

Rethinking Police in Schools

A History of School Resource Officers in Lincoln

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The groundswell of support for Black Lives Matter in the summer of 2020, combined with budget crises brought by the pandemic, is prompting cities around the country, including the city of Lincoln, to take a fresh look at how we should best organize and fund social services and crisis prevention and intervention. School Resource Officers (SROs) attract particular attention in this movement, as they are armed police who have broad access to minors and perform a range of social work in schools that could be performed by other professionals trained to perform those services. It is important to note that criticism of police in schools is not targeted at individual SROs, nor can it be refuted by examples of good SROs. Criticism of police in schools is a systemic criticism that addresses the historical purpose and disparate outcomes of policy. A close look at how SROs emerged in Lincoln and how their role and justification morphed over time shows us that school policing in Lincoln is overdue for disassembly. It arose out of both an anti-progressive “war on crime” in the 1960s and well-intended community policing efforts that inadvertently expanded the carceral state. Decades later, the Lincoln SRO program became a catch-all service that placated parents worried about gangs, then terrorism, then gun massacres while also policing children and delivering a menu of quasi-professional social services via uniformed bodies that the predominantly white public had come to find innocuous and worthy of investment.

I. Community Policing and “War on Crime”: 1971-1980

In the 1960s, policies of the Lyndon B. Johnson administration laid the foundation for a new era in policing, the effects of which we continue to grapple with as a country. While advancing progressive social policy such as a War on Poverty and the Voting Rights Act, Johnson also advanced the “war on crime.” For Johnson to pass his more progressive anti-poverty and racial equity legislation, he made concessions to conservatives to also enact policies to increase arrests and incarceration—including the 1968 Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act and Law Enforcement Assistance Administration—that would be vigorously amplified in the administration of his successor, Richard Nixon.¹

This massive federal investment in law enforcement had profound repercussions. It permanently wed law enforcement and crime reduction to social welfare efforts. It led to anti-riot training and equipment in police departments around the country, militarizing those departments in an effort to violently contain social unrest. It provided funding to establish police training programs (such as the one in Grand Island, Nebraska) that would eventually become so focused on officer safety in use of force training that they are now widely implicated in police shootings. It also invested in state and local crime prevention initiatives, including Lincoln’s pilot School Resource Officer (SRO) program.

We can see the entanglement of education, social welfare, and law enforcement in Lincoln’s early SRO effort. Critics of police believed that racism, economic inequality, and “responsive” policing—that is, policing that involves responding to emergencies rather than building relationships—had led to a degradation of relations between communities and police. So even as the “war on crime” was underway, so, too, was a push for community policing, which often included assigning police to specific neighborhoods and providing them opportunity to develop relationships with the community outside of crises. Producing interactions *outside* of crises, though, means entangling police in institutions that are not meant to be law enforcement operations. So even though community policing was often meant to rein in police excesses, it often expanded

¹ Elizabeth Hinton, “‘A War within Our Own Boundaries’: Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society and the Rise of the Carceral State.” *The Journal of American History* 102.1 (June 2015), 100-112.

policing by mingling police with other community services or even replacing those services with more police. In short, both the “war on crime” *and* some efforts to improve relationships between minoritized communities and the police resulted in an expansion of policing.

In Lincoln, the first SRO program was initially funded by the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration and was meant to regularly expose young children to friendly police officers in order to train them to respect police. Ben Goble, a former high school teacher and son of a Gage County sheriff, pushed for reforms that he believed would build relationships between residents—specifically kids—and police. As a teacher Goble had developed curriculum to teach students about police and the court system. When he was hired as a civilian by LPD to work on community relations at the height of the national reform movement, he advocated for summer camps that would create personal relationships between “at risk” boys and police, and a school resource officer program that would put police in middle and elementary schools in Lincoln.²

In 1971 Goble’s efforts succeeded, and the Lincoln Police Department assigned its first two SROs to Lincoln elementary and middle schools.

Goble’s program targeted young kids and was expressly *not* meant to put police in schools for enforcement. Like the summer camp, which began the previous year, it was an intensive effort to persuade children to trust police early in their lives, and was consistently described this way in local media. When Goble, SROs, and school administrators explained the pilot program to the media, they repeatedly praised the program for teaching children respect for the law and police and to see officers “as human.” One school administrator was proud to report that he had not heard the terms “fuzz” or “pig” in the school since an SRO had come on board.³ The program was framed in the media as a one-way street—it was the kids who needed to learn the humanity of the police and to learn respect for law enforcement.

² Several local news items discussed Ben Goble and his efforts. The fullest profile of him is Margaret Reist’s article “Resource Officers on Agenda,” *Lincoln Journal Star*, November 27, 2006.

³ “School Resource Officer Program Changes Attitudes Toward Police,” *Lincoln Star*, January 13, 1972.

An editorial from 1973 affirmed the racial dynamics of this psychological operation. A city council member addressing police “sensitivity training” asked, “What about educating minorities? It’s a two-way street.”⁴ Indeed, replied the newspaper, the pilot SRO program was trying to do just that.

The pilot SRO program enlisted the public schools in psychological operations of the police department, and it was focused on convincing children, particularly children of color, to trust police even though it was rational for those children and their parents to be wary of police. However, despite these valid criticisms, it is important to note one thing the pilot SRO program was not doing: the first SRO program in Lincoln, designed by a civilian, was not established to police children or enforce the law within schools. Law enforcement was only a secondary interest of the pilot SRO program, and even then the enforcement was not aimed at LPS children as perpetrators but as victims.⁵

In fact, because police were in Lincoln elementary and middle schools all day with few enforcement duties, we can see them taking on duties of social work, as in the case of Rolland Weisser, who was profiled in the *Lincoln Evening Journal* in 1972. According to the article, “On a clipboard he [Weisser] keeps photographs of known child molesters and an array of handwritten notes from children describing cars and individuals who tried to molest them.”⁶ Protecting kids from strangers, “molesters,” and violent assailants was a recurring secondary justification for the program, as was echoed in a 1974 news item that reported the program was “guarding against traffic violations and possible molesting.”⁷

The program was consistently deemed a success by local authorities. One official reported that the American Bar Association had called the Lincoln SRO program “the most aggressive, most effective law enforcement-based program in the country.”⁸ Its related summer camp went from 20

⁴ “‘Sensitivity Training’ for All,” *Lincoln Star*, July 14, 1973.

⁵ Early publications by Lincoln Police Department, including the 1971 and 1972 annual reports, mentioned enforcement as part of the SRO duties, but specifically focused on protecting students by enforcing traffic laws outside the building. The only reference to students committing crime in early annual reports was in 1972, when the annual report quoted a junior high principal who claimed that SROs lead to a 50% drop in complaints about alleged illegal behavior from homeowners nearby. The report implied that the presence of an officer leads to improved behavior but did not claim that the officer arrests or tickets students.

⁶ “‘Like’ Means Program Success for Officer,” *Lincoln Evening Journal*, April 1, 1972.

⁷ “Ed Board Asked to Continue Resource Officer Program,” *Lincoln Star*, May 8, 1974.

⁸ “Lincoln ESU Work Given High Marks,” *Lincoln Evening Journal*, January 21, 1976.

boys in 1970 to 100 in 1973. Other police departments in Nebraska, including Norfolk, North Platte, Alliance, Broken Bow, and Sarpy County, began pilot SRO programs modeled on Lincoln's. By the end of 1974, the county attorney even explored creating a program modeled on the SRO program that would put a deputy prosecutor in county schools for a half a day a week where—in what surely would have been a conflict of interest and civil rights violation—he would “counsel students on legal problems relating to violations of the law.”⁹ In 1975, LPD was pointing to the success of the SRO program to argue for broader community policing efforts, specifically assigning officers to permanent neighborhood beats on what they called a “total officer concept” in which neighborhood police teams would get to know a neighborhood and be on hand for all needs, rather than responding city-wide to specific sorts of calls.¹⁰ These efforts exemplified a situation arising all over the country: as communities worked to produce ongoing, non-crisis relationships with police, they established police in areas of life where law enforcement was not always necessary.

Despite the publicized successes, Lincoln's SRO program was fraught by budget woes. At first, the program was funded by grants that had arisen out of the national police reform push, but as these seed funds dried up, the question of who was to pay for police to maintain what was essentially a PR presence in schools became an ongoing dispute, with funding coming year to year from local and state programs and the public schools. In 1977, officers with LPD reported that the program was being treated as low priority by the Department and that higher-ups in the Department were bypassing Goble, the civilian in charge. That year, the city eliminated Goble's position.

The SRO program continued, however, supervised after Goble's departure by Lincoln's first Black police officer, Albert Maxey. Maxey, who still lives in Lincoln and is an artist in his retirement, was married to JoAnn Maxey, the state's first Black woman to serve as a state senator, who was herself an educator and ultimately became the namesake of Maxey Elementary School. Maxey's tenure over the program was short, however. By 1980, the budget disputes surrounding the SRO program led to its closure. The city had no SROs for fourteen years, when different motivations led to a new kind of SRO program.

⁹ “Computer Records Nearer,” *Lincoln Evening Journal*, December 12, 1974.

¹⁰ “Police Adopt Team Concept,” *Lincoln Star*, November 22, 1975.

II. A Note About the Media

Something that jumps out about local news stories on the early SRO program in Lincoln is how popular it was. Whenever the program was at risk of being defunded, letters to the editor from parents and school administrators supporting the program showed up. The newspapers ran story after story highlighting the strengths of the program. When dissent did appear in local media, it was typically indirect, with an official responding to criticisms of funding the program with education money, with those criticisms themselves not getting direct attention.

In March of 1973, the *Lincoln Evening Journal* reported that the Lincoln-Lancaster County Youth Services Commission was spending \$300 on surveys to gauge student, parent, and teacher opinions on the SRO program, “attempting to replace \$40,000 in federal funds” that were about to dry up.¹¹ When the results came back in June of that year, they unsurprisingly showed the program to be quite popular. The paper reported that 84% of responding parents said their children had been “favorably influenced” by the SRO, 80% of teachers reported that student attitudes toward police had become “more positive,” and 80% of students “liked the idea of having a school resource officer in their school.”¹² There appeared to be no digging into these numbers to find out who did *not* approve of the program or why they didn’t approve of it. In 1970, 98% of Lincoln’s approximately 168,000 residents were white. What reasons did the 16% of parents and 20% of students who did *not* approve of the SRO program have for their views? We don’t know because if anyone did care to ask the media didn’t report it. The popularity among the majority of respondents in a 98% white city seemed good enough to obscure any valid complaints among the minority of respondents. In fact, as one reads the local news coverage of the SRO program through the 1970s, such an unflinchingly favorable picture of the SRO program emerges that it seems surprising that the program was discontinued. A reader today can hardly tell what criticisms of the program might have been held in the community—only a constant game of hot potato with its funding seems to have preceded its closure. Local media amplified only the voices that were least critical of law enforcement.

¹¹ “Young People Focus of Crime Panel,” *Lincoln Evening Journal*, March 14, 1974.

¹² “Panel Requests Added Funds for Full Circle Workers,” *Lincoln Star*, June 13, 1974.

III. Enforcement, 1994-

In the late 1980s, Lincoln's city government occasionally discussed a reinstatement of the SRO program for gang prevention, based on the claim that early friendships with police were a major deterrent to joining gangs. In March of 1994, Mayor Mike Johanns committed to reviving the SRO program. This time the SROs would be in middle and high schools, and at first Johanns said that the police were not there to patrol the hallways, but to help teach about criminal justice.¹³ (I know of no city-funded program that permanently stationed professional artists, mathematicians, or poets in Lincoln schools to help the trained educators at LPS teach.)

Six SROs appeared in Lincoln schools in fall of 1994. A grant from the U.S. Department of Justice paid for part of the program, but Lincoln Public Schools paid for two-thirds of the cost. An SRO explained to the media that he had begun that workday by intercepting trespassers at Northeast High School and conducting a mental health check on a student.¹⁴ He said, "We do everything from education to prevention to actual law enforcement."¹⁵

By the mid 1990s, the main motivation for SROs in Lincoln had become fear of gang violence. In early 1995, after a Chadron student took a gun to school and shot a teacher in class, Lincoln Public School officials reassured the public that schools were generally safe from gang violence, and SROs were on hand. One Lincoln high school banned gang colors. A school resource officer published tips for parents for identifying possible gang affiliation, including a kid who uses the terms "home boy," "homie," "slob," or "crab."¹⁶

The new SRO program, like the first, became the subject of ongoing funding disputes. Whose responsibility was it to pay for police officers policing schools? In 1997, now-congressman Jeff Fortenberry, then a city council member, voted *against* funding the SRO program. Far from making a statement about the role of police in schools, Fortenberry clarified that he thought SROs

¹³ "Mayor Would Fund Officers for Schools," *Lincoln Star*, March 4, 1994.

¹⁴ "Program Lets Officers Provide Personal Touch in Schools," *Lincoln Star*, December 19, 1994.

¹⁵ "School Supervisors, Officers Graded High," *Lincoln Star*, June 14, 1995.

¹⁶ "Educators Stress Tools Necessary for Gang Resistance," *Lincoln Journal*, May 15, 1995.

are great. However, he thought the cost of the program should come from the public schools, not the city, even as the schools struggled with a budget. “I’m not comfortable the school board simply pushed this onto us in the midst of their budget woes,” he said.¹⁷

In 1999, the justification for SROs in schools shifted again to gun violence prevention in the wake of the Columbine school shooting. In 2001, preventing terror attacks was added to their list of benefits. Over these years, despite their initial justification as educators, Lincoln SROs played a clear law enforcement role at schools. Enforcement ranged from conducting breathalyzers¹⁸ and writing tickets at school events to dealing with students who brought firearms to school. LPD argued that firearms in school were a justification for having SROs in the building.¹⁹ However, even though the police and other authorities acknowledged that these firearms typically come from home, the city of Lincoln to this day refuses to pass an ordinance requiring the safe storage of firearms even as LPS continues to allocate a significant portion of the budget to SROs.

The shifting justifications for SROs and refusal to address those problems through more effective means raise the question of whether these are the real reasons for putting police in schools, or whether they are ex post facto justifications for keeping and building a police presence that is a comfortable one-size-fits-all “solution” for a white majority in a carceral society.

A stunning illustration of the comfort Lincoln’s white majority feels for policing and the carceral state came in 2005, when Mayor Colleen Seng bestowed an “award of excellence” on Jason Brownell, a fill-in school resource officer. Brownell’s “excellence” was that in a brief stint at Lincoln’s most racially diverse high school he had made an astounding number of arrests. “Jason Brownell volunteered to fill in for a few months as a school resource officer at Lincoln High,” the *Lincoln Journal Star* explained. “And during that time he wrote 250 traffic citations, made 85 misdemeanor arrests and four felony arrests and served five warrants. That’s 84 percent more traffic citations and 80 percent more misdemeanor arrests than other high school resource officers.”²⁰

¹⁷ “Council OKs Officers Despite Funds,” *Lincoln Journal Star*, August 19, 1997.

¹⁸ “High Schools Battle Underage Drinking,” *Lincoln Journal Star*, December 25, 2001.

¹⁹ “Gun Incidents Are Higher at Lincoln High Schools,” *Lincoln Journal Star*, March 7, 2004.

²⁰ “Crisis Averted, Officer Applauded,” *Lincoln Journal Star*, July 13, 2005.

By 2005, funding considerations began to reshape Lincoln’s SRO program once again. LPD Chief Tom Casady argued that middle schools were low priority for SROs because little crime occurred there.²¹ This indicated a dramatic shift from the original rationale for the SRO program. Instead of an SRO program targeting young kids for positive relationships with no enforcement mandate, the police were now acknowledging that its primary purpose was law enforcement. In 2005, more of the funding for middle school SROs was shifted to the schools, with the police saying they couldn’t justify the expense. In 2010 middle school SROs were dropped altogether, and from 2010-2018 only Lincoln high schools had SROs.

In recent years—roughly coinciding with the rise of expensive personal digital devices—the most common crime addressed by Lincoln SROs was theft, and police filed reports for thefts big and small—including items as minor as stolen gym shorts.²² They also made news for arresting two students for arson (while acknowledging the damage was “negligible” and students hadn’t intended to start a serious fire),²³ citing a bipolar student for disturbing the peace,²⁴ and citing a Native student for disturbing the peace of the SRO himself when he broke up a fight she started at Lincoln Southeast High School—a civil liberties case that went all the way to the Nebraska Supreme Court, which affirmed that an SRO can name himself as a victim in a disturbing the peace charge at a school.²⁵

IV. The Current Debate

In 2018, after a former student shot and killed 17 people at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, renewed calls for gun control rippled across the country. In Lincoln, a group of parents calling themselves Parents United for Greater School Security (PUGSS) organized to demand increased police presence in Lincoln schools. The group included members who are staunchly opposed to gun control, and the group sought answers to school security that

²¹ “LPS Will Have to Pay for Middle School Resource Officers,” *Lincoln Journal Star*, October 9, 2005.

²² “Crime in Schools,” *Lincoln Journal Star*, June 17, 2009.

²³ “Boys Suspended, Ticketed After School Arson Incidents,” *Lincoln Journal Star*, April 18, 2008.

²⁴ “Mother Not Giving Up on Bipolar Son, 12,” *Lincoln Journal Star*, October 12, 2008.

²⁵ “Fights at School Can Disturb the Peace of Security Officers Who Intervene, Nebraska Supreme Court Rules,” *Omaha World Herald*, December 18, 2017.

would not involve gun legislation. On February 27, Lincoln Board of Education held an open mic meeting where a range of community members, including some from PUGSS, as well as Nebraskans Against Gun Violence (NAGV) voiced their concerns. While some insisted on increased police, NAGV representatives, including me, insisted that we stop addressing these problems with more police—a strategy that does not prevent school shootings but does disproportionately feed minoritized students into the school-to-prison pipeline. Conservative politicians and media personalities were angry at criticism of police in schools and any calls for gun reform as an answer to violence. A local radio host covering this meeting even argued that I should have not been allowed to speak at the public open mic.

PUGSS met with public officials to urge increased policing. Meanwhile, NAGV formed a coalition called Peace and Justice in Lincoln Schools, a working group to coordinate efforts to stop SROs, metal detectors, and active shooter drills as the community response to school violence. Instead, we wanted better student and family support resources, gun control legislation, and taxes on gun and ammunition sales to pay for any additional hard security measures taken by LPS. This coalition met with LPS Superintendent Steve Joel to express our concerns. We learned that LPS administration was not opposed to increasing SROs because they saw it as an opportunity to get a package funding deal that would also increase funding for community learning centers (CLCs). Joel also affirmed the social worker role of SROs, explaining that there are students in LPS who find uniformed officers more appealing than social workers, who tend to be women and lack the authority of the uniform.

By this point the members of Peace and Justice in Lincoln Schools believed that increased SROs were likely inevitable. At a meeting with Rick Hoppe, Mayor Beutler's Chief of Staff, we voiced our objections to SROs as a non-answer to gun violence that would disproportionately harm students of color. Hoppe responded that the joint funding of SROs and community learning centers was a top priority of the mayor and that the city was willing to take the risk on SROs in order to secure CLC funding. It was clear the City was moving fast to secure funds for community learning centers and school resource officers while the ability to raise funds was hot.

Nevertheless, over the spring of 2018, members of the local NAACP, ACLU, NAGV, and Nebraskans for Peace attended school board meetings, city council meetings, and meetings with city government staff to stress that SROs have a disproportionate impact on minoritized students, that the city has not been keeping detailed enough data on SRO outcomes, that more investment in student and family services is needed, and that the city needs to pass a firearms safe storage ordinance to prevent firearm access to minors. At one school board meeting on April 24, representatives from the Lancaster County Human Services and Attorney’s Office responded to concerns with a presentation explaining that Lincoln officers undergo bias training, that they have an effective diversion program, that the SRO program is popular, and “cop clubs” for at-risk youth are teaching kids to have positive perceptions of police. A video produced by LPS earlier that month promoted SROs, showed officers lunching with middle school students and included the Chief of Police praising the program for teaching children that police are “human.”²⁶ Many of these arguments are the same ones used to first expand policing into schools in the 1970s—except in the intervening 40 years the law enforcement role of SROs has been fully established.

School principals were invited to speak about SROs, and their praise for the catch-all service provided by SROs was virtually indistinguishable from the support the program had received from school administrators decades ago. Dr. Chris Deibler, the long-serving principal of Pound Middle School, reflected on his experience with SROs before they were discontinued at the school. He described SROs as extensions of school staff who supervise students, mentor students, help teach classes, and act as a deterrent to poor behavior. He explained that “you can’t even measure” the benefits of students “getting to know an officer as a friendly person.” This squishy rationale for SROs—as police PR and all-purpose social service—has accompanied the program from its beginning and has persisted even as the program shifted to the criminal policing of students themselves.

Dr. Sarah Zuckerman, member of Peace and Justice in Lincoln Schools, also gave a presentation at the Board’s invitation. Zuckerman showed that the roles of SROs are unclear and the problems they would be tasked with solving at middle schools have not been adequately defined. She explained that their wide discretion to arrest students includes charges such as “disorderly conduct”

²⁶ “Glimpses of LPS: Lunch with Cops at Park Middle School,” video at the beginning of the April 10, 2018 Lincoln Board of Education Meeting.

for incidents that would be better handled by the school. She presented research showing the racial disparities in school arrests, with Black and Latinx students being far more likely to be arrested at school than white students. Black girls in particular are four times as likely to be arrested at school than their white peers, and Latina girls almost three times as likely. Additionally, LGBTQIA youth and students with disabilities face higher arrest rates.

In the open mic forum that followed, a CLC administrator supported the proposal, as did State Senator Adam Morfeld on behalf of Civic Nebraska. For them, the lure of CLC funding was appealing enough that they raised no objections to the SROs. However, several Lincoln residents explained the racial consequences of the plan. Dr. Dewayne Mays of the NAACP, recipient of the city's Human Rights Award, objected to the fact that the Board of Education had not consulted the community of color in Lincoln when forming the proposal. He said that an SRO of many years in Lincoln had acknowledged to him that students of color were inequitably disciplined in Lincoln schools. Mays said that kids need to see people who look like them, and Lincoln Public Schools has been very reluctant in hiring and promoting teachers and administrators of color. Reverend Michael Combs, pastor of Mt. Zion Baptist Church, asked the board, "'How are you going to prevent the criminalization of black males and females?" He pointed out that the proposed agreement included inadequate data about race and SROs in Lincoln and inadequate provisions for how racial disparities would be avoided. He said that racial bias has resulted in police shootings of unarmed black men, and that in schools black children are often read as aggressive when they are expressing exuberance. Scanning the room, he said that when he looks around at the LPS board he sees whiteness. He asked how the schools were going to properly supervise SROs with a lack of Black and Hispanic teachers, principals, and counselors.

Dionne Keys, a Black mother with children in Lincoln Public Schools, spoke to her own experience with SROs. She recounted a time that the school called to tell her they would be asking her son about a cell phone that had gone missing, but later, when her son didn't come home on time, she discovered he had been questioned by the SRO, which she did not consent to, and had been given a criminal referral when he refused to cooperate with their questioning. She asked the Board to please consider how many students who had no previous problems with the law would be

detrimentally impacted by SROs. She encouraged the Board to speak to parents whose children had had similar experiences.

Finally, longtime activist and LPS retiree J. Eileen Durgin-Clinchard asked why there seemed to be more money for SROs but never enough for other student and family resources. She pointed out that the Board was rushing a plan to put more police in schools without enough racial information in the data. She complained that the specific job duties of SROs were not sufficiently clear, and worried they were not clear to teachers who might depend on them for discipline. She concluded: "Racism is alive and well here in Lincoln even though we are 'nice.'"

This testimony was all at just *one* LPS Board meeting. Meetings on May 30, May 8, and May 21 included similar testimony.

Further, on May 3, 2018, Lincoln Public School Board, and the Lincoln Education Association held a "safety meeting" with about 40 teachers in attendance. The teachers overwhelmingly asked for more counselors, social workers, and psychologists—no teacher requested more SROs. Their requests were unsurprising given the fact that 23% of Nebraska students attend a school that does have armed police but does not have a single mental health professional, social worker, or nurse. In fact, in Nebraska there are 347 students to each school counselor. Lincoln has some elementary schools that do not have a fulltime librarian, nurse, or counselor.

We are now re-entering the debate about SROs, this time in a climate where there is intense public attention on excessive policing. It is important to remember that just two years ago a group of Lincoln parents who assiduously wanted to avoid gun control insisted that the city add more school resource officers to prevent school shootings, even though school resource officers have not been shown to prevent school shootings—and gun control, specifically safe storage laws, does. These parents found a ready audience in LPS administration and city officials, who saw this demand for SROs as an opportunity to piggyback funding for community learning centers. Throughout this process, members of NAACP, Nebraskans Against Gun Violence, Nebraskans for Peace, and ACLU persistently argued that SROs endanger minoritized students and do not prevent school shootings. Through all this, city and school officials made deliberate decisions about who to hear

and who to ignore, which concerns mattered and which did not. Despite clear and compelling objections, policing in schools was expanded with the passage of an interlocal agreement on May 21, 2018.²⁷

As we take up this debate again in the wake of the murder of George Floyd, amid calls to defund police—which to some people means the literal abolition of policing and to others a thorough reconsideration of how we mismanage social services—it is worth considering the history and changing justifications for putting police in our local schools. Lincoln city officials and LPS expanded school policing in 2018 because the majority of people in our city have for decades accepted policing as an innocuous or comforting solution to myriad social issues. It was unimaginative, insensitive, and lazy to push for more armed law enforcement in schools even as community stakeholders explained the racial, educational, and public safety implications of that policy. Let’s hope this time will be different.

²⁷ A similar debate about the role of SROs unfolded at the Unicameral, with Senator Ernie Chambers arguing for the abolition of SROs, and Senator Patty Pansing Brooks—who had become alarmed by the handcuffing of Black elementary school students—proposing a bill that among other provisions would require SROs and their school administrators to undertake 20 hours of training. Pansing Brooks’s bill (LB390 2019) was signed into law and takes effect in 2021. The 20 hours of SRO training must include “school law, student rights, understanding special needs students and students with disabilities, conflict de-escalation techniques, ethics for school resource officers, teenage brain development, adolescent behavior, implicit bias training, diversity and cultural awareness, trauma-informed responses, and preventing violence in school settings.”

Notes
