



WESTPORT PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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MEMORANDUM

TO: Dr. Velma E. Heller, Moderator and the Westport Representative Town Meeting

FROM: Dr. Colleen A. Palmer, Superintendent of Schools

DATE: July 30, 2018

RE: Request to Approve Appropriation for Two School Resource Officers

CC: Westport Board of Education
Jim Marpe, First Selectman
Foti Koskinas, Chief of Westport Police

More than a year ago, I committed to a trip that would take me half way around the world during this first week in August. Please do not interpret my absence this evening as any indication that my total commitment to advocate for School Resource Officers (SROs) in our schools has waned; it is just unfortunate timing that I cannot present to you personally. In lieu of my presentation, representatives from the Board of Education and the executive leadership team of administration will speak to our collective support of including SROs in our schools.

Since my arrival to Westport two years ago, I have continuously advocated for the implementation of a School Resource Officer (SRO) Program in our schools. SROs have been accepted as a standard level of care in the safety and security of schools for more than the past twenty years. Throughout my tenure as a school administrator over these twenty years, both as a high school principal and superintendent, I have worked successfully with SROs as part of an essential, powerful safety and security resource team. Long before the series of horrific school shootings of 2018, I had introduced the idea to the Westport Board of Education and began working collaboratively with Chief Koskinas to bring this asset to our students and staff. It is only the rapidly increasing lethality and frequency school shootings that have accelerated this strategic plan of implementation.

As the Westport Superintendent of Schools, my most critical goal is to ensure the safety and security of our students and staff. Our students represent 21% of Westport citizens. It is our community responsibility to provide this standard of care to the youngest and most vulnerable members of Westport.

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VELMA E. HELLER
TOWN MEETING

Provided with this memorandum are accompanying documents that include my communications with the Board of Finance, the scope of job responsibilities, and data on the rate of implementation of SROs in school districts across the state. Within our District Reference Group (DRG), Westport is the only district that does not utilize SROs. As the largest DRG A district, our security resources lag behind those of other comparable districts in this regard.

Prior to your review of the supporting information about SROs, I feel it may be helpful to separate myth from reality in terms of statements I have heard from public officials with regard to the role of SROs.

Myth #1: If we hire these police officers as SROs, we can never get rid of them.

Truth: The police force, like every workforce, experiences attrition and retirements that necessitate new hires on a regular basis. At some time in the future if it were determined that the District would not utilize SROs, there would be a natural reduction in force through the typical forces that create a downsizing pattern. No one is making a lifetime decision on staffing or expenditures of the Town by voting yes to fund these officers.

Myth #2: Having SROs in our schools will result in more students entering the justice system with arrests by the SROs.

Truth: The police and schools have already established a strong partnership and always collaborate to support students in making positive choices. In fact, arrests have decreased with the increased involvement of police in our schools – SROs are problem-solvers and provide support; it is not their goal to “catch” more students violating the law or school infractions. Any older studies on this issue tend to be from large urban areas where SROs were needed to keep “law and order” in the schools and simply do not apply to suburban schools in CT.

Myths #3: The SROs will be really tough on our students when they find a student violating school rules.

Truth: Quite the contrary, school administrators would continue to handle all school discipline. By law, school administrators have much more power and authority to conduct searches, etc. than any police officer.

Myth #4: SROs are only appropriate for the high school.

Truth: SROs improve school culture and student outcomes at all levels. It is especially effective at the secondary levels (grades 6-12) where internal school threats are more prevalent.

Myth #5: There is evidence that some SROs did not respond appropriately in emergencies so we cannot depend on them to intervene.

Truth: There are numerous instances where the SRO on hand during a school incident reduced or prevented the harm to students and staff through his/her actions. While there are instances where the SRO appeared to be ineffective, there is little chance to reduce lethality unless a SRO is available to respond. Nothing is 100% in life, but I have great confidence in the professional judgement of our Chief and officers that our SROs would respond and put themselves in harm's way to prevent harm to our students and staff.

Myth # 6: Our students are uncomfortable with police in the schools so this would create further anxiety.

Truth: There may be some students who do not yet understand the role of SROs in our schools since there has not been an approval by the Town. Upon approval, an entry plan would be developed to communicate the role of SROs further to students and staff. In my experience students come to see the SRO as a supportive friend/mentor figure. As the SRO interacts with students and staff, the idea of just a person in uniform dissipates quickly and that of a trusted adult emerges.

Myth #7: More students die in car crashes and suicide than school shootings so we should concentrate on these areas of prevention.

Truth: Youthful driving and suicide do take many lives each year, many more than in school shootings. Schools and communities have multiple ways to intervene to prevent each of these tragedies, and we remain relentlessly committed to prevent these losses. However, in each of these instances, the harm is self-inflicted on the person creating the actions. In the event of school violence, innocent students and staff are the targets of harm by others. Society mandates by law that children attend school. Therefore, it is our responsibility to ensure their safety while under our care.

Myth #8: Why bother with SROs when the District is not focused on other areas of security for its schools.

Truth: The District focuses on every aspect of security and constantly seeks to assess threats and intervene proactively and to support prevention. SROs are one component of a comprehensive plan of safety and security.

Myth #9: Having SROs are not really important; we have never had them before and we have been fine.

Truth: The top security expert in our community, Chief Koskinas, gives his highest recommendation to deploy SROs in our schools. Many give their opinions on best security approaches, but I rely on the security expert with years of training, experience, and knowledge of our community.

Myth #10: Deploying three SROs at once is simply too much and cannot be done with fidelity or effectiveness.

Truth: The idea of deploying SROs in both middle schools and the high school concurrently offers opportunities to capitalize on the team model. Together, through formal training and learning from each other, the learning curve of the SROs is accelerated. The first year of onboarding these SROs necessitates tremendous time devoted to developing relationships in the schools. Waiting another year delays the full effectiveness to be in place at our three secondary schools until the end of 2020-21, a full three years from now. By putting these officers in place for this fall, the 2019-20 would be the first year of full implementation after the inaugural year. This resource is too critical to wait three years for actualization. Additionally, I have decades of experience working with SROs effectively and can assist with this work in collaboration with the WPD. It is my professional judgement that bringing the three officers on board is quite manageable, highly effective, and moves us forward with added security resources sooner. When we are talking about the safety of our schools, I cannot dilute my request.

There are probably many more myths floating around the community as the issue of SROs is discussed in various forums. While everyone has an opinion, Chief Koskinas's opinion is the one that matters most and carries the greatest weight with me. I urge you to take his professional advice.

I thank you for your consideration of this most important matter.