



Statement of Barbara Distinti  
President of SEEK  
To Committee of the Judiciary  
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Special Education Equity for Kids of Connecticut (SEEK) is committed to ensuring a strong education for all children in Connecticut and specifically to students with disabilities. We have reviewed the draft Police Accountability legislation (LCO #3471). We testify to urge you to include in that legislation provisions removing uniformed, armed police officers from Connecticut schools. The presence of these law enforcement officials can have profoundly negative effects on students, particularly students with disabilities and students of color. Employing school resource officers (SROs) consumes resources that would be better applied to hiring social workers, guidance counselors and school psychologists and providing social emotional education and trauma-informed supports for the large number of students in need.

Police were placed in schools in large numbers in the wake of the massacre at Sandy Hook. They were deployed to ensure the safety of the school from outside intruders. Sadly, there is no data to support the assertion that having police inside schools reduces school shootings. From what we have seen, police in schools are ineffective and have not resulted in any positive change in challenging student behaviors. Indeed, logic suggests that police outside the school building would be more effective in reducing violence than police in the school building.

According to a March 26, 2018 report of the Office of Legislative Research, around two-thirds of Connecticut school districts utilize SROs. Districts can spend up to \$200,000 a year for two or three uniformed police officers. The duties and funding of any school resource officer is provided for in a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), which, under Public Act 15-168 (Connecticut General Statutes §10-233m), needs to be entered into between the local board of education and the local law enforcement agency. These MOU need to clearly preclude school administrators from using SROs to enforce discipline within school. As a result, the presence of police officers in Connecticut schools leads to a higher average of student arrests. <https://ctvoices.org/publication/policing-connecticuts-hallways-the-prevalence-and-impact-of-school-resource-officers-in-connecticut/>. While the state has worked diligently to reduce the number of suspensions and expulsions, the number of in-school arrests continues to rise.

The disproportionate impact on students of color and on students with disabilities is significant. As Commissioner Cardona reported to the State Board of Education on February 6, 2020, "Large disparities remain in suspension rates between Black/African American and Hispanic/Latino students and their white counterparts. While one out of every 25 white students received at least one suspension, one out of every seven Black/African American students and

one out of every 10 Hispanic/Latino students experienced the same sanction." While the overall suspension rate was 6.7%, the rate for students with disabilities was 11.1%. Black and Hispanic students accounted for 63% of school-based arrests, while accounting for only 40% of Connecticut's students. Students attending schools with SROs were at greater risk of discipline overall. The average arrest rate of Latino students at schools with an SRO was six times greater than the average arrest rate of Latino students at schools without an SRO, according to the Voices for Children study.

The problem with uniformed, armed police officers in schools goes far deeper than that. Children of color and children from poverty often grow up with a well-founded abiding fear of the police. It would be superfluous to recount the reasons for that terror at this time. Turning schools into law enforcement agencies with frightening armed officers in the hallways exacerbates the fears and uncertainties of many students, and undermines the fundamental purpose of schools, i.e. learning. No student can learn while being traumatized. This fear pervades many students with disabilities as well who know that SROs often do not understand their disabilities or even think it important to consider their disability. The legion cases in which an individual with autism is arrested and abused by police officers is reason enough for that fear.

We know from our work in the field that SROs lack sufficient training in dealing with students on the autism spectrum. In many cases involving SRO arrests, a principal or school social worker decided, often impulsively, that the school resource officer should handle an issue. The SRO's solution was to arrest the kid. Yet, the real origin of the "problem" was a learning issue or regular behavior for a student with autism. It's a very sad thing to see the light in a kid's eyes turned off over an arrest in his school. Indeed, arrests at the high school level frequently lead to students dropping out of education altogether. While the issue of armed police officers in school is usually seen as a race issue, we see it as a disability issue as well.

The cost of school resource officers is high. The cost of a police officer is at least equivalent to that of a school social worker. While a police officer brings fear and top-down authority into a school building, a social worker can promote the sort of social emotional learning that can prevent acts of violence from ever occurring. A supportive school, utilizing trauma-informed practice, conflict resolution, de-escalation, and restorative justice, can do far more to keep the peace than can a police officer. We need to shift resources away from law enforcement and to school climate.

School climate change needs to come as part of the removal of armed police officers from school. Increasingly, and far too often, school administrators call the police when they face a behavioral issue in their school. Whether there is an SRO in the school or not, police respond to these calls by using the power of arrest. Arresting a student does not deal with the social and emotional issues, often trauma-based, faced by a student. There are excellent blueprints available for Social Emotional Learning available, particularly from the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, which need to be implemented to ensure that the police do not need to be called.

The police accountability legislation to be considered by the Legislature may be the best opportunity to make our schools safe and harbors for learning, with resources to address the

needs of all students, rather than scary, law enforcement agencies. The negative social and emotional impacts of students due to armed police in the schools is intolerable. Funds should be redirected to professional therapists and social workers to help students with behavioral challenges. School administrators must change their approach from one of law enforcement to one of social emotional and trauma-informed education.