

NEW JERSEY SCHOOL RESOURCE OFFICERS ASSOCIATION (NJASRO)
POSITION STATEMENT ON S86
ESTABLISHING CLASS THREE SPECIAL LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS TO PROVIDE
SECURITY IN PUBLIC AND NONPUBLIC SCHOOLS AND COUNTY COLLEGES

On Monday, June 27, 2016, the Senate and the Assembly passed a law establishing a Class Three special law enforcement officer to provide security at schools and county colleges. A last minute change to the law deleted the requirement that these Class Three special law enforcement officers complete the 40 hour training course for safe schools resource officers (SRO) before working in the schools. In effect, this law is a veiled attempt to improve school safety and is a disservice to the population it is designed to protect.

NJASRO supports the establishment of Class Three special law enforcement officers who can function as a valued asset. However, NJASRO strongly opposes this version of the law as currently written and urges Gov. Christie to conditionally veto it.

A safe and secure school environment requires the fostering of a supportive and nurturing learning environment, as well as protection from outside threats. SROs properly trained, pursuant to C.52:17B-71.8, help to ensure that our children will learn in the most positive and constructive school environment possible. The SRO program is based upon a successful and effective community policing model for SROs in schools and requires comprehensive and specialized training. NJASRO urges that this law be amended to require that all Class Three special law enforcement officers complete the training course for safe schools resource officers pursuant to N.J.S.A. 18A:17-43.1. We owe this to our children.

New Jersey has long recognized the importance and value of an SRO, properly trained, as a law enforcement officer, educator and counselor. A review of the development of the SRO programs, and the training involved, highlights the importance of this specialized training:

- 1) In 2006, the Police Training Act (N.J.S.A. 52:17B-66 et seq.) required the Police Training Commission in consultation with the Attorney General, to develop a 40 hour training course for safe schools resource officers. A Safe Schools Resource Officer Training Program provided by NJASRO was found to meet all statutory training requirements for all SROs and was implemented in police academies throughout the state. NJASRO continues to train in partnership with the New Jersey Office of Homeland Security & Preparedness, the New Jersey Attorney General's Office, the New Jersey State Parole Board and the New Jersey State Police. Before an SRO can begin working in a school, the officer must complete this comprehensive training. The SRO is a unique position involving great responsibility

and requires highly specialized skills in order for the SRO to effectively work with children in a school setting.

- 2) In 1988, the *Uniform State Memorandum of Agreement Between Law Enforcement and Education*, (MOA) was jointly issued by the New Jersey Department of Law and Public Safety and the Department of Education, to address the burgeoning problem of alcohol and drug use by school age children. The MOA has evolved over the years and was revised again in 1992, 1999, 2007, 2011 and 2015 to address other emerging issues in schools, including among other things, weapons, school safety, and incidents of harassment, intimidation and bullying. Articles 1.9 and 13.5 recognize the importance of the presence of an SRO, properly trained by the Police Training Commission, in enhancing school safety and security and providing positive interaction with students.
- 3) In 1998, in *The New Jersey Guide to Establishing a Safe Schools Resource Officer Program in Your Community*, Christine Todd Whitman, Peter Verniero and Leo F. Klagholz highlighted the importance of having trained SROs to collaborate with schools in reducing juvenile delinquency by focusing "on education, prevention, communication and information sharing." The guide recognized that schools were "an essential component" of the community and that a "trained and specially selected police officer" was an integral part of that school community. The guide also recommended that the SRO develop Stationhouse Adjustment Programs at the school to handle minor juvenile offenses, effectively dealing with minor juvenile offenses without the need to involve the Juvenile Court. The way the current law is written, a Class Three special law enforcement officer would be unable to conduct stationhouse adjustments since they are strictly limited to providing school security.
- 4) In 2009, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) issued an ACLU White Paper, *Policing in Schools, Developing a Governance Document for School Resource Officers in K-12 Schools*. In it, the ACLU highlighted the importance of written guidelines for an SRO program and the need for support and training for the SRO to understand their role within the school and the rights and needs of the children they would serve. Without that understanding, the SRO might create an "adversarial environment that pushes students, particularly at-risk students, out of school rather than engaging them in a positive educational environment." The ACLU recommended that the SRO receive at least 40 hours of training at a minimum, to include topics such as adolescent development and psychology, working with special needs children, and cultural competency. NJASRO's safe schools resource officers' training fits these criteria. "Police officers generally are trained to deal with adult perpetrators on the street, not children in schools.

Yet these officers face challenges unique to the public school setting and must be prepared to handle these challenges appropriately."

- 5) In January 2013, Gov. Christie convened the New Jersey SAFE Task Force on Gun Protection, Addiction, Mental Health and Families, and Education Safety (SAFE Task Force) following the tragedy in Newtown, Connecticut. In April 2013, after examining root causes of mass violence, the SAFE Task Force issued their report which included 50 recommendations, 12 dealing specifically with school security. The task force encouraged the use of SROs in schools as essentially a form of "community policing" where the officer's "beat" is the school. The task force found that having SROs who are part of the school community, supported a nurturing environment conducive to education and enhanced school safety, in contrast to placing armed guards at schools which could undermine the educational climate.
- 6) On October 22, 2014, the New Jersey School Boards Association School Security Task Force, (NJSBA) issued their final report, *What Makes Schools Safe?* The NJSBA was a study group formed after the tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, Connecticut. It should be noted that Sandy Hook did not have a school resource officer, but had officers at nearby middle and high schools. The NJSBA examined factors that would help make New Jersey schools a secure learning environment for children, including stationing armed personnel in schools. The NJSBA issued 45 recommendations in various areas related to school safety. They found that the SRO was the "preferred" "model for a law enforcement presence" at a school and that care should be taken to select a qualified officer who was properly trained to fill that role. The NJSBA also recommended that, if legislation were to pass establishing a Class Three special law enforcement officer to provide additional school security, the officer be "specially trained in working with students." The NJSBA also noted that an SRO, who develops trusting relationships within a healthy school setting, can help to stem the tide of the "School to Prison Pipeline" through the use of Stationhouse Adjustments and referrals to Family Crisis Units.
- 7) In August of 2013, the New Jersey Legislature mandated that a School Security Task Force be convened to study and develop recommendations to improve school security and safety to ensure a safe learning environment. The task force assessed many factors, including physical building security, cyber vulnerabilities, and the role of police officers stationed in the schools. In July 2015, the final report, the *New Jersey School Security Task Force Report and Recommendations*, was issued. The report included 42 recommendations to improve school security in New Jersey. The report recommended the

placement of "carefully selected and specially trained SROs" in all school buildings. Additionally, the report recommended that all Class Three special law enforcement officers be required to undergo SRO training.