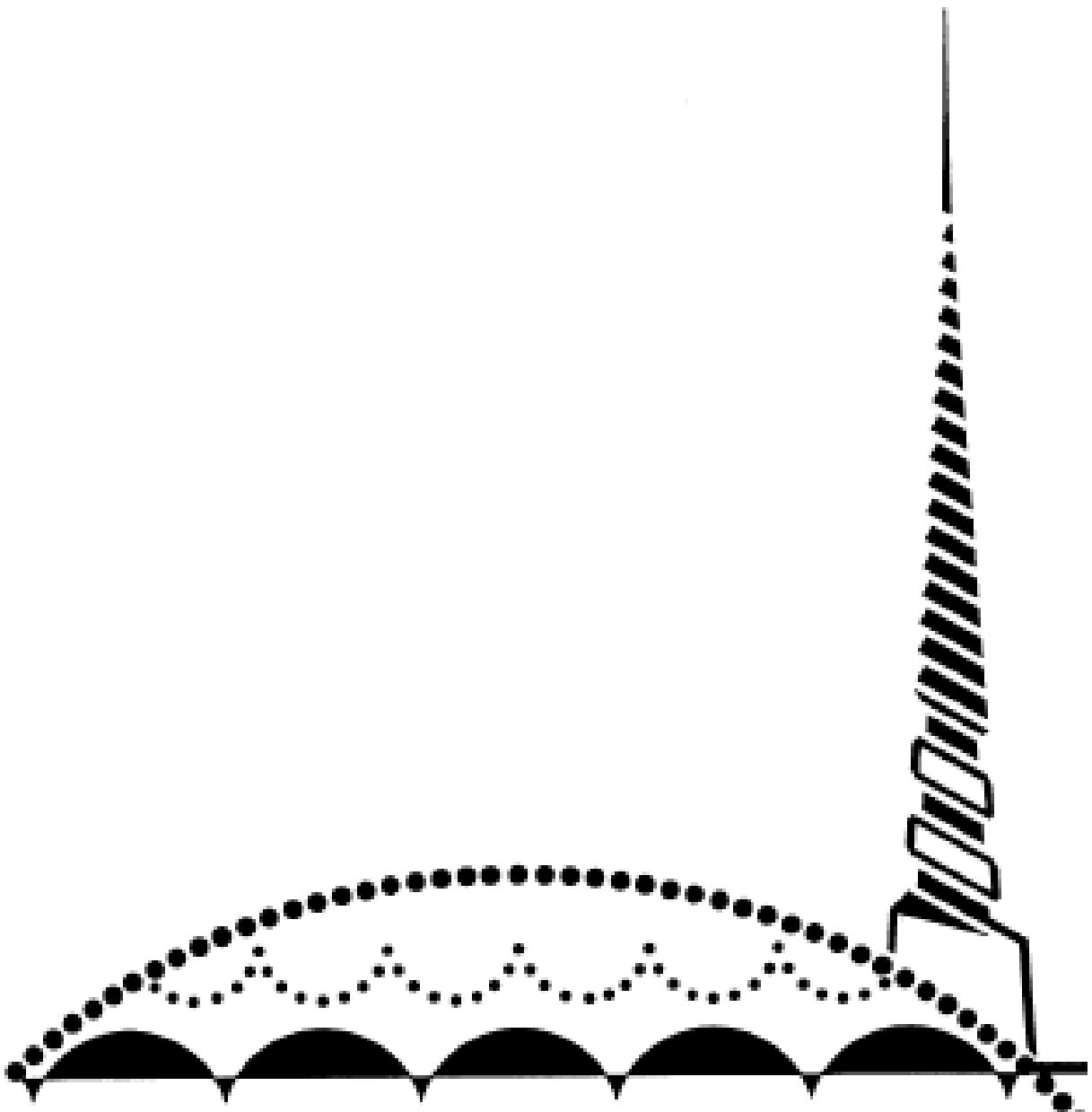


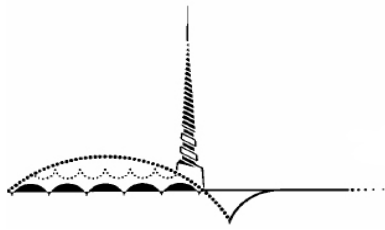
2009-2010 Marin County Civil Grand Jury

# School Resource Officers: A Proactive Approach to School Safety

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## **School Resource Officers: A Proactive Approach to School Safety**

### **SUMMARY**

School Resource Officers perform a relatively unknown, but very important, role in maintaining safe public schools in Marin County. More commonly referred to as SROs, they are police officers or deputy sheriffs who receive special training that prepares them to establish effective working relationships with students in all age groups. Their presence at the county's schools contributes significantly to maintaining safe and secure environments in which learning can take place.

Though SROs are sworn law enforcement officers, their role in performing this unique assignment does not involve enforcing school policies or maintaining discipline. Instead, along with the professional educators, they share responsibility for identifying and preventing inappropriate juvenile behavior, not only on school campuses, but throughout the community. The SRO's assignment includes three primary roles: law enforcement officer, law-related counselor/mentor, and law-related educator. Their specialized training prepares them to develop positive relationships with students and establish working partnerships with teachers and school administrators.

For at least twenty years, this proactive approach to school safety has proven to be an effective tool in preserving positive learning environments for Marin's public school students. Funding for the programs has been provided by various police departments and by the county Sheriff's office. Unfortunately, financial pressures that law enforcement agencies currently face have led to a substantial reduction in their support for this program. Without an alternative source of funding, SRO programs will be substantially reduced or completely eliminated.

Though school districts are the primary beneficiaries, no district is actually contributing to SRO program funding. Maintaining safe public schools serves not only the interests of school districts, but also the interests of law enforcement agencies and the entire community. The Grand Jury believes it is time for communities to establish budget priorities that include funding to sustain this essential program.

All possibilities for funding should be examined. One community passed a bond measure that includes sustainable funding for one SRO position. In one city, the receipt of a grant by the police department gave it the flexibility to fund one SRO position; however, grants are temporary and do not represent a reliable, long-term source of funding. Leadership and creativity will be required of law enforcement, and members of the community to ensure that the SRO programs in Marin are maintained.

## BACKGROUND

Maintaining a safe school environment is a high priority for every community. The Grand Jury chose to investigate safety conditions in Marin's schools. It learned that Marin's school safety programs are not uniform. One effective way to enhance school safety is by developing a working partnership between school districts and local police and Sheriff's departments. While investigating this issue, the Grand Jury became aware of the value of SROs in our communities. Unfortunately, we learned that some SRO programs in the county are being eliminated or severely cut back.

## METHODOLOGY

During the course of interviews with public school superintendents on the topic of school safety, the Grand Jury heard many positive comments about the impact SROs have on maintaining safe school environments. Research was conducted to determine the history and background of the SRO function and the extent to which SROs have been used in the United States. Late in 2009, local news items began to appear related to law enforcement budget cuts and the fact that funding for SROs was going to be either reduced or eliminated entirely. The Grand Jury interviewed school superintendents, principals, assistant principals, former and current SROs, and other law enforcement personnel. Following these interviews, a questionnaire was sent to school administrators to obtain their perspectives on the value and need for SROs on Marin public school campuses.

## DISCUSSION

The concept of the SRO originated in the 1950s as part of a community oriented policing philosophy that emphasizes a proactive and preventative approach to school safety. Over the next three decades, various versions of SRO programs were created throughout the country. In the late 1990s, in response to several tragic incidents that occurred on school campuses nationwide, the establishment of SRO programs gained momentum. Currently, schools in over forty states have some form of an SRO program in place. School Resource Officers have existed in some of Marin's school districts off and on for the last twenty years.

### The Unique Role and Responsibilities of the SRO

It is generally accepted by law enforcement and school authorities that the SRO's job centers on three main roles and responsibilities: law enforcement officer, law-related counselor/mentor, and law-related educator. The basic philosophy is that police and educators should share responsibility for identifying and preventing inappropriate juvenile behavior on school campuses and throughout the community.

Duties and responsibilities that SROs may perform include the following:

- **Develop positive, trusting relationships with students, through mentoring, counseling, and mediation**, which contribute to the prevention of negative incidents and behavior. The presence of an SRO also helps to cultivate a positive relationship between law enforcement and the community.
- **Enhance the safety of the school environment** by working with staff, students, and other members of the school community to identify students who may be a danger to themselves and/or others and monitoring juvenile crime trends.
- **Maintain visibility within the school** by visiting campuses and interacting with students when they are not in class, attending school functions such as sports and social events, and being on-call to assist administrators and students during the school day.
- **Establish and maintain close partnerships with school administrators, counselors, and teachers** by assisting in the development of school safety plans, conducting school safety drills, and responding to calls for assistance. SROs train teachers to be aware of student behaviors and provide information on how to recognize signs of drug use and/or gang affiliation.
- **Work with students to help them understand the legal implications of their actions** by providing classroom instruction and individual counseling related to issues such as drug and alcohol abuse, peer pressure, bullying, graffiti and other vandalism, dating violence, conflict resolution, and hate crimes.
- **Investigate allegations of criminal incidents** that occur on or near school campuses. For example, officers respond to reports of theft, assault, and possession of weapons and/or illegal substances, cyber-crimes, and gang activity.
- **Collaborate with school officials in making appropriate recommendations for referrals** to Juvenile Hall, youth services, and/or alternative school settings.
- **Discourage truancies** and participate in district School Attendance Review Board hearings.
- **Help prevent access to school grounds by unauthorized persons.**
- **Monitor areas off-campus** where students “hang-out” and where fights or other problems may occur.

- **Participate in regularly scheduled meetings** of the Marin County Schools/Law Enforcement Partnership for information sharing with educators and other SROs.

Contrary to what some may believe, SROs do not enforce school policy or act as “campus cops.” Disciplining students who violate school policies is the responsibility of the school; however, SROs work closely with school administrators and staff to ensure a safe and secure learning environment for all students.

### Specialized Training

Selecting the right person to serve as SRO is critical. The officer must be able to interact with students and understand that he or she will be working in an educational environment rather than on the streets. Police chiefs and officers agree that not all officers are well suited or willing to work in school settings. The SROs we spoke with were, without exception, enthusiastic about working with young people.

Once identified, SROs receive specialized training to develop effective communication with school administrators, teachers, students, and families. SROs must possess the ability to develop trusting relationships that give young people the confidence to report potentially dangerous incidents or to ask for help. Most important, SROs must know how to accurately assess and diffuse conflict situations and know when and how to act in order to prevent crises.

Training consists of an extensive five-day course followed by periodic refreshers in which officers learn about a variety of subjects including:

- School law
- Community policing
- Instructional techniques
- Lesson planning
- Communication and presentation skills
- Counseling
- Child abuse
- Harassment and bullying
- Substance abuse
- Dysfunctional families
- School safety
- Students with special needs
- Emergency management
- Crime prevention/proactive techniques

### Current Status of Marin’s SRO Programs

School Resource Officers are currently found in many communities and school districts in Marin County. The span of each SRO's jurisdiction is as varied as the communities they serve. Their assignments range from a small number of schools in relatively close proximity to many schools spread throughout the county. During the 2009/2010 school year, Marin had five full-time SROs dispersed throughout the county. The following spreadsheet provides an overview of that coverage.

***SRO Coverage in Marin County School Districts for the 2009/2010 School Year***

School District	Grades	Approximate # Students	Elementary Schools	K-8 & Middle Schools	High Schools	Other*	Total Schools
<i>19</i>		<i>29,467</i>	<i>38</i>	<i>17</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>71</i>

***The Sheriff's Department Provided One SRO for Marin's Unincorporated Communities***

Bolinas-Stinson Union	K - 8	100	1	1	0	0	2
Dixie	K - 8	1,770	3	1	0	0	4
Kentfield	K - 8	1,009	1	1	0	0	2
Laguna Joint	K - 6	35	1	0	0	0	1
Lagunitas	K - 8	288	1	1	0	0	2
Lincoln	K - 6	15	1	0	0	0	1
Nicasio	K - 8	60	0	1	0	0	1
Ross Valley	K - 8	1,975	3	1	0	0	4
Sausalito Marin City	K - 8	320	1	1	0	1	3
Shoreline Unified	K - 12	600	2	2	1	0	5
Union Joint	K - 6	15	1	0	0	0	1
<i>11 School Districts</i>		<i>6,187</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>26</i>

***Twin Cities Police Provided One SRO for Three Schools in the Following School Districts***

Larkspur**	K - 8	470	0	1	0	0	1
Tamalpais Union High***	9 - 12	1,630	0	0	1	1	2
<i>2 School Districts</i>		<i>2,100</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>3</i>

***Novato Police Provided Two SROs for Novato Unified School District***

Novato Unified	K - 12	8,050	8	3	2	3	16
<i>1 School District</i>		<i>8,050</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>16</i>

***San Rafael Police Provided One SRO for San Rafael School Districts***

San Rafael	K - 12	5,900	7	1	2	2	12
<i>2 School Districts</i>		<i>5,900</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>12</i>

***No Dedicated SROs are Provided for All or Part of the Following School Districts***

Mill Valley	K - 8	2,700	5	1	0	0	6
Reed Union	K - 8	1,100	2	1	0	0	3
Larkspur (1 school)	K - 4	800	1	0	0	0	1
Tamalpais Union (3 schools)	9 - 12	2,270	0	0	2	1	3
Ross	K - 8	360	0	1	0	0	1
<i>5 School Districts</i>		<i>7,230</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>14</i>

\* Other schools such as Alternative, Continuation, and Charter Schools

\*\* SRO Coverage for Hall Middle School Only

\*\*\*SRO Coverage for Redwood High School and San Andreas Continuation High School Only

The data shown in the chart reflects how varied SRO coverage was in the 2009/2010 school year. It should be noted that 20% of Marin's schools, or 25% of students, attend schools not covered by a School Resource Officer.

The Grand Jury found that most Marin schools employ campus supervisors to monitor student activities between classes as well as at recess and lunch. While campus supervisors are not trained law enforcement officers and do not have the same authority or broad range of responsibilities that SROs have, they do focus on enforcing school policy and maintaining order. When schools have SRO coverage and campus supervisors, they work as a team with school counselors and administrators. This team approach can proactively address and prevent volatile situations.

### Current Funding for Marin's SRO Programs

The fully burdened cost of an SRO ranges from \$90,000-\$125,000 per year. Funding for the SRO positions in Marin County is provided by law enforcement agencies. The Grand Jury found the current funding for Marin's SROs to be as follows:

- **Novato Police Department:** For the 2009/2010 school year, two SROs in Novato were funded. Due to recent budget cuts, funding for the 2010/2011 school year will support only one SRO position, reducing coverage by 50%. The SRO program is scheduled to be terminated after the 2010/2011 school year.
- **Sheriff's Department:** The one SRO position responsible for the schools in the unincorporated areas of the county is funded by the Sheriff's Department. Future funding will be determined on a year-to-year basis.
- **San Rafael Police Department:** There is one SRO position for which funding is determined on a year-to-year basis.
- **Twin Cities Police Department:** The one SRO position is funded through a ballot initiative (Measure E) passed by voters in 2009, guaranteeing SRO funding for the next 30 years. Twin Cities has the only long-term funded SRO program in the county.

### Benefits and Value of School Resource Officers

The Grand Jury's interviews with educators and law enforcement personnel have led us to conclude that the value of an SRO goes beyond having another component of school safety. Trusting relationships develop between students and SROs that far exceed what would come from an adversarial encounter during an enforcement action. There is also an opportunity for students to develop a positive attitude towards law enforcement that continues into adulthood.

School Resource Officers counsel students on issues such as stranger danger, driving safety, cyber-bullying, sexual harassment, drug and alcohol laws, and abusive relationships. Students are provided an opportunity to speak with a trusted professional who can offer a practical and legal perspective on these issues.

Experts in the field of school safety believe that schools are a reflection of the communities in which they are located. Law enforcement officials and school personnel have confirmed that gang activity is increasing and is a serious concern in Marin County. Children in high schools and middle schools are exposed to bullying and intimidation both on and off campus. Several SROs reported learning about potential fights and retaliatory acts, which they were able to prevent. One SRO intercepted a group of non-students coming onto campus with the intention of “starting trouble.” It is highly unlikely that patrol officers would have been alerted prior to the event. SROs on campus are seen as authorities that students can go to with their fears and concerns. They help create the safe surroundings necessary for learning and positive social interaction. As one administrator put it, “Nobody wants safe schools more than the kids.”

There are instances in which students do break the law and, when that happens, there are consequences, including arrest. Much like the foot patrol officer in a city neighborhood, an SRO involved in these situations has knowledge and understanding of the school’s culture.

Every school official interviewed praised the SROs for their professionalism. They spoke of the SRO’s ability to connect in a personal way with students. Each made it clear that the reduction or loss of the SRO programs would have a negative impact on the safety, not only of schools, but of the communities as well. Most emphasized the need for more SROs. One administrator said that she is reluctant to call patrol officers when the SRO is unavailable, since those officers may not relate to youth in the same manner as an SRO.

### Impact of the Loss of SROs on Communities

The impact of the loss of SROs on the school districts is not easily determined. As noted elsewhere, an overwhelming majority of school administrators are strong supporters of the SRO concept. When asked how critical SROs are to the schools and county, the responses from school administrators were consistent.

*“SROs play an important role. Their presence cultivates a positive relationship between law enforcement and the community.”*

*“Having the SRO physically present on campus and thus a recognizable face is an asset that as school administrators (we) will never take for granted.”*

*“.... it also allows the police department to have an important connection with the youth of our town.”*



*“... we are stronger in our efforts to keep students safe during their formative years than we ever could be if we acted as independent districts without the support of the SRO officers.”*

*“The SRO seeks to solve problems and work with young people, not just make arrests.”*

It is difficult to measure the full value of a School Resource Officer largely because of the preventative nature of the job. What is known is that there have been few incidents of major significance in Marin schools. Weapons that have been confiscated are knives, not guns. Items confiscated are more likely to be drugs or alcohol.

Nevertheless, tragic incidents in schools throughout the country continue to remind us that schools are vulnerable. Extreme violence in American schools is rare, but the impact cannot be measured by statistics alone. Acts of violence have long-lasting effects on the schools in which they occur and upon their surrounding communities.

A United States Government study entitled, “Safe Schools Initiative,” recognized the importance of the collaboration between law enforcement and school officials to promote a culture of safety, respect, and emotional support. SROs can play an essential role in prevention by making a positive connection with all students, addressing problems before they become serious, and taking a stance against the “code of silence.” An SRO’s presence offers an opportunity for young people to feel comfortable telling an adult in authority when they hear about students who are considering doing harm to others or themselves. Early detection and intervention is in everyone’s best interest.

Marin residents should realize that without the proactive, preventative approach that School Resource Officers provide, calls from schools for police assistance will result in a reactive response by the first available patrol officer only after an incident has occurred.

### Strategies for Sustainable Funding

Law enforcement has been the sole source of funding for SRO programs. This is no longer viable. The reduction in the number of SROs in Marin County is real and upon us right now. The police and Sheriff’s departments that have been funding the SROs are under increasing financial pressure. New reliable and sustainable sources of funding must be found.

School administrators, staff, and law enforcement personnel are well aware of the difficulties involved in securing long-term funding. At a time when most schools and law enforcement agencies are looking at budget reductions, a proposal to retain SRO positions will be seriously challenged. Nevertheless, communities across the country are doing exactly that: identifying funding sources to match their priority of ensuring a safe school environment.

Nationwide research and the Grand Jury's interviews have confirmed that schools, the community, and law enforcement agencies all derive benefits from the SRO approach. This awareness contributes to the success of the program, but also broadens the pool of funding sources. We found a variety of funding examples throughout the country:

- 100% of cost borne by local law enforcement
- 100% of cost borne by the school districts
- Shared costs by school and local law enforcement
- Local, state, or federal grants
- Local sales or parcel taxes
- Private fundraising

After a successful SRO program is established, the value is apparent to the school, community, and law enforcement. Concern for the safety of the children, as well as the fear of a school tragedy, has motivated many school boards to make exceptional efforts to retain the SRO presence. In order to maximize the availability of SROs, small school districts have arranged to share the costs.

In the past, parent/teacher groups were known for raising modest amounts of money to add amenities to classrooms. Today, their efforts are broader in scope and far more sophisticated. Most Marin County school districts have a fundraising arm or non-profit foundation that enables schools to implement non-mandated programs. Arts, technology, athletics, music, and drama programs are often the recipients of such funds. The Grand Jury believes that communities should raise the priority of school safety when allocating discretionary funds.

One city in Marin is considering a ballot measure to increase the sales tax by a half-cent to help fund programs for seniors, children, and police. The Grand Jury strongly suggests that if a sales tax measure passes in that community, some of the revenue raised should go toward maintaining a strong SRO program in the schools.

In light of the benefits to schools, law enforcement, and the community, serious consideration should be given to sharing the responsibility of funding SRO programs. Marin school boards must take the lead in working with city councils and law enforcement to identify sustainable funding for SRO programs in their communities.

## FINDINGS

The Grand Jury finds that:

- F 1.** The role of a School Resource Officer significantly differs from that of a patrol officer and requires specialized training.

- F 2.** The School Resource Officer promotes a strong collaborative relationship between schools and law enforcement that benefits the entire community.
- F 3.** School Resource Officers help create a school environment where teachers feel safe to teach and students feel safe to learn.
- F 4.** School Resource Officers, along with families and school administrators, are a critical part of intervention to prevent unlawful or harmful behaviors.
- F 5.** For most communities, SRO funding is not assured beyond the 2010/2011 school year.
- F 6.** The costs of the School Resource Officer programs are borne by the local police and the Sheriff's departments with no financial contribution by the school districts.
- F 7.** School Resource Officers are uniquely positioned to monitor and address gang and drug activity in Marin County schools.
- F 8.** The loss of School Resource Officers will deprive youth of an important positive connection with law enforcement.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The Grand Jury recommends that:

- R 1.** School Resource Officer Programs be retained in schools where they currently exist and established in districts where they do not exist.
- R 2.** Marin County public entities make the School Resource Officer program a budget priority.
- R 3.** Marin County school communities take the lead in working with their city councils and law enforcement to identify sustainable funding to maintain a sufficient number of School Resource Officers.

## REQUEST FOR RESPONSES

Pursuant to Penal Code Section 933.05, the Grand Jury requests responses from the following governing bodies:

- The Marin County Sheriff: All Findings and Recommendations R1 and R2

- All Marin County cities and towns: All Findings and Recommendations

The governing bodies indicated above should be aware that the comment or response of the governing body must be conducted in accordance with Penal Code Section 933 (c) and subject to the notice, agenda and open meeting requirements of the Ralph M. Brown Act.

California Penal Code Section 933 (c) states that "...the governing body of the public agency shall comment to the presiding judge on the findings and recommendations pertaining to matters under the control of the governing body." Further, the Ralph M. Brown Act requires that any action of a public entity governing board occur only at a noticed and agendized public meeting.

The Grand Jury invites responses from:

- The Marin County school boards
- Marin County Board of Education
- All Marin County Chiefs of Police

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