



STATE OF CONNECTICUT

OFFICE OF PROTECTION AND ADVOCACY FOR
PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES
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**Testimony of the Office of Protection and Advocacy for Persons with Disabilities
Before the School Security Sub Committee of the Bipartisan Task Force on Gun Violence
Prevention and Children's Safety**

Submitted by: James D. McGaughey

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Thank you for this opportunity to comment on issues related to improving security in our public schools.

As fundamental institutions in our society, public schools both reflect and profoundly influence the values and norms by which our communities live. We know that if schools are to be places of learning and development, all students and staff members (and their families) must be able to feel, and, in fact, be safe. Unfortunately, over the past several decades, we have seen violence and illegal activity increasingly intrude into school life. Various efforts have been made to address this trend: installation of metal detectors and video surveillance equipment; identity checks and entrance controls; hardening of building perimeters; community outreach initiatives and the implementation of conflict resolution programs; adoption of "zero-tolerance" policies; and the direct assignment of police officers – School Resource Officers – to be present during school hours.

There are various published studies addressing the efficacy and possibly detrimental effects of such measures, particularly the assignment of School Resource Officers. Some of those studies suggest that the presence of police does, in fact, reduce the potential for violence, weapons, and gang-related activity in schools. However, some of the studies also suggest that school-based arrests for "breach of peace" have increased, supplanting the development of more appropriate disciplinary and counseling responses from school personnel, and launching many students with acting-out behaviors down the slippery slope toward involvement in the criminal justice system, quite possibly as a career.

In our agency's experience advocating for students with mental health and behavior-related disabilities, the risk of arrest for acting-out behaviors is very real. I am not talking about clearly criminal behavior, such as bringing a weapon to school or committing a premeditated attack on someone. But, there are situations where a student who was dealing with some significant stress in his or her life has gotten upset, run afoul of a "zero tolerance" rule and been arrested for things like kicking a hole in wall, or yelling something inappropriate at a teacher and throwing some books onto the floor. Instead of referrals for mental health counseling, consideration of possible eligibility for special education and related services, and the imposition of administrative consequences based on the "restorative justice"

model, those students have been handcuffed and treated like young criminals. Evidence is mounting that school based arrests for violations of "zero tolerance" rules is a major contributor to the "school to prison pipeline".

Some advocates argue that the mere presence of School Resource Officers (SROs) contributes to this problem; that the ready availability of a source of "outside", authoritative intervention has become an attractive alternative for school administrators who are beset with problems and are struggling to find resources. In our experience, the underlying issue is one of school climate – the same issue that underlies problems like bullying and excessive use of disciplinary measures such as suspension and expulsion. If the climate is harsh and rejecting, if the adults in the building treat each other and their students with disrespect, students will fail, and SROs assigned to that building will inevitably become involved in that vortex of failure. If, however, there is a commitment to ensure each student's success, and sufficiently strong leadership (and motivated followership) to implement that vision, then local police agencies can and should be included as partners in that positive direction.

The real lesson here is that the law of unintended consequences is as operative in efforts to improve school security as it is in other human endeavors. What started as an attempt to improve safety, has too often served as a vehicle for criminalizing adolescent behavior problems, particularly for students experiencing mental health crises. I would urge the Committee not to precipitously expand police presence in the schools of this State without thinking through the roles and responsibilities that would accompany that presence, and consciously creating criteria and safeguards to prevent both school administrators and the officers assigned to fulfill those roles from wandering off course.

Considerable literature exists regarding both the "school to prison pipeline" and the controversy regarding deployment of School Resource Officers. If there are any questions about either, or about our Agency's testimony, please feel free to contact me.