

# Bethlehem to review School Resource Officer program

The Bethlehem Gadfly George Floyd killing, Police June 28, 2020

 *Latest in a series of posts on the response to the George Floyd killing* 

Everything dealing with the police is on the table in the post-George Floyd era. We're looking at a meeting on a Community Engagement Initiative in the near future. It promises wide-ranging discussion.

Even School Resource Officers (SRO) are on the table, under the microscope.

Gadfly noted the review of the SRO program in Dr. Roy's fine **Op-Ed** last week.

There were no police or SROs in Gadfly's educational background.

In elementary school, Sister Helen Regina patrolled the halls, Bantam Weight champion of the North American Order of the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart. Given her diminutive height, she was perfectly positioned to use her pointer to poke boys in tender areas.

In high school, Father Alfred Monte patrolled the halls. He was rumored to have undergone torture in a Pacific theater POW camp, apparently a uniquely valuable experience for a Head Disciplinarian.

Gadfly watched himself.

But he has no experience with which to judge the impact of SROs on students of color in inner-city schools.

While reading the article below in today's print *Morning Call*, his mind wandered to the presence of an officer at our City Council meetings and other places/occasions where there is a police presence.

Gadfly's not sure how to think about this issue. Dr. Roy is listening to arguments against the program and will put in writing, for the first time,

a statement of its purpose. Good. Gadfly would like to hear arguments on both sides in more detail. He knows there are teachers among his followers. He knows that there are parents of school-age children among his followers.

Feels like a subject on which good people can differ. But Dr. Roy (and the BASD board) will need to justify their position.

Probably a delicate writing assignment.

Thoughtful discussion invited.

*from Jacqueline Palochko, “I’m listening to the argument that police don’t belong in schools’: Allentown and Bethlehem reconsider resource officers.” Morning Call, June 27, 2020.*

For children growing up after the 1999 Columbine school shooting that left 13 people dead, seeing an armed officer patrolling the hallways is a common part of the school day.

Bethlehem Area students start encountering officers in school in sixth grade. All together, the district has seven school resource officers — two at Liberty High, and one at Freedom High and each of the four middle schools.

All seven wear a police uniform and carry a gun. And Superintendent Joseph Roy believes the officers, six of whom are employed by the city police department and one by Bethlehem Township, are the best of the best. After school, they coach basketball teams, organize clothing drives for students and run clubs.

“They do what you would want a [school resource officer] to do as far as being embedded in the school community and getting to know kids,” Roy said.

But as the nation examines police violence following the death of another unarmed black man by a white police officer, many districts are reconsidering the decision to put armed officers in schools.

“I’m listening to the argument that police don’t belong in schools,” Roy said. “For students coming from communities that don’t have the best relationship or the police aren’t viewed in a positive place, having a police officer in the school might not make them feel safer.”

The district will review the purpose of its school resource officer program, Roy said, and put that purpose in writing, which is something the district has never done.

It’s a shift in the conversation after 20 years of placing armed officers in schools to keep students safe from shootings. Now advocates and many students believe policing does not belong in schools and contributes to the school-to-prison pipeline, especially for Black and Hispanic children.

Allentown and Bethlehem, the Lehigh Valley’s two largest districts, have the highest percentage of students of color. In Allentown, more than 85% of its 17,000 students are Black or Hispanic, while more than half of Bethlehem’s 13,600 students are.

After Columbine, other Lehigh Valley districts added officers, some picking up the tab and some applying for grants to cover the costs. Bethlehem’s school resource officers were paid through a federal grant, but when the grant ended, the city and district split the tab. The district pays \$400,000 for the six city officers.

Roy believes the solution of armed officers in schools is likely somewhere in the middle.

“You have to find that balance between the feeling of safety you want from an external intruder and then the internal school climate you want where kids feel comfortable and safe in school,” he said.

The state Education Department collects school safety data, including how many officers are posted at schools. For the 2018-19 school year, there were eight school police officers, 14 school resource officers and 65 security guards in Lehigh County schools. Northampton County schools had 31 school police officers, 11 school resource officers and 32 school security officers.

School police officers are typically those employed directly by a district, while school resource officers are usually from municipal departments. Unlike police officers, most security officers are unarmed.

Some districts, such as Easton Area and Northampton Area, operate their own police departments.

But after George Floyd, an unarmed Black man in Minneapolis, was killed on May 25 when an officer pressed a knee into his neck for more than eight minutes, the conversation about police brutality spread to schools.

Several large districts, such as Seattle and Minneapolis, recently promised to end contracts with local police. On June 18, the American Federation of Teachers, one of the country's largest teacher unions, [passed a resolution](#) calling for the separation of school safety and policing.

Some also argue that instead of officers, schools should employ more counselors to help students.

“When you have mental health issues and other social issues that would require counselors or therapists, is a school resource officer being a first responder for those instances?” he said. “Because if they are, then that’s maybe a problem.”

In Allentown, Dieruff High student Nasheera Brown, who organized Tuesday’s rally, said, “A lot of students feel they shouldn’t have to have police on their backs.”

Brown believes students should be disciplined for misbehaving in school, but minor incidents should not involve the police. She thinks that the district should also employ more staff members with a better understanding of Allentown students, most of whom live in poverty.

“We have some great leaders but some of our leaders don’t understand what we go through, and we need more understanding people to enforce positivity,” she said.

According to numbers the Allentown and Bethlehem districts provided to the state, 74 Allentown students and 95 Bethlehem Area students were arrested at school in 2018-19.

Bethlehem school Director Winston Alozie agrees with Roy's call to review the school resource officer program.

"I want to make sure that teachers and administrators understand the roles of SROs because I feel like sometimes that area can get very gray very fast and maybe lead to situations that shouldn't happen," he said. "You don't call an SRO if a kid isn't listening to the teacher. That's not an SRO call."

Alozie said when he ran the Boys and Girls Club in South Side Bethlehem a few years ago, he heard students talking about an officer using a stun gun on a Freedom High student.

"I remember them talking about that and the indelible impact that was left on their memories," he said. "As a school community, you need to ask how something like that can happen."

Since the protests against police brutality started, including marches and rallies every week in the Lehigh Valley since late May, Roy has met with current and former students who told him they don't think officers belong in schools.

Roy believes school resource officers should be used only for matters that school officials would call the police for, such as weapons in schools or assaults. They shouldn't be pulled into theft and other cases that school officials can handle.

The argument students at Tuesday's rally made was that when resource officers get too involved with enforcement, schools start to resemble prisons. And that's the last message Roy and Parker want to relay.

"The possibility is always there when there is a police officer nearby that they get pulled into things that we wouldn't otherwise be calling the police for," Roy said. "If it's a child that's a Black or Latino child getting into the system, that's not what we need."