

**School Resource Officers Are Not the Solution to School Safety:
A response to the Report of Governor Cooper’s
Special Committee on School Shootings**
By the Durham People’s Alliance Racial Equity and Education Action Teams

As educators, parents, and citizens, we are troubled by the report issued by the Governor’s Crime Commission Special Committee on School Shootings (SCSS) on February 7, 2019. We do not believe that the approach advocated by SCSS will have a positive or effective impact on school safety. In fact, we fear some suggestions will create more disparities and safety issues. We have some policy suggestions that are empirically proven to make schools safer, both emotionally and physically.

What the Special Committee on School Shootings report gets wrong

We believe the SCSS erred in approaching school safety with a race-neutral lens and we assert that equity training is critical to impacting the school-to-prison pipeline created and perpetuated by disproportionate discipline. Without intentionally addressing root issues, such as bias and mental health, we fear that increased School Resource Officer (SRO) funding may create the illusion of safety yet continue to manifest unsafe schools. A school-safety program that revolves around school shootings risks further traumatizing generations of students without centering learning in a sustainably harm-free environmentⁱ. The 2018 Brookings Institute reportⁱⁱ examining the efficacy of Senate Bill 402, Section 8.36, which was passed by the North Carolina General Assembly, found no relationship between increased funding for SROs and reduction in school violence. It did find, however, that SROs are directly correlated to the school-to-prison pipeline. As good public policy should be driven by sound data, we feel it is imperative to redefine school safety in a broader context beyond school shootings, which remain extremely rare.

SROs are fundamentally expected to be and to act as Law Enforcement Officers (LEOs). Placing them in the role of informal counselor or mentor puts them in a position of potential conflict: If they see or hear something of concern, it is their duty to arrest; hence, developmentally-typical classroom misbehaviors can become criminalized. On the other hand, school counselors and social workers receive extensive training within their licensure programs. Counselors and social workers who are equity-trained can proactively and responsively address underlying causes of school violence. Mental health and equity cannot be afterthoughts. Investing scarce resources in funding SROs leaves less-than-adequate resources for educators who directly support student mental health: nurses, counselors, psychologists, and social workers. Our children deserve access to services before they reach the juvenile justice system.

Negative impacts of SROs in schools

1. **Decrease supportive learning environment:** The presence of SROs, metal detectors at school boundaries, regular active shooter drills, and similar reactive practices create an atmosphere of fear and surveillance within schools that is not conducive to learning or healthy emotional development. In fact, 65% of students surveyed reported feeling

unsafe, fearful, or harassed by SROs in schoolsⁱⁱⁱ. Furthermore, we are particularly concerned about the psychological ramifications of high-stress drills taking place in schools. There isn't any data confirming the benefits of active school shooter drills, as school shootings are so rare, but numerous studies do show the harmful long-term impacts of damaging children's sense of safety^{iv}. Worse, there is now evidence that the Parkland shooter utilized what he'd learned during these active shooter drills to maximize casualties.

2. **Increase school-to-prison pipeline:** SRO presence has been documented to increase disorderly conduct arrests and criminalize ordinary adolescent behavior that would otherwise be handled by educators, thus exacerbating the school-to-prison pipeline. SROs are more common in schools with large populations of low-income, undocumented, or students of color — demographics that are already over-policed. Research shows that, in schools across the country, young people of color, young people with disabilities, and LGBTQ youth are disproportionately targeted by SROs. Their “differences” are criminalized rather than viewed as just normal variations of human individuality. In this way, SROs sustain and feed the systems that built mass incarceration.

3. **Fuel school-to-deportation pipeline:** The presence of law enforcement officers on campus presents an omnipresent threat to our vulnerable students without citizenship status. Schools are supposed to be safe zones, but school discipline can serve to funnel immigrant students into the school-to-deportation pipeline at a time when they most need the security of school and its services. Because of the increasingly punitive nature of our current immigration system, it has become risky for students without US citizenship to interact with law enforcement in any context. While our state constitution mandates that every resident has a right to a sound and basic education, the school-to-prison and school-to-deportation pipelines systematically deny that right.

Evidence-Based Policy Recommendations to Improve School Safety

1. **Invest funds in teacher training and restorative practices:** Build a climate of care and conflict resolution within the school through investment in training for teachers, students, and parents in restorative practices and relationship building. Discipline should be the teacher's role and should be included in all Memoranda of Understanding (MOU). A graduated response model (often described as a multi-tiered system of supports), such as the one in use in New Hanover County, provides a more unified approach to school safety that keeps discipline rooted in the classroom and with educational professionals. If SROs are present, they should not be involved in routine school discipline but focused only on protecting the school from weapons, drugs, and threats of violence.
2. **Invest in more equity-trained mental health professionals:** Every school should gain at least one counselor, one social worker, and/or one psychologist. We appreciate and support the SCSS endorsement of your 2018-2019 budget recommendations of \$55 million for Youth Mental Health, which includes resources to increase the Certified Instructional Support Personnel allotment, guaranteeing one additional full-time

employee (FTE) in each district. However, adding only one FTE per district is inadequate when research shows that the needs are much greater. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) recommends that schools strive to maintain a 250:1 student-to-counselor ratio. As of 2018, North Carolina's ratio was 386:1, according to the Department of Public Instruction.

3. **Craft effective regulation of firearms:** This includes raising the age of purchase and implementing red-flag laws that enable extreme risk protection orders.

Any school practices that funnel black and brown students into high suspension rates must ultimately be dismantled and replaced with community-based practices like restorative justice. The collateral consequences of over-policing our students include lower educational outcomes, alienation, and lack of trust towards authority.

We support using state funds for equitable, innovative, and evidence-based programs, including training to help teachers, school staff, and mental health professionals identify and respond to student mental health challenges, like crisis intervention training and trauma-informed care. The \$10 million currently allocated for SROs would be better spent on such evidence-based school-safety protocols. We ask that you consider allocating our precious public resources to established evidence-based practices and strategies that do not pose any potential threat or harm to our students:

- improved mental health services,
- highly-qualified educators and support staff, and
- increased teacher training and professional development.

These practices will enable us to nurture the conditions that facilitate learning, support students with diverse needs, and keep our schools safe in a sustainable way.

Thank you.

ⁱ Balko, Radley. "Putting more cops in schools won't make schools safer, and it will likely inflict a lot of harm." The Washington Post. 22 Feb. 2018. WP Company. 21 Feb. 2019

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-watch/wp/2018/02/22/putting-more-cops-in-schools-wont-make-schools-safer-and-it-will-likely-inflict-a-lot-of-harm/?hpid=hp_hp-top-table-main-police-safer-schools%3Ahomepage%2Fstory&utm_term=.7f11b788df8f>.

ⁱⁱ Anderson, Kenneth Alonzo (2018) "Policing and Middle School: An Evaluation of a Statewide School Resource Officer Policy," *Middle Grades Review*. Vol. 4 : Iss. 2 , Article 7 . Retrieved from: <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/mgreview/vol4/iss2/7>

ⁱⁱⁱ Padres y Jóvenes Unidos & Advancement Project . (2005). Education on lockdown: The schoolhouse to jailhouse track. Retrieved from http://b3cdn.net/advancement/5351180e24cb166d02_mlbbrqgxlh.pdf

^{iv} Hamblin, James. "What Are the Psychological Effects of 'Active-Shooter Drills'?" *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 28 Feb. 2018, www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2018/02/effects-of-active-shooter/554150/.

^ Kupchik, Aaron. "Over-Policing and Excessive Use of Punishments in Schools." *UC Press Blog*, 25 Aug. 2017, www.ucpress.edu/blog/22208/the-real-school-safety-problem-the-long-term-consequences-of-harsh-school-punishment/.