



UTAH BOARD OF JUVENILE JUSTICE  
**RACIAL & ETHNIC**  
D I S P A R I T I E S  
*Advisory Committee*

School Resource Officer (SRO)  
Parent & Student Discussion  
Findings and Recommendations

December 2020-February 2021

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## I. Executive Summary

The Racial and Ethnic Disparities (RED) Advisory Committee is a branch of the Utah Board of Juvenile Justice (UBJJ) that was created to help address the fourth core protection of the 1974 Federal Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDPA) which requires states to assess and address racial and ethnic disparities at key points of contact in the juvenile justice system. The key points include: arrest, court referral, diversion, locked detention, community placement, secure care, and transfer to adult court. Members of the RED Advisory Committee include youth, juvenile justice practitioners, educators, and community-based leaders and advocates.

The RED Advisory Committee learned in August 2020 that there would be potential changes to policies related to the points of an arrest and a court referral made by a School Resource Officer (SRO) or school personnel. The potential proposed changes would impact [state statute UC 53G-8-7 and UC 53E-3-516](#).

In addition to the working groups that were developed to address proposed changes in the abovementioned statute, the RED Advisory Committee held discussion groups with students and parents from communities of color. Specifically, RED wanted to better understand their perspectives on the roles of SROs as proposed legislation would potentially impact families.

Key findings and recommendations from the parent and student discussion groups fall into the following three areas:

- Roles and responsibilities of SRO's
- Training of SROs
- SRO relationship to and community-building with schools, students, and families

Overall, the RED Advisory Committee connected with parents and students from two different school districts along the Wasatch Front and was able to hear from various minority groups within the two districts. The discussion group findings will be valuable for legislators and other stakeholders to consider as they work on important policy changes.

## **II. Background**

In the state of Utah, an arrest and a court referral for a school-based offense may be made by an SRO or a school administrator. There are numerous state laws and local education agency and school-specific policies that determine the types of offenses, and which qualify for an arrest or court referral. The RED Advisory Committee is concerned with potential inequities that may occur at these points of contact.

While acknowledging there may be a multitude of reasons why inequities exist at these points of contact, stakeholders have made efforts to examine the multitude of reasons for why inequities exist at these points of contact and to implement policy changes to address the issues . Specifically, the interactions between law enforcement and school administration with students. Particular legislative efforts aimed to promote and implement the best practices in school settings are outlined below.

[HB 460 \(2016\) - School Resource Officers and School Administrators Training and Agreement](#)

*Amended by [HB 345 \(2021\)](#)*

*Codified in [Utah Code § 53G-8-7](#)*

This legislation focused on two primary areas. The first area was the development of a joint training curriculum between SROs and school administrators. The curriculum includes topics such as childhood and adolescent development; responding age-appropriately to students; working with disabled students; techniques to de-escalate and resolve conflict; cultural awareness; restorative justice practices; identifying a student exposed to violence or trauma

and referring the student to appropriate resources; student privacy rights; negative consequences associated with youth involvement in the juvenile and criminal justice systems; strategies to reduce juvenile justice involvement; and roles of and distinctions between a school resource officer and other school staff who help keep a school secure. The second area was the development of a memorandum of understanding to clearly define the roles and responsibilities of an SRO if a school was to contract with a law enforcement agency for SRO services.

[SB 198 \(2018\) - Student Data Privacy Amendments](#)

*Amended by [SB 166 \(2020\)](#)*

*Codified in [Utah Code § 53E-3-516](#)*

This legislation was quite broad, but the related area of focus included a requirement for schools to report on the number of law enforcement incidents on school grounds. The data points focus on the reason for law enforcement activity, the type of other law enforcement activity used, and the number of disciplinary actions imposed.

As there was renewed interest in examining the role of law enforcement in schools, working groups were formed to address potential changes in the legislation outlined above. These working groups included legislators, community advocates, law enforcement, school personnel, and members from the RED Advisory Committee. Understanding the importance of including voices that may be directly affected by changes in these policies, the RED Advisory Committee conducted discussion groups with parents and students from communities of color.

### **III. Discussion Groups**

Parent and student discussion groups were held to better understand their experiences and understandings of SROs in schools. It is anticipated that this information will be

helpful to legislators and other stakeholders as it provides insight into how the public feels about SROs and what they'd like to see from law enforcement.

Overall, four parent discussion groups were conducted in a school district along the Wasatch Front between December 2020 and January 2021. The parents in attendance had children in various K-12 education levels, however the discussion focused on junior and high school aged youth. Three discussion groups with high school students were conducted in January and February 2021.

<b>Discussion Group</b>	<b>Participants</b>
Title VI (Native American) Parent Group	6
LGBTQIA+ student Parent Group	12
Multicultural Parent Group- including Pacific Islander, Black/African American, Asian	13
Latino Parent Group	8
High School Student group	20
High School Student group	9
High School Student group	12

The same questions were asked to all the groups with some variation because parents and students had different follow up questions. The main questions asked to the groups included:

- What do you know about School Resource Officers at your child's school?
- How do you feel about law enforcement in schools? Do you think they should be there on-site full-time, only called when needed, should they be at schools at all?
- What role do you think law enforcement should have in schools? Safety/security, discipline, other?

- SROs are in many Utah schools now and they receive varying levels of training for the position. What types of training do you think SROs should have?

#### **IV. Key Findings**

##### Parent Feedback

When parents were asked what they knew about SROs at their child's school, most parents shared that they did not have much knowledge of their child(rens') SRO and were not familiar with the duties on school grounds. One parent shared: "As a parent, I don't think I would know what an SRO does." Furthermore, some parents did not realize that SROs are law enforcement officers, rather they thought they were solely part of the administrative truancy personnel. One parent mentioned, "My daughter is in elementary school and I didn't know [the school] had [an SRO]. They posted a picture last week and so I was surprised. They posted his picture [on social media] and a little about him and I thought that was good outreach. I don't know if they explained what he will be doing."

When asked what type of training SROs should receive the parents had many suggestions including: cultural awareness, bias, and mental health. An important emphasis was placed around SROs having the ability to speak the same language as the majority of the students/families in the school as well as having a better understanding of the LGBTQIA+ community.

Parents spoke on the importance of relationship building within their communities. They shared personal experiences when their children did not feel comfortable with law enforcement officers in general and said they felt this was because of a lack of a relationship. Most parents felt that SROs should be in the school at least part-time and that it is beneficial for safety reasons. Parents also discussed that they themselves should be involved before, during, and after an investigation of their child at school.

## Student Feedback

When asked what they knew about SROs, most students knew the SRO assigned to their school. Overall, they deemed SROs as nice, but viewed their authority as sometimes intimidating. For example, one Hispanic/Latinx student shared the following, “To an extent to what has been said, you automatically see an officer and there are a million connecting thoughts rushing through [your] mind, whether it is good or bad. But at the same time it is their job and they are putting their lives on the line. You never know what threat they will face at the same time. They should have their protective equipment, [but] I think reducing the appearance, it is intimidating with their big vest. Some of the students that served as student body representatives expressed their biases when coming into contact with SROs but they understood that their personal experiences with SROs may not be reflective of the entire student body. Another Hispanic/Latinx student shared “For us [student body reps], we are not any trouble kids so our perspective could be different.”

When asked about what kind of training SRO should receive, the students voiced that SROs need more training on youth behavior and development. They also suggested SROs receive more cultural training. One Polynesian student said, “[Training for] more knowledge about people’s differences. I think also how they come off at first they may have an assumption about the students.” The students expressed that safety and building trust within school communities are important in regards to SROs being in schools. One refugee student mentioned that, “I think officers should understand people emotionally, not only on shooting. From most of my understanding, most shootings happen because of emotions, so yes officers need to know that.”

## **V. Potential Limitations**

One of the potential limitations was speaking to parents and students whose first language was not English. We had one parent group and one student group where people were not speaking very much. Translation services were used in such situations and greatly assisted in getting perspectives from all parents and students. Another



limitation was generalizability. While there was a diverse representation of parent and student participants (LGBTQIA+, Black, Asian, Pacific Islander, Hispanic/Latinx, etc), these findings are not generalizable to the entire population.

## **VI. Recommendations**

### Communicating the roles and responsibilities of an SRO

Clearer communication is needed from schools to parents and students about SROs' roles and responsibilities within the school. This could be addressed by including a section regarding SROs in the student handbook. Details on the duties of an SRO and how they contribute to safety and security within the school would be beneficial to assuring parents that their children are safe. Clearer communication could also be addressed by providing more information on SRO's in the student handbook and meet-and-greet style opportunities for parents to have face-to-face interaction with the SRO outside of a problem incident.

### Training of SROs

SROs need to receive on-going training related specifically to working with youth in schools. Training should include de-escalation techniques, mental health in youth, cultural awareness, and sensitivity/bias. Parents stressed the importance that SROs are properly trained to work with youth of different backgrounds. Students emphasized that they'd like SROs to be trained on the cultures that are reflected in the student population of the school. Organizations which can provide culturally-relevant training should be consulted during the development and implementation of training curriculum.

### Improving relationships and community-building

A well thought out strategy between schools and SROs to address how to improve trust among SROs, schools, students, and families is necessary. Strategies should include

identifying areas of mistrust and developing intentional action steps towards addressing and rectifying mistrust. Such strategies should be explicitly stated in the memorandum of understanding (as described in statute) developed between a local education agency and a law enforcement agency.

SROs who speak languages other than English and/or who share similar cultural backgrounds as the students and families of the school could also be integral to building relationships. One of the schools involved in the discussion groups serves a student population which speaks over 30 languages. Some students come from different countries and they are not accustomed to anything other than punitive or violent interactions with law enforcement. Efforts should be made to continue to assist these students in understanding the roles and responsibilities of SROs, and law enforcement in general, in Utah.

## **VII. Conclusion**

The discussion groups held by the RED Advisory Committee with parents and students was to better understand their perspective on the roles of SROs and to indicate the need for: a) increased communication from schools to parents about SROs; b) continued focus on training for SROs; and c) commitment to improving relationships between SROs, schools, students, and families.

This discussion is just one of many to come. The RED Advisory Committee is committed to providing data, resources, and a platform to our communities, stakeholders, and juvenile justice agencies to help reduce the disparities in our minoritized communities.