

Report says Maine needs statewide training standards, more oversight for school-based policing

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By Kevin Miller Staff Writer

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AUGUSTA — A first-ever study of school-based policing in Maine recommends that the state set minimum training requirements for school resource officers and strengthen oversight of the programs as police officers become regular fixtures in school hallways across Maine.

Researchers at the University of Southern Maine found “wide variation” in school resource officer programs across the state, while noting that a lack of mandatory reporting or statewide oversight hampered attempts to evaluate the programs’ effectiveness. The researchers at USM’s Cutler Institute for Health and Social Policy also raised concerns about a lack of mandatory, specialized training that’s important for working with young people in a school setting.

“You are putting a law enforcement official into an environment ... that is different than the environment in which they are trained,” said George Shaler, a senior research associate at USM and co-author of the report.

USM’s Cutler Institute surveyed nearly 200 school resource officers and school administrators as part of the study, which was commissioned by the Juvenile Justice Advisory Group, which provides policy guidance to the Maine Department of Corrections.

Like most states, Maine has experienced a surge in the number of school resource officers in recent decades in response to growing national concerns about school safety. Federal funding for such positions also has surged, often in the aftermath of high-profile mass shootings in schools.

The USM study found that 49 of Maine’s 174 school districts, or 28 percent, had school-based policing provided by at least 71 officers last year. The majority of the 53 school resource officers who responded to USM’s survey said they worked in multiple schools, while roughly one-quarter of those officers reported working full-time in a high school.

The USM team found “a high degree of collaboration (among) program partners, and their

commitment to the youth they serve was evident.” However, the researchers recommended several key changes to ensure school resource officer programs are having a positive impact on youth and are “adequately guided and supported.”

Those include:

- Requiring that before working in a school, school resource officers receive at least 40 hours of training – and 10 hours of continuing education annually – in areas such as child and adolescent development, students’ legal rights, working with children with special needs and appropriate intervention strategies.
- Ensuring that schools are addressing other aspects of school safety by maintaining the recommended ratios of guidance counselors, social workers, nurses or other staff before hiring a school resource officer.
- Requiring schools and police departments to adopt detailed agreements outlining the roles and responsibilities of officers, how they will be hired and evaluated, and how the program will be overseen.
- Mandating that all officers collect and report basic data on the number of students who are handcuffed, restrained, arrested or referred to the court system, as well as detailed breakdowns on the demographics of those students. Shaler and study lead author Danielle Layton noted that their ability to measure the impact of school resource officers was limited by “the dearth of empirical data in Maine, the lack of statewide oversight or data collection, and this study’s limited access to school arrest rates, demographics and dispositions of students arrested in schools.”

In today’s environment, preparing for “active shooters” has become a mandatory endeavor in most schools. Resource officers often serve as the lead coordinator in helping schools develop response plans and conduct drills – and then are often regarded as the first line of defense if such a situation arises.

But school resource officers report that their jobs are much more complicated and demanding.

“While school and law enforcement systems may regard the purpose of the SRO program as primarily threat preparedness and relationship building, SROs are routinely deployed as investigators, school grounds monitors, mediators and counselors,” the authors wrote.

For instance, 72 percent of officers reported engaging in “informal counseling daily” with students, while half reported mediating conflicts between students every day. Additionally, 46 percent of officers reported investigating criminal activity on a weekly basis, but also frequently being deployed for non-criminal “teachable moments.”

Officer Jeff Upton, the school resource officer at Marshwood High School in South Berwick since

2001, was among the wave of SROs hired nationwide after the 1999 mass shooting at Colorado's Columbine High School. Upton said his role at his alma mater has changed over the past 18 years so that he is now an integral part of the administrative team as well as the school's safety and risk assessment teams.

"In the beginning, you were putting a police officer in the school to provide safety, which obviously an SRO still does," Upton said. "However, over the years, we have evolved."

Upton said he has taught classes, conducted technology programs for elementary school parents and even serves lunch to students. Handing out sandwiches to kids, Upton said, is an important part of having "positive interactions rather than having a police officer being that punitive figure in the school."

But Upton also strongly supports many of the USM study's recommendations, particularly when it comes to outlining a school resource officer's role in a school and setting minimum training standards for officers.

"Before you put an SRO into a school, you should have this basic training ... because taking what you do out on the street as a police officer doesn't necessarily translate into what you do in the hallways of a high school or a middle school or an elementary school," he said.

Meanwhile, a newly formed Maine School Resource Officer Association "will serve many purposes and undoubtedly address many of the recommendations brought forward by the USM study," said the group's executive director, Mary-Anne LaMarre.

Another focus of the association, LaMarre said, will be to clarify the role of resource officers who are sometimes mistakenly expected – by teachers, administrators and parents – to manage and enforce school policies.

"Discussing these recommendations as a unified group, with sheriffs and chiefs engaged and involved in decisions, is the only reasonable strategy to successfully tackle what needs to develop in the SRO community in Maine," LaMarre wrote in an email. "It's important to remember that each and every SRO in the state answers to either a sheriff or a chief of police. It's incumbent upon those leaders to be invested in any policy development or training/reporting requirements."

Portland High School Principal Sheila Jepson said it is critical that school staff and the resource officers understand and know each other's boundaries. But Jepson said her school's resource officer, Mike Bennis, fits so well into the operations of the 875-student school that "his presence is so seamless with us."

Like other SROs, Bennis not only works with the school on safety measures, but is a constant, familiar face in the hallways, at sporting events, dances and other functions.

“He knows the students and families,” Jepson said. “He knows how we, as administrators, work. He works with us as a team, and I see him as another member of our staff. He plays a critical role, just like everyone else.”
