

Montgomery County school board extends review of resource officer program

Final recommendations for 2021-22 school year now due in May

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The Montgomery County Board of Education on Tuesday voted to extend its review of whether police officers should continue to be stationed in local high schools.

After more than seven months of work, the school board called on MCPS Superintendent Jack Smith to get more feedback from parents and students about the future of the school resource officer (SRO) program.

Board members also asked for more nuanced data and expressed concern about allegations that a committee established to guide the analysis was “flawed” and “clearly prioritized preserving the status quo.”

“As a school system that has equity as a core value and has said ... for years we need to address the disproportionality of discipline,” board member Lynne Harris

said in an interview following the meeting, “we cannot just rubber stamp a process that isn’t completely transparent, fully objective and willing to push the boundaries of what we’ve done, and look in a very open-minded way at what we’ve done as a system. I haven’t seen that yet, but we’ll keep pushing.”

In separate statements on Tuesday, three groups — including one group of six representatives on the committee — raised concerns that the committee did not conduct a comprehensive review and that it “actively ignored” student perspectives.

The group of committee representatives wrote in a letter to the school board and County Council that the perspectives of the MCPS central office staff and law enforcement personnel who support the program were “overrepresented” in the group and made students feel “intimidated.”

They argued that the work group “failed to analyze crucial data and empirical evidence surrounding the effects of the SRO program,” instead opting to read “surface level articles which predominantly argued in favor of SROs using misleading anecdotal evidence.”

Representatives of the the Montgomery County Council of Parent Teacher Associations’ Diversity, Equity and Inclusion subcommittee raised similar concerns, as did a group called Disability Rights Maryland.

In a statement, Disability Rights Maryland wrote that the work group has not considered the negative interactions SROs often have with students with disabilities.

“DRM is disappointed that the SRO Work Group did not examine and prioritize the experiences and needs of students most impacted by the SRO program — students with disabilities and Black and Latinx students,” the statement said. “In

our representation of students with disabilities, we have seen first-hand the traumatic and harmful interactions that school police can have with students with disabilities and we have seen students criminalized for non-violent, disability-related behavior.”

Student school board member Nick Asante said the allegations raised by the groups, particularly the student members of the work group, were concerning.

“It was alarming to see how student members of that committee felt in the way the committee conducted itself,” Asante said.

Harris suggested that the work group promote one of the student or community members to co-chair. Her colleagues did not support her suggestion, but board President Brenda Wolff said the group could decide if it it likes Harris’ idea.

Final recommendations about the future of the program are now due by May.

MCPS’ review of the SRO program began in June in the wake of the death of George Floyd, a Black man in Minneapolis, after a police officer kneeled on Floyd’s neck for several minutes, cutting off his breathing.

Floyd’s death sparked widespread protests across the country, including in Montgomery County, where residents called for police reform and the removal of officers from schools.

The Montgomery County school board authorized a comprehensive evaluation of the district SROs’ jobs and student arrest data, to determine if the program should be discontinued or modified.

All 25 of the county’s public high schools have SROs assigned to them. The district’s principals have voiced unanimous support in keeping the officers in their buildings.

The work group included representatives from the Montgomery County State's Attorney's Office, Juvenile Services, students, parents and community organizations, and met several times since July to review the SRO program.

That group discussed student arrest data, legal requirements to provide law enforcement coverage to schools, how an alternative program could meet legal requirements and programs other similarly sized districts use, according to school board documents.

The group made 17 recommendations about the SRO program, including that the school board solicit feedback from the community about SROs and continue to evaluate the program "before determining the status of the SRO program for 2021-2022."

Other recommendations include:

- Reviewing student arrest data quarterly
- Revising SROs' job descriptions
- Prohibiting student arrests on school property for offenses that happened in the community, except in specific circumstances
- Expanding training about restorative justice, implicit bias, emergency preparedness and de-escalation
- Including parents and the school community in the hiring of SROs
- Creating an "adequate local law enforcement coverage plan," which would be a "pool of officers assigned to each high school or cluster" rather than being stationed in schools
- Developing a system to "track SRO/local law enforcement officials' activities" to include prevention and intervention actions, mentoring efforts and classroom-related activities

The full list of recommendations will be released for community members to comment on before a final determination about the future of the program is made, according to school board members.

The school board also requested more nuanced arrest data. For example, members said, they want more information about how often school administrators initiate the student arrest process compared to SROs, and what offenses students were arrested for.

“Data is clearly an issue,” Wolff said.

MCPS data released in October show that 460 students were arrested in the past three school years. Of those arrests, 382 (83%) were of Black and Hispanic students. Eleven percent of arrests were of white students during the same time period.

MCPS’ student population is about 27% white, 21% Black and 32% Hispanic, according to MCPS data.

Students were most commonly arrested on charges of possessing drugs or weapons and for attacking other students, according to the data. The data were not broken down by school.

The data for each offense were not disaggregated by race.

Each of the years for which data were provided showed a decrease in overall arrests. During the 2017-18 school year, there were 226 student arrests, compared to 163 in 2018-19 and 77 in 2019-20.

The data for the 2019-20 school year were only compiled through March because the COVID-19 pandemic closed school buildings that month.

Hana O’Looney, speaking on behalf of the Montgomery County Regional Student Government Association, said the data are clear that SROs do not belong in MCPS.

The association has passed a resolution calling for an end to the program, as has MoCo Students for Change and Students Toward Equitable Public Schools.

“Schools need to be a safe space for all students, and not for one group at the expense of others,” O’Looney said. “Study after study has shown the disproportionate effect on the criminalization of Black, brown and disabled students, despite the fact there are no national or Maryland studies that show SROs increase school safety.”

MCPS principals have come out in unanimous support of keeping SROs stationed in their schools.

The union that represents Montgomery County police has said it opposes discontinuing the SRO program, and several council members, including President Sidney Katz, have echoed the sentiment.