

SELECT BOARD COMMITTEE ON POLICING REFORMS

SCHOOL RESOURCE OFFICERS

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Who are the School Resource Officers (SRO)?

Middle School SROs:

- Katie McCabe (& Bear, the Comfort Dog)
- Donal Kerrigan
- Joe Amendola

High School SRO:

- Kaitlin Conneely

Are students and parents aware of the SRO program?

Most students probably don't know these officers by their specific titles as SROs, but if you ask, many do know Officer Katie and Bear, Officer Joe, Officer Donal, and Officer Kaitlin. In fact, nearly every child in Brookline High School and those in 8th grade have been in their AWARE classes which are taught in every 6 – 8th grade throughout the district. At the beginning of each school year, a letter is sent to all households of 6th, 7th and 8th grader students from the Public Schools of Brookline (PSB) informing parents/guardians about the AWARE program and introducing the SROs.

Understandably, with busy lives, parents may sometimes miss correspondence being sent from the school which is why the program introduction is sent to all grades at the beginning of each year. Current 6th graders and some 7th graders have not yet had these classes due to COVID but letters did go home this year as well and students still may know the SROs from the various other school activities they participate in. Prior to COVID, the SROs regularly held PTO forums on topics such as vaping, emergency preparedness and active threat training, online threats and cyber safety.

What classes do the SROs teach?

The middle school SROs teach a curriculum known as the AWARE program. This AWARE program includes lessons on Building a Safe Community, Healthy Relationships, Substance Abuse/Awareness, Cyber-Safety/Awareness, Bullying and Student Empowerment in all eight of the Brookline elementary schools in grades 6-8. The SROs are invited in by the health teachers to teach these courses (and occasionally additional material as needed) and they are scheduled by teachers via a shared google calendar.

SROs are often invited to school community events, to visit BEEP classrooms and to participate in school activities (spring fair, field days, etc.), enabling them to continue building relationships with the middle school students outside of the classroom. At the High School, the SRO works in collaboration with the Legal Studies teacher to run a BHS Citizen Police Academy.

If the AWARE classes are canceled, these topics – which teens often struggle with – would not be taught or would need to be added to the teaching curriculum. Some health teachers may not feel comfortable or competent discussing these topics without additional training/curriculum development. School Resource Officers have extensive and unique experience as law enforcement officers who have participated in the investigation and prosecution of offenses in which youth were in grave danger. Such offenses include statutory rape, child exploitation, distribution of pornographic material, cyber risks, including chat rooms with child predators, etc. This experience, coupled with their advanced knowledge of the law and juvenile justice system, is why SROs are uniquely qualified to teach this material to youth.

Over the last year, due to COVID-19 and the controversy surrounding the role of SROs in our schools, the SROs were not invited to teach the AWARE classes. There was no replacement put in place, so students did not have instruction in these extremely important issues. As a result, our SROs have received many calls regarding students struggling with issues that would have been addressed in the classroom.

By example, recently SROs were called to assist at a school after one child committed an act against another that had an unintended consequence which amounted to a sex offense. The SROs were immediately on scene and were able to communicate with the staff, determine the location of one child who fled the school and initiate outreach to the children and parents. The SRO spoke with the parents who were understandably irate. Initially, they wanted to file criminal charges against the other student but the SRO was able to walk them through the process of requesting a safety plan and to de-escalate the situation, which was unfortunate but lacked criminal intent, in favor of more appropriate outcome for the offending youth, which was not to involve the criminal justice system. The SRO offered services to the family, including a conversation with our Department social worker and followed up with the school and other family involved. The SROs role in this situation undeniably led to the most positive and appropriate outcome for both students involved. The topics they would have taught that could have prevented this situation include the segment on healthy relationships (which includes inappropriate touching), bullying and behaving in a way as to promote a safe community.

Do SROs teach racial justice?

No.

During the fall, the Middle School SROs and their supervisors worked with the PSB K-12 Coordinator for Wellness Education on the delivery of the AWARE program during remote/hybrid learning. As part of that discussion, the idea to include a conversation around racial justice issues was introduced by the PSB K-12 Wellness Education Coordinator as a way to address the “elephant in the room.” The annual AWARE Intro letter was jointly updated to include that conversation, as well as include COVID resources for families.

Together, the PSB and the Brookline Police Department (BPD) acknowledged the importance of being sensitive to all that has transpired since last May and agreed that, although racial justice is not part of the AWARE curriculum, it would be reasonable to expect that students would have questions and concerns about police and policing in America. It was important to share the SROs willingness to answer questions and engage in conversations around concerns students would have because the SROs share in those concerns.

That portion of the letter read: “this year AWARE Officers will also discuss issues of racial justice, policing in America and community-police relations in Brookline. We are sure your children have many questions about policing, and we are prepared to have some difficult and candid discussions around the events we have all witnessed in America this past year.” These letters were distributed to parents of 6th, 7th, and 8th graders, as is done each year prior to the start of AWARE classes, along with a link to a Google form where parents could provide feedback and/or ask questions.

Are Brookline SROs responsible for the “School to Prison Pipeline”?

No.

This does not happen in Brookline. In fact, in Brookline, our SROs have NEVER arrested a student in the performance of their SRO duties. The goal of the SRO program is to divert youth away from the criminal justice system by using: (1) their deep understanding of the various resources available to assist youth and their families in Brookline; (2) their knowledge of juvenile justice laws and systems; (3) their ability and authority to exercise diversion options, and 4) the strong relationships they’ve built with partners in the schools, the courts, the mental health system, Teen Center, etc. that enable them to work out alternatives for youth. Equally important, the training that SROs are given in child development enables them to understand the variations in adolescent functioning and not view all problematic youthful behaviors as criminal.

On a regular basis, the SROs work closely with school staff and students (and their families) to ensure the most positive outcomes and to prevent students from entering into the criminal justice system. Our goal is to work with all parties involved to prevent relatively minor issues from developing into larger issues, or even criminal matters. For example, often SROs are asked to speak with students or groups of students whose online behavior (on platforms like Snapchat, TikTok, Musicly, chat rooms in various online games and social media apps that attract adult predators) are bordering on inappropriate and could potentially lead to victimization or criminal acts (bullying, sexting/dissemination of pornographic material, etc.).

Currently, SROs are available to students, families, and staff as they are needed (basically on call) and the schools can rest assured they will have trained, trusted and familiar faces coming in to assist with difficult situations. Our SROs are regularly contacted after hours by school staff and families to assist and/or provide guidance.

Without dedicated SROs, calls involving youth would be serviced by route officers in Patrol who have rotating schedules and assignments. Patrol officers generally do not have the flexibility in their daily schedules to fully invest in each situation or the specialized training, preexisting

relationships with staff or familiarity with the complexity of juvenile issues that the SROs have to do so effectively. Because of this, route officers also do not have the authority to exercise the level of discretion that our SROs have. Without the specialized training (including training in teenage developmental stages), knowledge, relationships and understanding of the juvenile justice system that SROs bring, we may see more youth ending up in the criminal justice system.

For example, this spring, a student attacked a teacher, causing a laceration on the teacher's face requiring stitches. The student left the building and staff immediately contacted SRO Connelly. SRO Connelly worked with staff to ensure their safety (two teachers were assaulted, but only one required medical attention). She was then able to initiate contact with the student by phone, ensure he was safe, and engage in a conversation with him about his actions. Meanwhile, a Walk and Talk Officer who had been working with the student's mother in the days leading up to the assault, reached out to the mother. The SRO and the Walk and Talk Officer, in consultation with the teacher and mother, counseled the student and informed him that he would be summoned to court for the assault and battery with a dangerous weapon with the goal of getting him needed help.

Had the SRO position not existed, an officer from patrol who was unfamiliar with this youth, the teachers, and the mother, would have likely arrested the student. SRO Connelly in this case PREVENTED the school to prison pipeline. In fact, because of the available resources that the SRO brings, no student has been arrested by the BHS SRO. There have been numerous cases of diversion, mediation and court involvement with the goal of services and not criminal justice punishment.

Situations like this one with such a level of violence, thankfully, are rare. Situations in which our SRO works with students, staff and families are not - those are daily occurrences. SRO Connelly is part of the safety net for our struggling study body and students choose to seek out her counsel, support, and mentorship.

Aren't SRO intimidating to kids?

All of our SROs are highly trained, community policing minded officers who are parents themselves (in fact, between them, they have more than 10 children of their own). They are professionally trained in how best to interact with children and youth, including those who are in crisis, have developmental disabilities, struggle with substance misuse or abuse, have been victims, etc. Our SROs are introduced to students often long before the AWARE curriculum is delivered in 6th grade. Classroom visits always include an introduction to the police uniform and equipment – which does include their firearm. Outside of these classroom visits, or an incident, students are not required to engage with officers. Yet, on a daily basis, many high schoolers “choose” to visit our BHS SRO in her office.

There have been questions about the SROs being armed. Police in America are armed. It is the practice in America that police carry guns and consequently there is an expectation that officers can and will respond to the highest levels of threats which may occur (including in the school building, on route to/from school, etc.). There is also an understanding among those wishing to cause harm that police are armed and capable of protecting the public, including school children,

which has a deterrent effect. This practice brings with it the responsibility for police officers to constantly train in the use of their weapons and to know how to avoid unnecessary use and misuse of it. Because of their extensive training in firearms as well as de-escalation, Brookline Police almost never use their firearms (in fact, there has not been a fatal shooting in Brookline in over 50 years). Having said that, our officers, including SROs, continue to carry firearms in the course of their duties. Each of our SROs are also members of the BPD's Training Division, and two are state certified instructors (through the MPTC) in firearms safety and de-escalation techniques.

Our SROs wear what is called a "soft uniform," which consists of a polo shirt with their name embroidered and navy-blue khakis. This uniform is designed to make them more approachable and provide greater functionality to the work they perform – like sitting down on the floor reading a book with students, sitting at a youth-sized cafeteria table chatting with kids during lunch, or joining in during a gym class or after school pick-up basketball game. Our comfort dog, Bear, who is partners with an SRO Katie, spends time visiting students and staff at schools and they are frequently invited to help calm kids during stressful times – like mid-terms/finals, during times of loss within the school community, following national tragedies, or even when a child or staff is feeling out of sorts.

With the removal of the SROs from the schools, students will lose an additional valuable resource and trusted adult with whom they can discuss difficult situations they may encounter in their increasingly complex lives (i.e. vaping, marijuana, bullying/cyberbullying, sexting, unhealthy relationships). They also lose the value of developing these early relationships and the establishment of trust and that could have negative long term impacts. Youth who don't experience positive, healthy and supportive interactions with police in their youth may carry a sense of fear into adulthood which may prevent them from seeking assistance when they need it, feeling apprehensive when they have casual or transactional interactions with law enforcement, or even displaying a level of fear that is misinterpreted as suspicious or unstable by officers who have not had the training provided by the BPD.

The SROs are constantly working on developing stronger relationships with the students and school administration to assist students and provide the safest school environment possible. SROs ensure that lines of communication between the BPS and BPD remain open at all hours. We saw the benefit of this program during the most recent COVID crisis. While the schools were teaching remote, the SROs were in continuous contact with the schools and offering services to families that needed it.

SROs also assist the schools with extra-curricular activities, for example open houses at the schools, graduations, RAFT dances, and field trips. Every summer the SROs host 20 rising 7th graders in a weeklong program. Throughout the week, students engage in team building exercises, problem solving activities, and educational presentations.

History of the SRO program

The BPD has a long history of working with the PSB to support students and to work collaboratively to ensure positive outcomes for our youth. From the early days of the DARE program to the BHS Citizen Police Academy to coaching sports and teaching in Health classes, the BPD has been an important part of the education of students and other youth in Brookline for more than three decades. Currently, there are four officers assigned to work with the schools. They have been called different things over the years – safety officers, DARE officers, AWARE officers – but none fully encapsulated what it is they do. When the High School SRO position was created in the spring of 2019, the BPD renamed the other school officers also as SROs – School Resource Officers – because that is what they are - a resource. They do not just teach classes, they are a robust part of the school community who can bring additional services, perspective, and knowledge to a myriad of issues faced by students and staff.

Is the effort to remove SROs from the schools the result of an “incident” they were involved in?

No. There was no incident involving the SROs prior to this current discussion. The effort to remove the SROs has been initiated as part of an effort to re-imagine policing in Brookline following the death of George Floyd and other people of color at the hands of police across America.

The Brookline Select Board Committee on Policing Reforms reviewed the work of the SROs, heard from district leaders and staff, students, families, the METCO director, etc. and compiled a comprehensive list of reforms to improve and strengthen the SRO program and to address concerns which have been raised about potential issues with having officers as part of the school community, including additional transparency and public outreach, increased communication and collaboration with the School Superintendent and School Committee, more specific job descriptions of their roles and responsibilities and participating in professional development with teachers.

Is there a financial impact to removing the SROs from the schools?

Yes. Removing the SROs will have significant impacts on the school community and budget. The SROs are an integral part of the safety net for youth in Brookline and provide many services at zero cost to the PSB – from hours teaching in the classroom, to assisting with school events, to staffing traffic posts, to working with families and students after school and on weekends, to being a constantly available resource to support school leadership in addressing various situations.

The PSB would now be responsible for training teachers in the topics currently taught exclusively by the SROs and to field the myriad of questions they are asked by staff, students and families regarding issues such as cyber bullying, dating violence, consensual sex/age of consent, etc. Additionally, the time which the SROs relieves teachers from classroom obligations is lost, time during which teachers can do lesson planning, grading papers, collaborative work with peers, etc.

The removal of SROs from the schools because of a belief that the SROs presence make students, particularly students of color, feel intimidated is also a reason to eliminate the many traffic posts that officers staff outside elementary schools and the BHS at the beginning and ending of every school day. Providing safe replacements for these officers would place a heavy burden on the PSB's budget.