



## **The Milwaukee School Resource Officer Program is not working well.**

### **But students know how it could.**

#### **Students Speak Out Leaders Advise Milwaukee Public Schools and the Milwaukee Police Department**

**By: Kim Farris-Berg**

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What's the purpose of the School Resource Officer (SRO) Program in Milwaukee Public Schools? The assistant principal at Vincent High School, scene of a 10-15 student fight during a pep rally in October 2008 during which many more young people were pepper sprayed by police, suggested to students that it's to intimidate young people into behaving safely. In a recent meeting with young leaders from Milwaukee.studentsspeakout.org, the gentleman said that the reason why SROs carry those TASER® devices, and pepper spray all that fun stuff is to keep students in line; to teach them to respect the uniform. But in the same meeting MPS administrator Kristi Cole and police captain Eduardo Negron, who are partners in carrying out the SRO program, reminded students that the purpose is quite different. Cole repeated what she had earlier shared on the Students Speak Out (SSO) Web site:

I think having police in schools helps prevent some incidents and actually allows them to work with the student population which is one of their job expectations. I would like to hear what other students think. Do you feel safer having police in the large high schools? One of the goals of having SROs in schools is to develop an understanding about the role of police and to build relationships with students.

As police build trust, students will see them as a resource, and schools' safety will improve.

The two ideas are obviously contrary. Can police build relationships with young people who will help them to prevent riots while at the same time intimidating students? Probably not. The students had uncovered something important: perhaps school administrators are, via their words and actions related to the SRO program, working contrary to its purpose.

As students would report, the SRO program *wasn't* having its intended impact. Police weren't getting to know the students. They were becoming disciplinarians and the basis of threats. The students, who see much larger crimes in school and on in their neighborhoods, resented the SROs. Moreover, they saw SROs as one more barrier to their education, giving adults an excuse not to form relationships with students. When students get flustered, the teachers seemed to automatically call in the SROs, the students reported. Instead of motivating students to come to class earlier, teachers would rely on the SROs to give tickets to tardy students. When relationships broke down, so did students' sense of safety. So they saw the SROs as having little impact.

Student leader Spencer Sartin wrote online:

Police in my school give tickets to the students for being late for class and also you get a disorderly conduct ticket for arguing. I guess they have police in schools to make a statement but it don't work we have had more riots and fights than any other years nothing has changed. The police can be out stopping a crime not making life harder on students.

As far as relationships the students don't speak to the police unless they are about to get arrested or get a ticket. My speculation is growing up in the places that most students have grown up in you don't see the police as friends you see them as the enemy. Do the students see the police different? I think not. The fact is that they don't treat us like the students that come to school to learn. They treat us as kids that come to school to do wrong.

Spencer and his fellow leaders would come to learn, however, that the SROs came with the best of intentions—wanting to mentor students and build relationships with them. SROs disliked being put in the middle of students and their teachers, and were very disappointed when they watched trust decline every time they were called to intervene in minor disagreements between teachers and students. When the two groups came together, at the initiative of students, they would unveil other challenges to the program's success. And they would agree to address the issues together.

### **Framing the problem: from “my perspective” to “community perspective”**

Early this year, SSO student leaders focused on safety and security formed a hypothesis: *We hypothesize that safety and discipline issues in MPS stem from a lack of communication, of common goals, of accountability, and relationships.* While this was the public hypothesis, at its core was the students' belief that police shouldn't be regularly present in schools. It was a waste of money, as police didn't improve safety. The leaders contended that police had no impact at all on the schools, except to create more barriers to their learning. But their peers would disagree.

The SSO process, in Milwaukee guided by adult ground organizer Sarah Granofsky, challenges students to gather evidence related to their research question—often via short video interviews which they post online. Geared-up with mini-camcorders donated by MPS Department of School Innovation, students quizzed their peers and parents. Do you feel safe at school? Do police make a difference? Should police be in schools? How can students help make schools more safe?

The leaders posted the video evidence at Milwaukee.StudentsSpeakOut.org. Adults who watched them saw patterns, and suggested to the young leaders during online and in-person discussions, that only a small minority of their peers shared their views. Far more students and parents sensed that the police presence made a positive difference in schools. If the SRO didn't break up the fight himself, students

knew the SRO was there to take action, even if it was just to call in more police. SROs didn't make the environment "fight-proof" or "riot-proof", but did keep the hallways clear (where students say the fights happen) and increase the chances of quick action when a fight breaks out.

"Police stop fights. They get students out of the hallways—to class on time."

"It was my freshman year when somebody said he brought a gun to school. It made me feel like I wanted to change schools because I felt it was dangerous. I think police can make schools a lot safer because they keep students out of the hallway and get the fights under control."

"Stuff has happened at Vincent that has jeopardized my safety....students legs were broken in [a fight] and a student was beaten in the head with a padlock before here...it's just really crazy. But there aren't many fights in the classrooms... You could bring in more officers to the school to prevent more fights if there were some police officers that were to be more effective. But if they're going to just be sitting there...then, no."

Interviewees did shed some light on downsides to the SRO presence, however. For example, students reported that police were breaking up groups made up of individuals of the same race while they were conversing in the hallways. This was disruptive to some students' innocent socializing, and caused resentment toward officers. Some students perceived the behavior as racist.

"Police here—it's not really what I'm worried about. It's just sometimes they take it to a wrong race or group considering that if they see too many Asians by themselves they consider it gang related or violent or something. That's a reason why I don't like the cops patrolling the area that much."

Also, as Spencer Sartin had written online, students reported that police were becoming enforcers of school rules (such as tardiness) rather than focusing on students' larger safety concerns. Some questioned police intervention with such matters, and sensed it only furthered distrust of the police. Why were schools relying on police for matters not related to fighting and safety? "Inform the parents [of disruptive or late or poor performing students]!" "Families should handle that; [police] should stay out of our business." Others said the police reaction to fights was too extreme and made small situations worse. Still, a good majority sensed the benefits of having SROs outweighed the costs.

A final observation was that no one called the police "SROs". They were simply known as "police". Any re-imagining of police that was being attempted through use of the "SRO" language was being lost on students.

While students were posting their videos and describing the problem, Cole made it a priority to participate in the online conversations. She clarified the official purposes of the SRO program. She also showed genuine interest in learning what students had to say, which motivated and inspired the students to consider their positions carefully. It was clear there was a decision-maker involved who might be able to make changes based on their input.

Discussing the results of their evidence-gathering and ensuing discussions, leaders reached a new level of understanding. Perhaps the SRO program's existence, at least in theory, wasn't the problem. Their peers weren't collectively against it. The goals Cole was describing seemed "all right." They realized, "We probably won't get very far with police, MPS administration, or our peers if we suggest out-and-out removal of SROs. If we stand behind our hypothesis, our best hope for change might be to simply describe the conditions police could create so the SRO program has a chance to achieve its goals." And so, with coaching (not direction) from Granofsky, they framed the problem not from their own points of view, but with great consideration about the community's point of view, with which they had some common ground.

The new framework: The SRO program, as it was being carried out, was *not* meeting goals established by the MPS administration, police, and the community. The next step in the process would be to develop a platform that would school the adults involved about the status quo and how to turn things around.

**How students *experience* police in schools, and in their homes, should influence the program's design.**

For the SRO program to meet its goal of improving the perception of police among the young community, police would need to take the first step in building trustworthy relationships with students. They could meet with students (in small groups) to discuss the purpose of the SRO program and to gain insights from young people about how to best achieve goals within each unique environment. Further, they could show genuine interest in improving the school communities. The student leaders specifically recommended the following:

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 Aides, because these aides have managed to create positive relationships with students.

Granofsky pressed the leaders, "What responsibility do students have in this?" The leaders replied that students should be open to listening and participating, but it is unlikely that they would take the first step in this situation (a Milwaukee district attorney would later point out that via their platform and initiation of meetings, however, they were indeed taking the first step). Their distrust of police is deeply ingrained. They've been taught since they were young, and often by their own families, that police disrupt safety and security. If SROs want to build trust, they will have to show their interest in the

See the complete platform at  
[Milwaukee.StudentsSpeakOut.org](http://Milwaukee.StudentsSpeakOut.org)

Click "groups" and visit the safety  
and security group.

community by investing in it.

Granofsky also sensed students should explore, or at least be exposed to, methods schools are using to achieve safety and security without having an SRO program. A college-aged member of the SSO online community, who had been following the safety discussions, informed Granofsky via the site that Marquette University's 4th Street Forum would be addressing "Combating School Violence" that week. Granofsky drove some of the leaders to the forum, where they listened with great interest to some panelists who described restorative justice practices<sup>1</sup> and their positive impact in Milwaukee schools.

During an excited ride home, the young leaders resolved that improvements to the SRO program might be aided by an MPS decision to foster of community via restorative justice practices in schools like Vincent, where it seemed the SRO program took first priority. They viewed the restorative justice as an investment more interested in students' growth than "unproductive" suspensions and expulsions. They would add this idea to their platform, and they felt better prepared for their upcoming meetings with adult decision-makers.

### **Advice-seeking meetings go a bit awry, but bring students *closer* to making change.**

Sensing the leaders were ready to discuss their platform with decision-makers, Granofsky arranged for them to meet with Cole and Negrón at Vincent High School on May 4, 2009. The idea was to have a two-way discussion in which Cole and Negrón would not just passively listen to students, but advise them about ways they might improve their platform to increase chances of take-up. The adults could also offer "leads," "contacts," or "next steps" for pursuing their platform goals. Cole and Negrón were eager to hear from the students, and were highly supportive of the idea that student voice could have a positive influence on the SRO program. Negrón, new to his position, was keenly interested in how to foster a more effective program and saw this as a real opportunity to learn. Everything was poised for a productive discussion. Yet the plans would get off balance throughout the afternoon.

On the car ride to the meeting, one student was not in "open dialogue" mode. He announced his desire to lay into the police captain. "I can't wait to get in there and tell him what I really think about the police." This made Granofsky nervous. "Really? Right now?" she thought. But Granofsky is in her early twenties, and having not too long ago graduated from Boston Public Schools, she easily understood his negative energy. "It's not as if students' disappointment, or initial anger about police presence in schools, disappeared completely because of SSO," Granofsky said. "SSO gives students an opportunity to change things they don't like or agree with, but it doesn't create respect for a program that, from their perspective, needs to improve. Only people's behavioral choices, and good design, can earn that

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<sup>1</sup> Wikipedia: **Restorative Justice** is a theory of justice that focuses on crime and wrongdoing as acted against the individual or community rather than the state. In restorative justice processes, the person who has harmed takes responsibility for their actions and the person who has been harmed may take a central role in the process, in many instances receiving an apology and reparation directly or indirectly from the person who has caused them harm. Restorative processes which foster dialog between the offender and the victim show the highest rates of victim satisfaction, true accountability by the offender, and reduced recidivism.  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Restorative\\_justice](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Restorative_justice)

respect.” This student had made a compromise, understanding from the process that the common good was worth pursuing more than his original ideas about a solution. But, as could be expected, the resolution did not remove his old feelings.

Granofsky wondered to herself if this student was ready for compromise. She politely challenged him. “After all this work? Are you ready to toss all that evidence gathering, problem-framing and platform design the window just to tell Captain Negrón something he’s probably heard before? Something that only highlights problems, but doesn’t give him the information he might need to improve the SRO program?” The student didn’t have to think long. He wanted something to change.

With one potential setback solved, the students encountered another minor struggle—finding the meeting location. When the students asked where the SRO office was, the front desk directed them to the counselors’ offices. Students then asked a counselor for directions, and she looked puzzled. When students explained more, she said, “Oooh! You mean the police!” And she pointed them in the right direction. This setback turned into a pre-meeting confidence booster. “Exactly,” they said amongst themselves. “More evidence for our platform. The ‘SRO’ term is lost on them, too.”

The third setback was far more serious, but perhaps the best learning opportunity of the day. Cole, on her way to the meeting, had encountered the assistant principal for Vincent High. He was curious about why Cole, an MPS administrator, was on campus. “We’re meeting with students today about the School Resource Officer program,” Cole replied. The assistant principal seemed curious, possibly concerned, but Cole reassured him and proceeded to the meeting.

After the introductions, Cole and Negrón enthusiastically and thoughtfully listened to the students’ platform, asking good clarifying questions and praising students for their thoughtful insights. There was great potential for constructive dialogue. Just as students were wrapping up the presentation, however, the assistant principal (who had not been invited to participate) came in to the room and sat down. When the students concluded their presentation, he asked one student for his name and address.

There was an uncomfortable silence.

Cole wondered out loud, “Why do you need his address?” “So we can invite him to a meeting to discuss the impact of police at this school,” said the principal. Cole replied, “That’s what we’re doing right now.” The assistant principal then went into a long explanation of his own point of view: students behave poorly. They are “out of control” in classrooms and hallways, and the police are there to intimidate them into submission. Police’s threatening presence is the only effective means of controlling students, he said.

Quite the contrary, Negrón explained. The SRO program does not intend to intimidate students at all. Scaring students hinders accomplishment of program goals. Cole agreed, and indicated that MPS would be open to working with Negrón to take steps toward eliminating misconceptions. Cole, Negrón, and Granofsky tried to refocus the meeting to the students’ platform, but since some of the young leaders attend Vincent they were not ready to speak out against the assistant principal. They became silent at their own meeting. Seeing an opportunity, the assistant principal took the floor again. He said (this as a

paraphrasing quote), "If we're talking about an orientation, all we need is an orientation for the students to teach them how to behave appropriately toward authority. How to be quiet when an adult walks into the room. How to dress. That's all we need."

On the way home, the students were a bit stunned. But Granofsky encouraged them. "Perhaps his interrupting our meeting was the best thing that could have happened. He illustrated to Cole and Negron part of why this program isn't working. And *you* called the meeting that showed them that." Feeling a bit more confident, students expressed what they learned from the meeting. Maybe the police aren't the problem. Maybe the SROs' intentions are good; but there is a break-down when it comes to school leaders' understanding of the SRO program's purpose. They further realized that this connected back with some of the students' video remarks about the SROs engaging in disciplinary tasks more than focusing on building trust with students and preventing real crime.

The next day, students met with some other local leaders. First, they met with Assistant District Attorneys Paul Dedinsky and David Lerman, who are assigned to facilitate restorative justice practices in Milwaukee Public Schools as part of the Safe Schools/Healthy Students initiative. Dedinsky and Lerman were extremely supportive of the students, and offered some suggestions, but when they asked how the students' work might help prevent future incidents like the October 2008 fights at Vincent High the young leaders froze up. They had focused on how their work would improve the SRO program, but stumbled when it came to making the connection back to safety and security on campus. Reflecting on this, they resolved to be better prepared the next time.

Students also met with State Representative Jason Fields, who asked for a lot of facts. "How many schools have SROs? Which schools have SROs?" The students were not prepared to answer those questions, but spent some time over the next week brushing up on their facts for future meetings. Finally, students met with the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel editorial board (along with Cole and Negron). This wasn't a hot topic, so the board was not able to write an editorial at the time. They were interested in the students insights, however.

Negron requested to meet with students again a few weeks later—this time with SROs. When students suggested their new theory, the SROs really opened up. Indeed they *want* to be mentors. Ideally, their job would be 20 percent policing and 80 percent mentoring. When students behave in ways that require police intervention, however, the balance is disrupted. So the SROs were open to the leaders' ideas about ways to create more understanding of the SROs' job and to inspire more cooperation from students.

Negron and the SROs also reported that they often feel that school leaders and teachers inappropriately use them as a threat against the students. Negron said he was at Vincent High recently to speak with the principal. A female student was being loud and the principal yelled at her, "Be quiet, get to class or I'll have the police arrest you." The SROs agreed that there is really nothing an SRO can do to resolve an everyday disagreement between a student and his teacher, or minor infractions such as being loud. So when teachers use SROs in this way, they diminish the potential for SROs to do what they really are there to do. Yet SROs feel powerless to ask school leaders to stop. Students confirmed that these

situations cause them to consider SROs as another barrier to motivation in their already strained schooling environments.

The students had reached a common understanding with the SROs and Captain Negrón.

**Next year at Vincent High, students will help shape a more effective School Resource Officer program**

The Vincent High School SROs and student leaders agreed to work together on two actions steps in the 2009-2010 school year to address concerns. First, SROs will host an in-school orientation to introduce the officers and their role. The orientation will also explain which infractions students should expect school leaders to address and which infractions students should expect police to address. School leaders, too, will hear this news and will know that students will know when a “threat”, such as “be quiet or you’ll be arrested” has no weight. Second, Negrón, Cole, and Granofsky would work to identify a third party to facilitate monthly focus groups with students, SROs, school leaders, and teachers to share information aimed at preventing violence.