

Disability Rights Wisconsin: School resource officers do not belong in Wisconsin's schools

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Wisconsin students with disabilities in many districts have returned to school buildings for the 2020/21 school year and are once again in the presence of school resource officers (SROs). While SROs are often touted as a policy response to gun violence in schools, research has failed to find solid evidence of increases in school safety when SROs are present.¹ However, having SROs in schools leads to a higher incidence of law enforcement referrals and arrests, frequently for school disciplinary issues. In Wisconsin, while 12% of students have disabilities, they represent over 34% of our state's school referrals to law enforcement—the sixth highest rate in the nation.² As Wisconsin's protection and advocacy agency, Disability Rights Wisconsin has worked with many families whose children with disabilities had harmful and unnecessary punitive interactions with school resource officers.

School-related arrest is even more disproportionate for students with disabilities who are also students of color. Black students with disabilities experience school-related arrest at six times the rate of white students without disabilities, while Native students with disabilities experience school-related arrest at five times the rate of white students without disabilities.³ Rather than making schools safer for students with disabilities, law enforcement officers stationed in schools exacerbate the school-to-prison pipeline.

Another concern for students with disabilities is the harm that can result from being physically restrained or secluded by police at school. SROs are too often involved in restraint and seclusion in schools, where over 80% of students in Wisconsin who experience these aversive interventions are students with disabilities.⁴ Since Wisconsin regulated restraint and seclusion in schools in 2012, DRW has

encountered multiple instances in which SROs were called to restrain students with disabilities in the mistaken belief that SRO-applied restraints did not have to be reported. DRW worked to have the reporting requirement clarified in a recent statutory update, as well as to require that the written incident report that is transmitted to parents must include any law enforcement involvement.

There has been a growing national recognition that SROs are responding to crises in our schools that they are ill-equipped to handle and that would be better addressed by professional student services staff. In particular, SROs do not have expertise in addressing individual children's behavioral needs, especially for students with complex behavioral disabilities.

At the same time, however, Wisconsin is underfunding social workers, school counselors, school psychologists and nurses.⁵ In every category, our state's ratio of students per staff member falls far short of the levels recommended by the professional associations. Wisconsin has only recently begun addressing the category with the most desperate shortfall – social workers – at the state budget level.

Wisconsin owes it to our students with disabilities to provide the support they need to reach their goals at school. Rather than spending scarce funding on SROs and risking the corresponding negative impacts on students with disabilities, we should instead be increasing funding to bring student support staff to recommended levels.

Disability Rights Wisconsin recommends ceasing to employ SROs in our state's schools, and investing instead in appropriate school personnel and programs to address the needs and safety of our students with disabilities. We look forward to working with other organizations in the effort to reimagine school safety in terms of support for students with disabilities and students of color.