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SCHOOL DISCIPLINE AND STUDENT SAFETY IN THE PROVIDENCE PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICT

**A Research Report from the Center for Youth
& Community Leadership in Education at
Roger Williams University and the Providence
Alliance for Student Safety**

Executive Summary



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The Providence Alliance for Student Safety (PASS), which fights for safe and healthy schools that treat youth with dignity and respect, partnered with the Center for Youth & Community Leadership in Education (CYCLE) at Roger Williams University to develop a research report on issues of school discipline and student supports in the Providence Public School District (PPSD). This includes the roles and perceived impact of school resource officers, existing and needed school-based supports for students, and the visions that participants have for safe and supportive schools. Methods for the study included a combination of document review, review of student arrest and discipline data, stakeholder interviews, and a student survey.

School Discipline and School Resource Officers in the Providence Public School District

The Providence Police Department has provided SROs to PPSD since the 1990s, and the partnership was formally codified in a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) signed in 2014. The MOU frames SRO role as “to help foster a positive school climate by demonstrating respect for students’ rights and protecting the safety of the school environment.” While SROs are mentioned in PPSD’s Code of Conduct, the Code does not give specific information about when and how they intervene in disciplinary issues. Over the past four years, an average of eight SROs have been assigned to nine Providence Public middle and high schools.

An analysis of PPSD student arrest data from the 2016-17 to 2018-19 academic years shows that:

- Over 230 student arrests occurred over that time, resulting in 316 total charges
- Students as young as 11 years old have been arrested, and students ages 11-13 account for about 19% of arrests.
- Black students are disproportionately represented in student arrests, making up 16% of overall PPSD enrollment and 30% of all student arrests. Black male students in particular are disproportionately represented. Black (non-Latinx/Hispanic) male students make up 8% of overall PPSD enrollment, and 19% of all student arrests. Hispanic/Latinx male and Black female students are also disproportionately represented in arrests.
- Over one-third (36%) of student arrests were for “Disorderly Conduct,” and 23% were for “Simple Assault/Battery.”

Additionally, the following themes and perceptions emerged from survey and interview data:

- From school to school and across student populations there are inconsistencies in disciplinary structures, SRO roles and responsibilities, how SROs respond to infractions, and the consequences of those infractions. These practices are often defined by building administrators, and in some cases SROs intervene in a range of discipline issues even though this is not supposed to be their role.
- While some SROs help to build relationships and bridge distrust between police and communities, simply having uniformed, armed officers in schools makes some students – particularly students of color – feel unsafe. 72% of student survey respondents indicated that they were not comfortable with SROs having guns in their school. Additionally, SROs may escalate rather than de-escalate disciplinary situations.
- Involvement with law enforcement and referral to the juvenile justice system has short- and long-term implications, and too many students are being arrested for “things that could be dealt with in other ways.”

Student Supports in the Providence Public School District

Research has shown links between youth trauma, mental health needs, and behavioral issues that too often result in students being disciplined and punished in school when root causes would be better addressed by support professionals. Despite the need for mental health supports, the vast majority of youth – especially youth of color and low-income youth – do not receive mental health services. Those who do receive help are most likely to access it within their schools. Recent research from Rhode Island College’s Social Policy Hub for Equity Research in Education (SPHERE) indicates that PPSD students, particularly students of color, have high exposure to Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and a high need for mental health and social-emotional supports, in addition to academic support.

An analysis of PPSD support staffing from academic year 2017-18 shows that while the majority of middle and high schools fall within the recommended 250:1 student to counselor ratio for guidance counselors, only one of Providence’s high schools and no middle schools fall within the recommended ratios for school psychologists (500-700:1), and no Providence middle or high schools fall within the recommended ratio for school social workers (250:1).

Additionally, the following themes and perceptions emerged from survey and interview data:

- Particularly when considering the high need, the number of support professionals in Providence is deeply inadequate, with limited capacity for meeting students’ mental health and social-emotional needs. Nurses, social workers, and psychologists are often part time and stretched across multiple schools, and have limited capacity to meet with students who need help. Additionally, the actual roles played by support professionals may vary from school to school.
- While guidance counselors are more of a presence, they are not necessarily effective at providing or brokering non-academic support. Additionally, students may be unsure about which support staff are in place in their school and how to access them.

Aside from greater numbers of support staff, the following were named as critically needed elements to support PPSD students’ non-academic needs:

- Strategies to build students’ social-emotional skills in areas such as communication, expressing feelings, mediation, and conflict resolution;
- Meaningful relationships with caring adults in schools and robust relationships with community partners;
- Increased training for educators in areas such as trauma, social-emotional supports, and de-escalation and efforts to recruit and retain educators of color who are representative of the student body;
- Adequately supported and resourced restorative justice efforts.

Recommendations

Interview participants held holistic visions for schools that recognize the humanity of both students and educators. Their definitions of safe and supportive schools included: 1) An environment that creates a sense of belonging for students; 2) School buildings with adequate social and emotional support; and 3) Educators who are supported and in turn better support students.

These elements are reflected in the demands of the Providence Alliance for Student Safety, which call upon the City of Providence to:

- Remove all School Resource Officers from Providence schools and use funding currently allocated for SROs within the Providence Police Department to support the hiring of new health and safety staff.
- Hire health and safety staff focused on conflict resolution.
- Increase the number of support staff in schools.

In addition to supporting the visions and demands above, CYCLE recommends the following steps to support implementation:

- Center youth, family, and educator voice in decision-making and expand partnerships with community-based organizations to leverage expertise and resources.
- Expand trauma-informed and cultural inclusivity/humility and other trainings that help teachers to accommodate students' needs.
- Implement an adequately supported and resourced district-wide restorative justice framework that acknowledges students as whole people.
- Increase data collection and transparency of student interactions with, referrals to, and arrests made by SROs and other police officers.
- Connect and align related efforts being made at the community, school district, city, and state levels to realize new visions of school safety and to ensure that any added supports are not only strategic but sustainable, so that much-needed resources are not stripped away as schools are gaining ground.

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Youth in Action
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Young Voices
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