

More School Districts Sever Ties With Police. Will Others Follow?

By [Stephen Sawchuk](#)

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School boards in St. Paul, Minn.; Oakland, Calif.; Seattle; San Francisco, and two San Jose, Calif.-area [Back to Story](#) districts all voted in recent days to suspend or dismantle school policing programs—a wave of action that started with the a historic June 2 decision by the Minneapolis district.

Simultaneously, a different story played out in Los Angeles and Chicago—respectively the nation’s second- and third-largest school districts.

A proposal in Chicago to eliminate its recently overhauled \$33 million school policing contract with the city police was narrowly defeated June 24 on a 4-3 vote. And Los Angeles’ board appeared close to paralysis on the issue June 23, with members unable to agree on any of three different plans for the future of its \$70 million school police force, which the district has managed since 1984.

“I would regret for the rest of my life if I left any student vulnerable,” said Los Angeles school board President Richard Vladovic, who voted against the most aggressive of the plans, which would have gradually reduced the force’s budget by 90 percent by 2024.

Taken in sum, the school board votes showed that advocates and student activists who oppose policing in schools have made major gains in some quarters, even as they acknowledge that the work in other cities could prove harder. The campaigns to eliminate cops from schools have caught fire amid larger national protests calling for the defunding of police after the death of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police last month.

Gallery: [Educators Rally for Police-Free Schools](#)

The developments are occurring right as new data from the EdWeek Research Center suggest that educators’ appetite for eliminating school police is mixed—potentially complicating efforts to expand the local activism nationwide. Many educators in that survey indicated that they value their school police officers and do not believe that they treat Black students differently.

All of that points in a few key directions for advocates: First, continuing to harness the power of youth, who, like with [gun violence in 2018](#) and [climate change in 2019](#), have been at the forefront of the organizing and activism in the cities where the votes were successful.

“I’m ecstatic. I’ve been crying for days now, tears of joy,” said Judith Browne Dianis, the executive director of the Advancement Project, which supports police-free schools. “As we see the country moving in this discussion around defund the police, young people, sometimes younger than high school, [are finding their voice in this moment and telling their stories.](#)”

It also means, she said, that the movement’s continued success will depend on reframing school safety in new ways and challenging old paradigms of thinking. The number of armed police in schools has risen steadily since the 1999 mass shooting at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colo.—to the point where the very concept of school safety has, fairly or not, become associated with police presence.

“This is where the hard work come in. Police are the easy thing; thinking about the ways in which we could support young people [to feel safe] takes some creativity, and it also takes real political will,” she said.

A Reckoning for SROs and Beyond

America’s racial reckoning with law enforcement extends far beyond school policing. Teachers and students are [demanding anti-racist curricula](#) that include the contributions of Black students and [no longer sugarcoat the country’s bloodier historical moments.](#)

Superintendents and boards have been confronted with the structural racism embedded in many common practices—[like which administrators are tapped](#) to become principals. Some district leaders have even called out racism [within their own governance ranks](#), as recently occurred in Oregon’s Salem-Keizer district.

But the front burner issue is that of school policing. Advocates for Black students have long argued that the same problems Black communities have experienced with punitive, disproportionate policing in their communities occur in the schools their children attend.

Research is mixed on whether the presence of police improves school safety, while federal data indicate that Black students are **disproportionately likely to be arrested at school**, and that they are more likely to attend school with police. Some studies attribute those patterns **directly to the presence of SROs**, while others fault **overall school culture**.

For school boards, the main debates have centered on whether to do away with school-based police altogether, or whether steps can be taken to reform them. Discussions around reforming police typically center around tighter job descriptions, better training, bans on the use of pepper spray and policing techniques like **neckholds**, and prohibiting school police from being involved in routine disciplinary matters.

For its part, the National Association of School Resource Officers recommends **at least 40 hours of training** covering the teen brain, sex trafficking, and how to mentor and build relationships with students among other things, and some states have moved to establish similar voluntary or mandatory guidelines for SRO programs.

It's not clear whether such training sufficiently covers all those topics in enough depth and whether it is reinforced in day-to-day school interactions, or how it dovetails with previously received messaging. (Many SROs come through regular police academies.) And even school safety experts wrestle with the philosophical question of **whether the hierarchical, command-and-control nature of policing** can be squared with the culture of schools, which is supposed be nurturing.

At last week's board meetings, many of the youth who said that even when they haven't personally experienced a bad interaction with police, their presence in school felt stigmatizing.

"Having an SRO is like having a note on my back that says, 'I'm not valuable,'" said one Chicago student during the board's public comment period.

Pros and Cons

For racial-justice advocates, several of the week's actions were not only a breakthrough for students, but also carried symbolic resonance because of the past history of policing in those locations.

St. Paul has long faced tensions between students, teachers, and school police after a spate of attacks on teachers. The district **overhauled its school policing several years ago** even as Black Lives Matter advocates pushed for more drastic measures.

And in Oakland, where school police have been a controversial fixture since the 1950s, the vote made it the first to dismantle its own school police force; the **Black Organizing Project has been advocating for nine years** to force police out of schools.

Those deep roots have paid off, advocates said.

"Youth of color have been working with organizers for years. So there was the killing of George Floyd and the awakening our country had, and this infrastructure was already in place for youth to be connected to be organized, and to be educated to say: Not only do we not want police in schools, here's what our vision of safety looks like, and what being included in a school community looks like," said Cara McClellan, an attorney for the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund.

Even though Chicago's vote fell short of advocates' hopes, it was nevertheless an extraordinary rebuke of Mayor Lori Lightfoot, who opposed the elimination of school police. (Lightfoot appoints the members of the school board, who rarely if ever challenge her positions.)

Still, the boards' discussions also illuminated some of the limitations of the debate. Both advocates for and against the plans and board members themselves frequently drew on anecdote, personal experience, and emotion rather than data about student arrests or perceptions of school police.

Los Angeles board member George McKenna mounted a passionate defense of school police, insisting that the district's SROs are fundamentally different from municipal police. He suggested at one point that the students who had turned out were being manipulated by adult advocates. (Similar criticisms date all the way back to youth activism during the Civil Rights and Vietnam eras.)

In Chicago, two board members who voted against the resolution, Dwayne Truss and Lucino Sotelo, spoke at length about traumatic experiences of being threatened by gangs when they were young Chicago students. They both said they worry that fearful students will drop out rather than attend an unsafe school.

"Our schools become a sanctuary because of the violence in their communities. We have communities under siege by gun violence," Truss said.

How Educators View School Police

Where data exist, they tend to show a distinctly mixed picture. Discipline referrals in Chicago schools and overall police notifications continue to fall but continue to disproportionately affect Black students.

What's more, surveys from Chicago educators and community members showed distinctions in how students and administrators felt; only about a third of students felt that SROs tried to build relationships with students while over half of teachers felt that way and three-quarters of administrators did.

The new data from the EdWeek Research Center survey likewise **suggest that educators' views about school policing aren't monolithic**. The nationally representative survey included 1,150 responses from teachers, principals, and district leaders.

See Also: **[Educators Support Black Lives Matter, But Still Want Police in Schools, Survey Shows](#)**

It found only small differences between those respondents who identified as white and nonwhite on the question of whether eliminating police could lead to more school shootings, with about 60 percent of each agreeing that it would.

But other responses divided along gender lines: 62 percent of men "completely disagreed" with the elimination of armed police officers from schools compared to 48 percent of women, in an echo of the split board votes in both Chicago and Los Angeles, where women favored the more aggressive plans to eliminate school police.

Strikingly, EdWeek's data showed that 65 percent of respondents whose schools are in the South said they "completely disagreed" with eliminating policing in schools, compared to 59 percent in the Midwest, 35 percent in the Northeast and 38 percent in the West. Those patterns could reflect different regional cultural attitudes and practices in "tough on crime" Southern states—some of which are likely traceable all the way back to the racist post-Civil War era Black codes.

Overall, educators who responded to the Education Week survey said they didn't see differences in treatment of students by their race. Ninety-one percent of the survey respondents said that armed police officers in their district treat students of color fairly "a lot."

Safer Without Police?

Those data suggest that widespread efforts to rid schools of police could depend on continuing to win the hearts and minds of educators.

There are signs that that's starting to happen. Teachers' unions have only within the last few years taken steps to condemn police presence in schools; the American Federations of Teachers **recently passed a resolution to that effect**. But the union has its work cut out to win over the rank-and-file. The EdWeek data found that nearly 40 percent of teachers agreed that school police were necessary because "too many students are out of control."

McClellan, of the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, sees the data in a different light. So many schools are understaffed that police officers may be pushed into filling the roles of mentors or homework helpers, and that may be why so many say they value their school police.

"When educators may be talking about, 'I like our police officer, he's a great mentor to the kids,'" the reality is that our schools are understaffed and our kids are so desperate for mentors or help with homework, we're using the resource to fill the gap when it doesn't require a police officer to do those things," she said. "And in fact, the risk is that they can use the information they're receiving to do criminal prosecutions. If you're saying, 'Our officer is super friendly, she's really great about talking to girls or mentoring them,' they're often not thinking about, 'Is she giving them Miranda warnings?'"

Other pressures could shape the evolving conversation, too. Two horrific school shootings in 2018 led to widespread demands for stronger police presence or armed personnel in school, noted Ken Trump, the president of the National

School Safety and Security Services, a Cleveland, Ohio-based safety consulting firm, and those concerns aren't going to go away.

"I can tell you this: There is no question in my mind that in a year or two down the road, when incidents start to happen, not only are you going to have that other group of loud parents [who support school policing], but you'll also see these districts are going to pay a lot more in civil litigation for incidents that probably could have been prevented because they reduced the standards of security," he said.

He added that he's deeply concerned that school districts have not given enough thought to what will replace their policing programs. (Most of the districts have said they plan to invest in counselors, who are universally in short supply in K-12 schools, among other supports; several have scheduled upcoming board meetings to discuss comprehensive plans).

"We can try to quantify incidents and arrests, but it's hard to quantify prevention," said Trump, who is not related to the president. "You have to take reasonable steps to have a secure environment in which the counseling, prevention, and intervention services can be provided."

He acknowledged, though, that many school policing programs suffer from poor management and muddled purposes.

"We often find that there is a well-written and agreed-upon memorandum of understanding between [school districts and police agencies], but those are typically executed at an executive and board member level. And when we get to the ground level, the principals and the officers themselves have never even seen the [agreements] and have no idea what the contents look like," he said.

School districts in Denver, Milwaukee, West Contra Costa, Calif., and the Edmonds, Wash., district have also this month paused or eliminated some, or all, of their SRO positions, while the city council in Rochester, N.Y., did so via its budgeting process. Madison, Wis., is expected to vote to end its program June 29.

Is your district reconsidering its SRO program? Education Week would like to hear from you. Please email Stephen Sawchuk at ssawchuk@educationweek.org.

Associate Editor Christina Samuels contributed to this report.

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