

Chapter 24

The Evolution of Securing the American K–12 Educational Environment With Armed Police Officers

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ABSTRACT

Over the course of time we have seen a dramatic shift in the protection and security of our school system. With the increasing media coverage of school violence the general public has responded with a demand and a push for a safer educational environment for our children. This chapter addresses the movement from very limited school security through full time armed police officers responsible for the school campus. The chapter focuses on policy response to school shootings and covers a wide range of police and school response.

INTRODUCTION

When a significant event occurs under the umbrella of public education it makes national news headlines. In the recent past there have been school shootings, bomb threats, teachers exposed for engaging in sexual conduct with students, dangerous bus drivers, students fighting in classrooms and teachers using extreme corporal punishment to control students. Any one of these events will make news not to mention becoming viral sensations on the Internet. Furthermore, these newscasts have resulted in widespread panic and fear among students, parents, and communities prompting numerous responses in an attempt to make schools a safer place for our children.

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This chapter focuses on the policy changes related to securing the public school campuses. Over the past 60 years there has been a movement to implement a safer educational environment by numerous means. Introducing the use of law enforcement officers into the American schools has rapidly expanded since its inception in the 1950s. This growth can in some measure be attributed to the Safe Schools Act of 1994, the launch of the Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) Office, and disastrous events that have transpired in our country's public schools over the recent past (Mckenna & Pollock, 2014).

Law enforcement officers have been teaching Drug Abuse Resistance and Education (D.A.R.E.) training in schools since the early 1980s when Los Angeles Police Chief Daryl Gates introduced the first D.A.R.E. program. Other than security guards, who were generally not armed, students were not used to seeing any sort of police officer in their school unless something criminal happened. This changed in the 1990s when schools along with police departments across the country took advantage of grants offered through the Federal Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) Office. The grant money was used to put armed police officers in schools. These officers were called School Resource Officers (SROs) and had a myriad of duties. Over time and with heavy influence from the media surrounding school shootings, school administrators took notice of public pressures surrounding keeping their children safe while on the school campus. Public pressure and media exposure of these school shootings led to somewhat of hysteria among parents.

Indeed, an armed intruder (active shooter) poses one of the grimmest threats to the students, faculty and staff and when an incident like this does happen, in fact, it makes national news. Consequently, school police officers train rigorously for active-shooter scenarios. Unfortunately, safety threats are not limited to violent intruders on campus. Actually, the active shooter threat occurs even more rarely when compared with the other risks to students, faculty, and staff. Crimes, such as physical assault, possession of weapons or drugs, and theft, occur much more frequently than armed intrusions, yet the public remains largely unaware of these incidents. Moreover, officers may have to deal with difficult situations that involve students with special needs, students living in poverty, angry parents, disgruntled faculty, and administrators dealing with the pressure to meet certain levels of achievement, at times at the expense of their school's safety (Rudick, 2011).

As a result of media sensation and public perception of their children's safety, school districts began creating their own police departments. This was a major shift from the traditional School Resource Officer (SRO) who, many times, was the only police officer in the school. Now, there would be a complete police force managed by a police chief who would answer to the school administration. To make this possible, state agencies which regulate police officers authorized school districts to form their own police departments and employ certified officers.

DEFINING EDUCATION

The term educational system commonly refers to public education and more commonly to kindergarten through high school programs (K-12). In 2011 there were 16,990 school districts across the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). Schools or school districts are typically the smallest recognized form of "education system." Each state regulates school districts through rules, educational codes and statutes. Simply put, an educational system comprises everything that goes into educating public-school students at the federal, state, or community levels to include: Laws, policies, regulations, public funding, resource allocations, procedures for determining funding levels, state and district ad-

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