

Education Committee

JOINT FAVORABLE REPORT

Bill No.: SB-1095

Title: AN ACT CONCERNING SCHOOL RESOURCE OFFICERS.

Vote Date: 3/10/2023

Vote Action: Joint Favorable Substitute

PH Date: 3/1/2023

File No.: 252

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SPONSORS OF BILL:

Education Committee

Sen. Gary A. Winfield, 10th Dist.

Rep. Anthony L. Nolan, 39th Dist.

Sen. Herron Gaston, 23rd Dist.

Rep. Joseph P. Gresko, 121st Dist.

REASONS FOR BILL:

Currently, each school board that assigns school resource officers (SROs) to their intuitions must enter a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the employing local law enforcement agency. This MOU governs the role of the assigned SROs.

This bill requires that each of these school boards publicly post their respective MOUs online, in a central location in the district, and in the schools where SROs work. It also requires that MOUs specify the SRO procedures for student restraint, firearm use, and school-based arrests. These requirements will ensure transparency regarding the responsibilities of SROs.

SUBSTITUTE LANGUAGE:

A previous version of the bill included a requirement for MOUs to specify that school counselors, social workers, psychologists, or staff members with appropriate training can be assigned the duties of an SRO.

The substitute language of the bill removes this provision in response to concerns that it would conflict with the existing responsibilities of these staff members.

RESPONSE FROM ADMINISTRATION/AGENCY:

State Department of Education (SDE), Commissioner, Charlene Russell-Tucker; supports the transparency of publicly posting the memoranda of understanding and specifying procedures for student restraint, use of firearms, and school-based arrests. However, they oppose reassigning other staff members, especially mental health professionals, to those duties typically performed by SROs *. They note that given the shortage of qualified mental health staff, these workers need to be utilized by schools in a manner that reflects their expertise to support the emotional well-being of students *. **The substitute language of this bill addresses these concerns.*

The Office of the Child Advocate (OCA), Child Advocate, Sarah Eagan; supports this bill to ensure that the role of SROs is clarified. They express their belief that student discipline should be the responsibility of school administrators, not SROs. Finally, they recommend requiring schools to collect data regarding sanctions arising from SRO encounters with students.

NATURE AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT:

Connecticut Voices for Children, Research & Policy Fellow, Lauren Ruth; supports the bill citing research their organization conducted finding that students in schools with SROs have a significantly higher risk of arrest or law enforcement referral than students in schools without SROs. They express that this divide could be mitigated by clearly defining SRO disciplinary procedures, as this bill requires, which could lead to better behavior and higher academic achievement. Additionally, they state that ensuring publicly available guidance regarding SROs would help clarify for parents and school staff the instances where police involvement is legally advisable.

NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness) Connecticut, Public Policy Manager, Thomas Burr; supports this bill stating that recent statistics have indicated large numbers of children are being arrested in certain schools in Connecticut. They note that children who exhibit behavioral issues are often dealing with an inadequately treated underlying mental health condition, which is only exacerbated by an arrest. As such, they recommend implementing SRO training on disabilities, restorative practices, de-escalation, rehabilitation, and developing supportive relationships. They also suggest that the selection of an SRO should be made in collaboration with school administrators to ensure that they are accessible, nurturing, and non-reactive.

Special Education Equity for Kids in Connecticut (SEEK), Vice President and Legislative Chair, John Flanders and Andrew Feinstein; supports this bill. They recommend that MOUs outline that SROs should not be involved in regular school discipline or behavior issues, but rather focused on protecting schools from threats to physical safety. They also propose establishing minimum standards and best practices for MOUs through providing templates or guidelines. Finally, they echo the suggestions from NAMI Connecticut regarding SRO trainings and SRO selections.

Connecticut Association of Boards of Education (CABE), President, Liz Brown; supports requiring the public posting of MOUs by local and regional boards of education. However, they express opposition to the provision that enables other staff members to assume SRO responsibilities *.

**The substitute language of this bill addresses these concerns.*

Norwich Free Academy, School Counselor, Jeremiah Berard; supports this bill. However, they request the committee to remove the provision assigning SRO duties to school counselors *. They express concerns that the current language eliminates the distinction between SROs and school counselors, whose functions are unique by design *. They note that school counselor communications with students have a measure of confidentiality, which may be compromised by assuming SRO responsibilities, potentially eroding trust with students *.

**The substitute language of this bill addresses these concerns.*

American Civil Liberties Union of Connecticut (ACLU-CT), Policy Counsel, Jess Zaccagnino; supports this bill stating that school counselors, social workers, psychiatrists, and nurses are the right people to address the issues facing young people, especially students of color, rather than SROs *.

**The substitute language of this bill has removed this referenced provision.*

Connecticut Legal Rights Project (CLRP), Executive Director, Kathy Flaherty; supports this bill stating that SRO presence in schools too often results student criminalization. They also assert that Connecticut must address the root cause of these behavior issues by providing support services to students instead *.

**The substitute language of this bill has removed this referenced provision.*

Hartford Public Schools, Teacher, Steven Tatum; supports this bill stating that they have witnessed an increase in the social and emotional needs of students since the pandemic. They express that these students require responses with extra support services, rather than potential discipline from SROs *.

**The substitute language of this bill has removed this referenced provision.*

The following organizations submitted testimony in support of this bill. Their members cite research from Connecticut Voices for Children which shows that schools with SROs have more arrests and expulsions than peer institutions without SROs. They also state that students would feel more safe, secure, and supported in schools if they were addressed by professionals with behavioral health resources instead of SROs *.

**The substitute language of this bill has removed this referenced provision.*

Blue Hills Civic Association (BHCA)

Citywide Youth Coalition (CWYC)

Community First Coalition

ConnCAN

Connecticut Justice Alliance (CTJA)

CT Black and Brown Student Union (CTBBSU)

CT Students for a Dream

Hearing Youth Voices

New Britain Racial Justice Coalition (NBRJC)

Radical Advocates for Cross-Cultural Education (RACCE)

Two individuals submitted testimony anonymously in support of this bill.

NATURE AND SOURCES OF OPPOSITION:

Connecticut State Police Union, President, Todd Fedigan; opposes this bill stating that Connecticut school systems are already uniquely designed with counselors, psychologists, and social workers acting as the primary intervenor regarding behavioral issues with students*. They express that SROs are partners with school staff and only intervene as law enforcers when requested or necessary*. They also note that school principals often make the final determination of a criminal complaint, which rarely occurs unless the student is a chronic offender or poses a safety risk to others.

**The substitute language of this bill addresses these concerns.*

Connecticut Association of School Psychologists (CASP), Government and Public Relations Chair, H. Thomas Brant; opposes this bill stating that the provision to assign trained staff with SRO duties is in direct opposition to the professional standards created by the National Association of School Psychologists*. They also express that it would violate the Guidelines for the Practice of School Psychology from SDE*. They note that there is already a shortage of school psychologists in Connecticut and this bill as written would only exacerbate the issue*.

**The substitute language of this bill addresses these concerns.*

Connecticut School Counselor Association (CSCA), Executive Director and Government Relations Chairman, Michelle Catucci and Virginia DeLong; opposes this bill stating that it will directly conflict with the role of the school counselor, as defined by the Comprehensive School Counseling Framework from SDE*. They also express that SROs serve a critically important separate role from school counselors, who are not trained to be disciplinarians*.

**The substitute language of this bill addresses these concerns.*

The following individuals submitted testimony in opposition to this bill. They stated that school counselors should not be doing the work of SROs as it will directly conflict with their existing responsibilities, which are increasingly important to address the mental health needs of students*. They also note that school counselors in Connecticut are already spread beyond the nationally recommended ratios with students and cannot afford the potential expansion of their workload*.

**The substitute language of this bill addresses these concerns.*

Sacred Heart University, School Counseling Program Director, Sandra McKibben
University of St. Joseph, School Counseling Program Director, Marte Ostvik-de Wilde
Southern Connecticut State University, School Counseling Program Coordinator, Jennifer Parzych

Four people submitted testimony anonymously in opposition to this bill.

NATURE AND SOURCES OF GENERAL COMMENT:

Connecticut Police Chief Association (CPCA), President, Neil Dryfe; expresses concerns that publishing MOUs would be inefficient because they should only be detailing the legal arrangement between police departments and school districts. They also note that MOUs should not be used for establishing police procedure because SROs must work under their

respective agency's policies. Finally, they recommended funding uniform SRO training across the state, creating an ideal MOU template, creating a model police department policy regarding SROs for consistency in all school districts, and requiring supervision for school-based arrests.

National Association of Social Workers – Connecticut Chapter (NASW/CT), Executive Director, Stephen Wanczyk-Karp; expresses their support for the provision requiring specifics on SRO procedures relating to restraint, firearms, and school-based arrests. However, they express opposition to the provisions assigning trained staff with SRO duties *. They note that it would violate the NASW Code of Ethics and could leave school social workers open to allegations of violating this code *. Additionally, they note that issues of confidentiality and trust between school social workers and students could be compromised if they had to perform law enforcement duties *.

**The substitute language of this bill addresses these concerns.*

Reported by: Taha Anwar

Date: 3/21/2023