

The NASBE Interview

Tom Manger is chief of police in Montgomery County, Maryland, a position he has held since 2004. From 1998 to 2004, he was police chief in Fairfax County, Virginia. Both jurisdictions are among the largest in the country, and both school systems have a school resource officer program that is a cooperative agreement between the school system and the police.

You were involved with the creation of a school resource officer (SRO) program in Fairfax County, Virginia, in the 1990s. What led the school system and the police to jointly create that program?

Manger: Administrators at [a county high school] realized that they kept calling the police to prevent disturbances that were taking place in the school. It wasn't long before they started to wonder whether having a police officer in the school full time might actually cut down on the situations that were becoming violent. So we put a police officer in the school. Some parents and teachers were really supportive. They felt that the presence of the officer made the school safer. But others said, "You're putting a cop in our school? They're just going to start arresting kids for normal teenage behaviors." We started with one high school, but other schools requested the same support from the police. So the program expanded—today, Fairfax has 51 SROs in high schools, middle schools, and secondary (combined middle and high) schools.

It was not long before we learned two key things: First, you had to put the right officer into the school. Fundamentally, officers have to build relationships with students, teachers, and parents. We have found that ideally, the SRO should be an officer who really wants the assignment. Not everyone has the temperament to deal with teenagers, but it all starts by having someone who wants to be there. Second, you need to clearly describe the mission. Successful SRO programs should never be about the number of arrests. In fact, the best programs don't focus on law enforcement, but rather on prevention. In both Montgomery County and in Fairfax County, the school system and the police now have a memorandum of understanding (MoU) that spells out expectations for both the officers and the schools.

Talk a little more about how you find the right people to be SROs.

In the police department, there's a process—you list a vacancy, and people apply for it. But if we have several officers applying for the position, we conduct interviews to find the person who will be the best fit. Over time, we've learned that it's best if the principal is a part of those interviews. They don't make the final decision, of course, but their input is really valuable. "I think Officer Smith would be a great addition to our team," or on the other hand, "I'm not so sure Officer Jones would work well at our school." When there is an incident at a school, the principal and the SRO are going to have to trust each other, so it's best if that starts early.

Once you hire the officers, you have to make sure they are trained. In Montgomery County, we now spend a full week every year during the summer months in mandated training. The training starts with information about the adolescent brain—that teenagers are not just miniature adults. From that, we can move to practical issues: How can you deescalate a situation before it turns violent? How can you develop strong relationships with students so they trust you? How can you help students learn how to resolve conflicts in a peaceful way? Some of the things our officers learn are the same things that beginning teachers need to know.

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It turns out that training is just invaluable. I think every state could benefit from instituting a mandatory training program. There are a number of training programs available, but we were happy to see that nearly all of them incorporate the same issues that we in Montgomery County had already identified and included.

What do you do to make sure that both the schools and the police have a common set of expectations?

Put everything in writing. We have a very clear set of expectations about what our SROs will do, and all of that is spelled out in the MoU with the school system. SROs are police officers first. But the MoU makes it clear that the principal, as administrator of the school, is always the person in charge. Of course, there are some serious incidents—things like possession of a firearm in school or serious crimes like rape and assault—where the SRO should take the lead in any investigation.

The goal of the SRO program should be lean and unambiguous: We want students to feel safe in school. When I was in middle school, I remember feeling fear every day. I was afraid someone was going to take my lunch money. I was afraid they were going to beat me up. That's not what we want for students. It's hard for students to focus on learning if they're afraid of what's going to happen after class.

At the same time, with the understandable concern that schools have for active shooter situations, we know that lives can be saved if there is a police officer who is already on site and who can respond to the situation immediately. Those are very rare, but they are something every parent worries about. Of course, the best situation is when an incident is prevented. SROs often get the word—usually from other students—that a student has brought a weapon to school. Ideally, the officer can deescalate the situation and take possession of the gun before anyone gets hurt. But that kind of communication is only possible if students have learned to trust the officer.

One of the criticisms of SRO programs is that they can exacerbate the school-to-prison

pipeline. Students get arrested for minor infractions at school, and that leads to further problems with law enforcement. How can policy-makers ensure that SROs do not criminalize relatively minor cases of misbehavior?

That's something the schools and the police department both have to monitor and work to prevent. It's really important to look at the data regularly, which is something I do. How many arrests are SROs making? For what? If they are arresting students for minor things—like dress code violations—you have to address that. Your MoU should spell out that the officers are there to enforce the law and not the discipline code. I tell SROs not to get involved with minor stuff like hats. I say to them, "If you tell a kid to turn his hat around and he doesn't, then what are you going to do?"

The best situation is when the principal and the SRO are on the same page and trust each other. If they can develop a two-way relationship, then they can respond quickly in case of a real safety emergency. Bad things sometimes happen in schools, but when the schools and the police can work together, we are better able to deal with whatever arises.

If a state board of education is providing oversight of SRO programs, what questions should board members should ask?

First, do you have a job description for what an SRO should do? Don't start a program until everyone is clear about what they are there to do. Second, how many arrests do SROs in the state make? What are the charges for which students are arrested? Ideally, you want SROs to make few arrests, and then only for things that anyone would say, "Well, of course, the student got arrested for that"—things like bringing a weapon to school. Ask whether there is an MoU or an agreement between school districts and the police department. Everyone should know what's expected. Finally, ask about the selection process for SROs. Ask whether school administrators are involved in that process. Are resource officers trained? How are they supervised? All of these things mean that you can get the best people in your schools. ■

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