

STRATEGIES FOR CONSOLIDATING A K-12 SCHOOL POLICE DEPARTMENT
WITH AN URBAN MUNICIPAL POLICE DEPARTMENT

Article
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In the dawn of a new decade, social and economic turbulence is affecting schools throughout the nation. Current budget deficits for fiscal year 2004 are huge and growing. States are facing budget deficits in the range of \$60 to \$85 billion, which in some cases represent between 13 and 18 percent of all state expenditures. These current deficits are deeper than they have been any time in the last half-century. Given the magnitude of the deficits, state actions are highly likely to cut deeply into budgets for elementary and secondary education.¹

School districts throughout the nation are struggling to retain law enforcement within their schools. Some economic experts believe that it will take at least half of a decade before economic diversity is stabilized in our communities. According to Business Week Online, California's once-cherished public education system has been in decline for years. California accounts for 14% of the U.S. economy, as big as the 22 smallest states combined. When California slumps, the whole nation feels the pain.²

While the future economic forecast appears dismal, school districts around the county must begin to look at means to conserve precious education dollars. One means is to consolidate school safety services with local municipal law enforcement. Consolidation would reduce duplication of services and in many cases reduce the cost of districts maintaining their own police services.

The Internet reveals a mixture of information regarding the consolidation of agencies. One interesting note is the lack of one common theme driving the need or desire to consolidate. Many school police agencies throughout the United States appear to have at one time or another dealt with this issue, but the reasons for merging are inconsistent between cities.

The most impacting consolidation in recent years, and the first indication of a trend, occurred in New York in 1998. Under a plan approved by the New York City School's Board of Education, all training, recruiting and managing of the Division of School Safety's 3,200 officers was turned over to the New York Police Department (NYPD). Black leaders, who said black children already have strained relations with the police, particularly emphasized objections to the plan.³ Other opponents said the police (NYPD) presence would interfere with the learning atmosphere for the system's 1.1 million schoolchildren. School officials have long resisted such a move because of fears that police (NYPD) would infringe on educators' autonomy and create a prison-like air in schools.⁴

The takeover was urged for years by then Mayor Rudolf Giuliani, who contended the move would improve safety and ease a Board of Education unit whose officers and officials have been involved in school crimes and corruption over the years.⁵ However, local editorials challenged the move heavily in the media. Citing a low number of criminal incidents in New York City Schools, many questioned the need for street trained officers in learning environments. Many believed the cost for police services would be better spent reducing the number of students in a classroom, applying conflict resolution, and increasing students' choice over curriculum.

In 2002, the Board of Education for the San Diego Unified School District hired an outside consultant to study the effectiveness of their school police department. The primary purpose of the study was to examine both the feasibility of having services taken over by the San Diego Police Department, as well as examining the impacts consolidation might have on school-site services.

Interviews conducted by the consultant with school staff and students revealed a sense of ownership and collaboration with their current school police officers. Although San Diego police officers were involved with some individual schools, there appeared to be a sense of separation. The social acceptance and relationship with the school environment was clearly stronger with the school police officer. The importance of this sense of acceptance supported the teaching and learning environment, the theory being children learn when they feel safe.

When the consultant spoke with school police officers, they revealed the same sense of ownership and pride, as well. Many officers expressed their desire to work with children, as demonstrated by municipal officers or deputies leaving local municipal and county law enforcement agencies to work as a school police officer.⁶

In 2002, the San Diego Police Department began a feasibility study for consolidation. Several factors immediately arose that inhibited consolidation. First, many school police officers were already retired from the city of San Diego. These same officers were now in the state's retirement system. Although reciprocal agreements exist, some were medically retired, creating conflict for consolidation. Another issue was whether the San Diego police could continue to provide the same level of service and response time compared to the school police. The study was later abandoned by the department and never completed.

A review of research nationally for information on police presence in schools revealed that in 1996-1997, 78% of schools nationwide reported they did not have police or other law enforcement representatives stationed at their schools. However, 12% of schools reported that police or other law enforcement representatives were available when

needed.⁷ In California, school officials reported that 63% of all public high school campuses have a sworn officer on campus; 38% have full-time officers and 25% have part time officers.⁸

Concerns and Expectations

In order to address negative preconceived ideas regarding consolidation, stakeholder concerns and expectations must be identified and addressed. With the current failing economy and a dismal forecast for the future, school districts are considering consolidating their school police with municipal police or county sheriff. However, several factors must be considered:

1. What is the feasibility of consolidation?

In light of current economic conditions and discouraging futures forecasting, consolidation possibilities are encouraging. As much as a school district may wish to divert resources to education and away from public safety, municipalities are facing similar dilemmas. Budget deficit planning and balancing is a shared interest that ultimately could be decided by the voters. Sharing the financial burden can be complicated but cost effective.

One strategy calls for a collective effort by the city and the school district to share costs associated with providing municipal law enforcement services to schools, and to explore alternative funding sources to offset financial impacts. The fiscal outlook of this plan based on anticipated trends remains somewhat unclear; however, joint power with shared costs is a strategy that supports a merger.

2. What are the conflicting values and interests between education and law enforcement?

The values and interest of public education is to teach students to learn. This primary mission comes before any and all other interests, especially during difficult social and economic times. The value and interest of law enforcement remains the protection of life, liberty and property. Coming from two diverse directions, collaboration will be essential.

The strategy here is to identify differing values and interests, as well as developing a method to bring stakeholders together for the common good. The plan must demonstrate the need to establish positive relationships through training and interaction at multiple levels. The district must embrace school security and safety right alongside with teaching and learning. The city must guarantee an officer selection and placement process which allows for district input. Finally, both parties must work together to achieve the highest level of service which most benefits the school children, staff, and overall environment.

3. What will be the social acceptance of local law enforcement in schools versus specialized school police?

Officers in public schools must have the desire to work with children; otherwise, there is little likelihood for success. Consolidation without a true value for school safety and all that comes with it will destroy years of student mentoring, counseling, and guidance. Schools will expect positive child interaction by officers.

An effective strategy is to allow the school district input and agreed upon control over the placement of officers in their schools. The length of the officer commitment is also critical to the plan's success. Teachers and students develop a bond with their officers and the officers effectively become a part of the school culture. A successful merger

requires that existing district officers be intergraded into the municipality and permitted to remain within the schools wherever possible.

4. How will local law enforcement management interface with public education?

As important as trust is between officers and students, the same holds true for police management and public educators. Expectations between parties are high; both desire improved service and safer schools. Cultural differences will be challenged and desired change difficult. What will be the primary focus: the school's mission or the department's mission? A struggle for control will require patience and understanding. Where a board of education once controlled their police agency, consolidation will require shared control.

Plans should call for a collaborative vision of school safety with improved service. All parties must commit to this vision to establish trust in the relationship. The district must commit resources to train municipal officers to work with children in some non-law-enforcement conventional ways. Law enforcement management must exercise top down support for the training, which may included child psychology, behavior analysis, cultural awareness, and general counseling. Law enforcement management must buy into the long term benefits of working in schools with children. The children are the future and the impacts of today will have a lasting effect into tomorrow.

The research rendered a problematic response to the issue. While education has benefited from law enforcement collaboration, control and application of a merger is vital to its success. While declining student enrollment in public schools and declining school funding present valid concerns for consolidating, these trends were actually less influential on the issue when managed. Having officers who are specially trained and

who possess a true desire to work with children outweigh many of the other factors thought to be major inhibitors.

5. What will be the primary focus, the school's mission or the department's mission?

The primary vision and mission for all will be school safety and security. Committed parties on both sides must share their resources and power. Flexibility and understanding of needs for the district as well as the city are key components to a merger.

Summary

While merging might be difficult, the overall benefits outweigh overall difficulties. Mergers generally provide more officers for schools, improved school safety, enhanced relationships, and a reduction in duplicated police services. One method to acknowledge needs and address concerns would be to develop a collaborative group to conduct a multifaceted study to detail the proper course of action. Key stakeholders such as school and law enforcement administrators, managers, employees, and union groups should be involved. Additional stakeholders include, town councils, parent and community groups, students, and the general public should also be included. All participants must be prepared to not only study the working operation of a merger, but also the anecdotal values, traditions, and cultures that drive each agency. Lastly, a phased merger plan is essential to provide the necessary time for evaluation and adjustment.

Consolidation of law enforcement services remains an interest to agencies and municipalities desiring to improve their economic and social conditions. The merging of a school police department with a municipal police department can improve the level of service to schools, reduce costs, and eliminate duplication of services. Along with any

consolidation come preconceived ideas, both positive and negative. Careful attention must be paid to addressing the negative ideas and developing a plan to transition those negative ideas into positive ideas. This effort will allow for additional support and reduced fear, thereby paving the way for a merger to occur.

ENDNOTES

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4. Ibid. 2
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