

SROS: CONNECTING PEOPLE, CREATING SAFER SCHOOLS

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In 2016, the Steilacoom Department of Public Safety had the opportunity to partner with the Steilacoom Historical School District to implement a School Resource Officer (SRO) program which benefits the students, the district, and the community.

“Smiles, high-fives, and relatability go a LONG way!”

Police-community relations in the U.S. is a frequently discussed topic, and public outcry over recent police actions have led to civil unrest and strained relations. While the Town of Steilacoom has enjoyed positive police-community relations, there was an opportunity to improve relations through the implementation of the SRO program.

MORE THAN A POLICE PRESENCE

The program aligned with the organizational goals of both organizations, and so it came to life. Now in its second academic year, the SDPS and the school district utilize the SRO in three roles: 1) as a problem solver and liaison to community resources, 2) as an educator for both faculty and students, and 3) as a safety expert and law enforcer. Both the police department and the school district

PRINCIPAL EVALUATION CRITERIA

Creating a Culture, Ensuring School Safety, Engaging Communities



SMILES AND HIGH FIVES: Student Resource Officers play a key role in keeping school communities safe.

recognize the purpose of the SRO is not simply to provide a police presence. The SRO is not a “one-trick pony,” but fosters confidence in interacting with authority figures, facilitates interventions working with administration and staff, formulates and provides training for staff, and provides the potential for very rapid and timely response if a critical incident occurs.

The Steilacoom Historical School District is geographically located next to Joint-Base Lewis McChord (JBLM) in the south Puget Sound region. The school district provides educational services to several communities due to its positive academic reputation, and its boundaries encompassing

parts of the City of DuPont and unincorporated Pierce County. The school district operates six schools: one high school, one middle school, and four elementary schools, which serve approximately 3,200 students. Three of the schools (two elementary schools and the high school) are located within Steilacoom, while the others are located in DuPont and on Anderson Island.

Before the SRO could fulfill the primary purpose of the position, the police department had to build bridges with the students, the staff, and the parents. We had to exemplify what Sir Robert Peel noted which was “...the historic tradition that the

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police are the public and the public are the police.” We accomplished this by immersing ourselves in everyday school activities. Officers are frequently at the schools when the students arrive, conduct walk-throughs, read with primary school students, and generally demonstrate that officers are human beings. Smiles, high-fives, and relatability go a LONG way! We have become part of the schools’ “landscape,” and we stopped being “the police” and started being people who worked as police officers.



ASHIFT: Students now see SROs as people who happen to work as police officers.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

In speaking with the school principals, staff, and, most importantly, the students, the SRO program is working exceptionally well. The police department and the school district identified Steilacoom High School as a focal point for the SRO program to provide influence to both students and the community.

Our SRO began being approached by students who shared problems, fears, and information once the groundwork was laid. Our SRO has been able to coordinate with social workers, Child Protective Services (CPS), parents, and staff to resolve these issues. This culture change is not surprising or remarkable, but the ease of coordination of this shift is impressive. The SRO provides assistance with student welfare checks, the resolution of student-to-student issues such as bullying or disorderly behavior, and is a resource for the Community Truancy Board.

In addition to the “reactive” liaison duties, our SRO has built working relationships with student and parent groups (i.e. Art Club, Key Club, Watch D.O.G.S.) as well as community groups such as Kiwanis. In one instance, officers partnered with staff and Animal Control to capture a roosting bat from the entry of one of our schools and relocate it to a more suitable environment.

The SRO’s function in the problem-solving/liaison role complements the educator and safety/law enforcer roles. Our SRO provides training to students and staff on crime prevention, safety, and critical incident responses. We have received positive feedback from students, parents, and staff regarding these training sessions, and they have sparked conversation outside of the school environment. We have also tasked the SRO with assisting in the development of protocols and coordinating emergency response plans (in conjunction with other emergency responders) between our communities for handling the district’s various types of emergencies.

INCREASING COMFORT LEVELS

The SRO presents a visible safety enhancement at our schools, and students and staff have informed the police department and the school district that there is an increased sense of safety and security. Steilacoom High School is located directly adjacent to the Western State Hospital (the state’s largest mental institution), which houses numerous mentally ill patients. The school’s location has presented a security issue over the years as patients with grounds privileges, passes to visit the local communities as part of their therapy, or intentional escapes/walk-aways have entered the school or been on its property. However, since the implementation of the SRO program (and the subsequent focus on safety

and security), the comfort level of students and staff has increased.

Fortunately, the law enforcer aspect of the SRO program is the role used least by our SRO. The SRO doesn’t exist to arrest students and send them to the “big house” as was feared by some at the onset of this program. Certainly, the SRO deals with criminal activity from time to time, but the objective is to provide a safe environment for students and staff. When police are called to the school for criminal activity, we investigate and promptly resolve those cases. However, the majority of incidents occurring at schools are disciplinary in nature and the SRO stays out of the administration’s way in handling those situations.

“ Students welcome me as I walk through the hallways, and offer a hand for a high five.”

I regularly visit each of the schools in Steilacoom to make sure my perception of the police department’s relationship with our school district and its students isn’t skewed. What I found was what I expected to find: students not afraid or intimidated by police presence. Students welcome me as I walk through the hallways, and offer a hand for a high five. I know that SRO programs are not new, and I know that our SRO program can be improved.

I’m proud of the work our SRO has done and how our department has engaged the community through the SRO program. We—the police department and the school district—have worked collaboratively to use the implementation of our SRO program to strengthen relationships between students, staff, and the community. ■