



Students Speak Out—Milwaukee Safety & Discipline Work Group

Proposal for Improving the School Resource Officer Program

Developed March 23, 2009

We, the students, decided we want to work to influence and improve the School Resource Officer program as it continues to be implemented in Milwaukee Public Schools. If you visit our Work Group at Milwaukee.StudentsSpeakOut.org you will find written discussions and video interviews about this topic from which we developed this platform.

Working on SSO, we've established the following core beliefs related to the program's implementation:

1. Students and the police must work *together* to create a functional community within the school.
2. Both students and police have misconceptions of each other that need to be overcome.
3. Asking students and police to 'just get along' will not work.

Our recommendations:

Students, teachers, and police must form positive relationships to overcome the prejudices and stereotypes that exist. The students believe that it is the responsibility of the Police to take the first step toward this relationship because of the unique position and power that police hold in our community. Moreover, the students believe that because of the existing fear of police that many students have (due to their childhood experiences) and their inability to relate effectively and positively to police, it becomes the police's responsibility to show the students that they are in the school first and foremost to keep the school peaceful- not to harass students. Based on this, we recommend that:

1. police engage in existing school events such as attending art shows and sporting events as spectators and supporters,
2. police attend a beginning of the school year assembly to introduce themselves to the students,
3. new police tour the school with a student and walk through classrooms as an alternative way to introduce themselves to students,
4. police seek mentorship from the Safety Aids, because they have managed to create relationships with students.

We believe these activities will lead to increased visibility of positive police impact in the school and will begin to overcome the some student's distrust of police.

Each high school is a unique community with its own language, issues, and hierarchy, including cliques and gangs, particular race relations, teacher student relationships, etc. Therefore, we recommend that:

1. students and police work together to create a high school specific training for police who will be placed in schools (which might include from the students' point of view how to appropriately break up a high school fight, how to talk effectively to high school students, how to moderate high school arguments to preserve peace, and how to build relationships with high schoolers to prevent violence).
2. a 'student mediator' position(s) be established to serve as an impartial representative of the student body to help settle disputes between police and students, in order to help maintain peace and understanding and build relationships. We would use the principles of restorative justice circles to make these student mediator positions most effective.
3. that focus groups be established with students, teachers, and police to acknowledge the current issues facing the school community and co-design solutions, with roles for everyone (not just police). These focus groups would be held on a monthly basis in order to keep communication regular, and to establish positive relationships among the police, students, and teachers. These focus groups would be modeled on the restorative justice practices exhibited at several Milwaukee public schools.
4. that a rotating student or group of students act as a police/student moderator.

These recommendations establish ways for students to have a say in the implementation of the School Resource Officer program in their schools. We believe this will help develop more buy-in and partnership from the students and will eventually lead to better relationships between students and police.

Police in schools from the students' point of view:
They help safety, but hurt community.

Students are accepting of police presence because:

1. Sometimes police presence does deter students from acting a certain way. For some students, the police ensure that they won't be bothered by those students who do cause trouble.
2. If you're not doing anything wrong, you have nothing to be afraid of. Police are in every community and it is best for students to learn how to get along with them.
3. Fights have decreased and some students do feel safer in their school.

Students are uncomfortable with police in their schools because:

1. Many students have been raised in an environment that doesn't teach them to respect police, but to fear them. Police in the schools are then viewed not as peace keepers, but as law enforcement officers that must give tickets, and punish.
2. Communication is a barrier- students don't know how to talk to police, how to ask them questions, and this reinforces fear of police. In return, students perceive that police have not gone out of their way to try to engage the students and show them that they are able to communicate.
3. Students feel as though the police stereotype them and profile them- that they presume guilt before innocence. Students have commented that standing in a group of too many of one race causes the police to break up the group, or that even with a hall pass the police will ticket a student. These interactions cause students to act out, figuring that if the police are going to bother them, they might as well have done something wrong.
4. Students perceive that police only interact with students when something is wrong, which affects their ideas about the police. In schools where police have a permanent office, students say they rarely leave the office to get to know their 'community'. This reinforces some students' image of police not as positive members of the community, but as outsiders, taking over.
5. Students feel as though the teachers and principals are afraid of the police in the school. If the adults in the building are uncomfortable with the police around, how can the students be comfortable?