



# WINOOSKI SCHOOLS

*We are the future.*

Dear WSD School Board:

I would like to express my position on the role of the School Resource Officer (SRO) in preparation for the March 31, 2021 special board meeting. I want to acknowledge the harm to BIPOC individuals, families and communities that has systemically occurred for decades and continues across our country at the hands of police. A majority of WSD students are BIPOC and the role of the SRO in our school district should be reviewed given the past and recent history of harm by police against BIPOC individuals, families and communities.

I would like to label the struggle I feel in this important decision. Due to the systemically racist nature of policing and local feedback, we know that armed police presence in our school makes some people feel unsafe, particularly students, staff and parents who are BIPOC. As voiced in various local mediums, we also have students, staff and parents who feel safe with an armed SRO on our campus. We know that WSD does not need an armed officer to protect us from our students and we know the national research does not support that an SRO has the ability to limit human damage during a mass shooting which we have become all too familiar with in the US. And WSD is on a single and relatively small campus which I believe would increase the probability that an SRO could be helpful in a timely manner in an active shooter situation. Also, there are other very important functions and supports our SRO provides in addition to protection during a life-threatening event. This complicated decision has the potential to polarize our community if we do not have a transparent, thoughtful review of the current SRO role and research other models of ensuring the safety and security of everyone who comes into our building.

WSD has come a long way in improving general culture and climate in our district in the past 10 years through increased staffing of support services (e.g. special education, behavior teams, social workers, ELL, Reading and Math specialists, guidance counselors), programming (e.g. PBiS, MTSS, Responsive Classroom, Social Thinking, Mindfulness, Developmental Designs, Spectrum Multicultural Help Desk, School-Based Health Center, Food Security) and through our hiring practices. Specifically, our student discipline and SRO-involved data has improved significantly in the past 3-4 years through intentional coordination of a variety of supports and services including the role of the SRO. On the other hand, we have had situations where students and parents have become physically and verbally threatening, and the SRO has been involved after other steps have been exhausted. While we have put numerous student safety plans and 1-2 "No Trespass" orders in place per year to ensure safety there have been few arrests in the past four years by WPD on the WSD campus, and all have been adults.

From my perspective the SRO has been an integral part of the positive growth in our culture and climate because we have partnered with WPD to shape the role after the National Association of School Resource Officers

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(NASRO) model and collaborated to hire police officers who understand schools, child development, the importance of relationship and belonging in learning and law enforcement.

It makes me very uncomfortable to think about maintaining adequate safety and security in the upcoming 2021-22 and 2022-23 school years without the SRO. SRO Jason Ziter is co-chair of our Public Safety Committee with WMHS Co-Principal Jean Berthiaume and next school year we will have many classroom and office moves due to the capital project so we will be revising our emergency procedures on a monthly basis. During the 2022-23 school year the capital project is scheduled to be completed and we will have a 50% increase in square footage with updated security systems to incorporate into our emergency procedures and train students and staff in these updated procedures.

In addition, some positive aspects of the SRO role that don't get talked about much are the coordination between WPD and WSD about police calls in the evenings, weekends and during school breaks that allow us to provide a team-based wraparound approach to serving students and families. The linkage via the SRO to the Howard Center's Community Outreach team, Winooski Restorative Justice Panel, and Department for Children and Families (DCF) is essential in addressing complicated student and family issues in a coherent and compassionate manner. Also, some students have taken advantage of proximity to the SRO to explore career opportunities in law enforcement.

We know from the data that has been collected locally thus far that there is no clear majority in support of or against the SRO position in the school. I wonder if we are doing the right thing by possibly eliminating the role of the SRO instead of embracing the current challenges and shaping the SRO role for the future so relationships between students, staff, parents, community members and police could be improved and develop a model partnership to serve Winooski and for other communities?

In conclusion, I would highly recommend the board take action on March 31st to maintain the SRO position within the City-WSD MOU for the next two school years, 2021-22 and 2022-23 so the SRO can co-lead and coordinate the significant safety and security operational needs during the completion of the capital project and during the first year of creating emergency procedures in a new building with considerable additional square footage. During these 24 months the board and administration will work with all stakeholders to research, share and discuss the current SRO program more deeply and other models which would meet the safety and security needs of WSD. Finally, this will result in a decision by the school board or delegation to the superintendent to select a model starting in the 2023-24 school year.

Respectfully,



Sean McMannon

Superintendent, Winooski School District

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