

# Divesting from School Resource Officers & Investing in Students — An Issue Brief

As members of the [Department of Curriculum and Instruction](#) at the University of Minnesota, we prepare a significant number of licensed teachers in the state. We are [committed to promoting social justice and dismantling racial, socioeconomic, gender and language injustices in education](#). We are teachers, scholars, community members, students, and parents.

We write after last week's [unanimous decision](#) by the Minneapolis Public School Board to pass a resolution to terminate their contract with the Minneapolis Police Department for the services of School Resource Officers following the death of George Floyd. We stand behind the years of [youth activism](#) and [advocacy](#) that led to this historic moment, including efforts from Minneapolis and Saint Paul students, the [Black Liberation Project](#), [Young People's Action Coalition](#), [Social Justice Education Movement](#), [Social Justice Education Fairs](#), and the recent [Free Minds, Free People Conference](#) organized by the [Education Liberation Network](#) and its local chapter in the Twin Cities.

Following nationwide calls from Black organizers to [divest-invest](#), we stand with Minnesota school districts who terminate School Resource Officer contracts. In the Issue Brief that follows, and in alignment with demands by [Black Lives Matter at Schools](#), we outline a body of research that supports this decision, as well as offer practice and research-based actions that school districts can take to invest in students and communities. Specifically, we urge schools to divest from School Resource Officer contracts and reinvest those funds in 1) developing and teaching ethnic studies and heritage language curriculum, 2) expanding arts and creative out-of-school-time programming, 3) hiring and retaining critically conscious Black, Indigenous, and PoC school counselors, 4) hiring and retaining critically conscious Black, Indigenous, and PoC educators, and 5) applying trauma-sensitive, anti-racist, and anti-oppressive teaching practices.

We share this brief as a way forward. We ask teachers and students to imagine better ways to educate—possibilities that cultivate equity, justice, freedom, safety, and peace, possibilities that recognize the ways in which [our liberation is bound together](#). Our students, in turn, ask that we not only teach these values, but that we live these values both in and out of the classroom. In the spirit of transformation, and from our collective experience as teachers, scholars, community members, students, and parents, we stand with every Minnesota school district that terminates contracts with law enforcement agencies and redirects funds toward investments nurturing health, community, and learning. We stand with our students, our communities, and you.

## Message of Solidarity

*I am a Black, gay man from the South. I am a scholar who thinks deeply and writes passionately about inequities in education and especially those that negatively impact young people in schools who identify as queer. I am a leader in the Department of Curriculum & Instruction, a department where “we actively work to eliminate barriers and obstacles created by institutional discrimination.” I am a teacher educator who encourages my students to teach boldly in their future classrooms in order to promote positive educational outcomes and to speak loudly in defense of young people – especially those who do not look like them. Given these multiple, intersecting identities and my personal commitments to justice-centered engagements, I stand with and alongside the authors of this brief. In their statements above and in the words that follow, they have laid out a collective vision and encouraged you to take actions that will promote equity, justice, freedom, safety, and peace. In too many cases, School Resource Officers do harm. Resources that are currently used to support them must be redirected in ways suggested by the authors of this brief.*

—JB Mayo, Associate Professor and Associate Department Chair

## How do School Resource Officers (SROs) impact students?

[61% of all Minnesota public high schools](#) employ law enforcement agents, commonly known as school resource officers (SROs), with the belief these agents will keep schools safe. While there are anecdotal reports of positive experiences with SROs, neither research nationwide nor the majority of our experiences in Minnesota as practitioners support this narrative.

[Research indicates](#) that SRO presence [does not increase school safety](#), but rather that [school communities have a stronger impact on school safety](#). Nor do SROs prevent school shootings. The *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Review* [found no evidence that SROs deter mass shootings](#). SRO programs disproportionately target [Black and Indigenous students and students of color](#), contribute to the [school-to-prison pipeline and its nexus](#), [normalize the presence of police culture](#), and [disrupt student learning](#) by orienting school discipline to approach students as criminals.

In fact, empirical data show that SRO presence in schools [increases the likelihood that school officials will refer students to law enforcement](#), even for low-level offenses, described ambiguously as “disorderly conduct.” SRO programs and punitive disciplinary practices contribute to an increase in disproportionate racialized disparities, [pushing out](#) Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) from schools. These and other studies clearly indicate SRO programs are ineffective.

In the 2015-2016 school year, [police in Minnesota made 1,080 arrests and 5,005 referrals](#) at schools. Overwhelmingly, [SROs are untrained](#) in mediation, de-escalation, and recognition of youth behaviors that may indicate exposure to violence, trauma, and abuse. Overpolicing contributes to student mistrust and community trauma, particularly for BIPOC students, students with disabilities, and [LGBTQIA identified students](#), [sustaining a legacy of historical and structural oppression in our schools](#) that extends into our communities.



Philando Castile, a nutrition services supervisor at Saint Paul Public Schools JJ Hill Montessori Elementary School, [was an unarmed Black man racially profiled, pulled over, and fatally shot by Officer Jeronimo Yanez on July 6, 2016](#), in front of his girlfriend, Diamond Reynolds, and her young daughter. The shooting was streamed on Facebook Live. Yanez was later acquitted by a jury and found not guilty. Students at the elementary school where Castile worked organized the “Are We Next?” Children’s March in his memory and honor at JJ Hill Montessori on July 10, 2016, with support from family and community members. Photo credit: [Thai Phy Phan-Quang](#).

## How can school districts better invest in students?

We know racial disparities in Minnesota education have [long been among the worst in the nation](#) with [on-time graduation rates for Black students ranking 50th of all states](#). Research and practice indicate that SRO programs do not support closing racial disparities. [Rather than funding programs that hold our students back](#), we encourage Minnesota schools to reinvest funds currently allocated to SRO positions in the following practice and research-based actions:

### 1) Invest in developing & teaching ethnic studies and heritage language curriculum

The goal of ethnic studies is to teach [culturally relevant and historically situated curriculum through the lens of the oppressed](#), a goal supported by [culturally relevant](#) and [sustaining pedagogies](#) as well as local community knowledge. Ethnic studies and [heritage language](#) courses engage schools in [establishing, building, and maintaining trust with communities](#) of color by making [stronger anti-racist impacts](#)—more so than courses that merely diversify representation in existing curricula, which often tokenizes the experiences of Black and Indigenous people and people of color. It is imperative that ethnic studies investments include genuine and quality professional development, mentorship and training for existing teachers alongside investment in hiring and retaining critically conscious Black, Indigenous, and PoC educators (as indicated in the fourth action). Evidence shows ethnic studies courses in K-12 schools [benefit student engagement and academic performance](#). In a Stanford University study, students enrolled in an ethnic studies course saw [an attendance boost of 21% and a 1.4 point improvement in their GPA](#). In addition, scholars suggest [heritage language education be understood as culturally specific and incorporated into all aspects of the curriculum](#). Locally, groups such as SPPS [Student Engagement and Advancement Board](#), [Unidos MN](#), [YoUthROC](#), the [University of Minnesota's African and African American Studies Department](#), and the local Chapter of [Education for Liberation](#) are already making strides in advocating for ethnic studies in their schools and across the state.

### 2) Invest in expanding arts & creative out-of-school-time programming

For every Minnesota student enrolled in an afterschool program, there is another student who currently [lacks access to such programming](#). Programming offered outside of classroom hours [is shown to improve student engagement in school](#), boost academic performance, [reduce summer learning loss](#), foster social support networks, and [cultivate healthier feelings and attitudes](#). Longitudinal studies suggest that these benefits are even greater [when programs partner with community organizations and families](#), as well as with students' sustained participation. Artist residencies in schools, for example, [increase critical vocabulary and critical thinking skills](#), by addressing [null curricula](#), the intellectual processes and subjects that schools do not teach. Participation in the arts, in particular, [lowers drop-out rates, boosts student attitudes towards learning, and fosters community and family involvement in school](#). Other programs, such as [school-community kitchens](#) open during and after school, address [food justice](#) in the educational system by feeding students healthy, nutritious food so [they are able to better concentrate and learn](#). [A recent study by economists at UC Berkeley](#) found a link between healthy school meals and improved test scores, deeming investment in healthy school meals a cost-effective way to improve academic achievement.

### 3) Invest in hiring & retaining critically conscious Black, Indigenous, PoC school counselors

For every [654 students, Minnesota has only one school counselor](#). This is the third worst ratio in the nation and [far from the American School Counselor Association recommendation of one to 250](#). Across the nation, [1.7 million students are in schools with police but no counselors](#). Access to school counselors offer [myriad benefits to students](#), including fewer disciplinary actions, [especially for students of color and students living below the poverty line](#). For Indigenous students, [access to critically conscious counselors can promote positive self-identity](#) and cultural wellness. Research also indicates [early identification and treatment](#) of mental health conditions drastically improves academic performance and raises graduation rates for all students. According to a [Harvard University study](#), the majority of school counselors are white. Access to school counselors who are Black, Indigenous, and PoC is shown to have [notable benefits for students of color](#).



#### 4) Invest in hiring & retaining critically conscious Black, Indigenous, PoC educators

Although students of color comprise [34% of Minnesota's student population](#), [94% of the state's teachers are white](#). Recent scholarship on [racial melancholia in education](#) illustrates students' need for [belonging and being known](#) by teachers [who are part of their community](#). Research shows that a racially diverse teaching force [has positive impacts for student achievement, especially for students of color](#). Critically conscious Black, Indigenous, and PoC school leaders (e.g. principals, superintendents) [provide culturally responsive school leadership and promote culturally relevant pedagogy](#) at the school, district, and state level.

[A New York University \(NYU\) study](#) shows that students of all races, including white students, indicate more positive perceptions of teachers of color, describing teachers of color as more challenging, supportive, and captivating. Asian American students report the strongest positive relationships with black teachers, in particular. Minnesota schools with teachers of color also report [lower teacher turnover and reduced implicit racial bias among students](#). However, teachers of color [face numerous barriers to retention](#). Researchers stress that better mentorship, differentiated professional development, cultivating welcoming school climates, and valuing the additional labor of teachers of color in concrete ways (e.g. offering [student loan forgiveness, service scholarships, compensation for expanded duties](#)) help [improve retention rates](#). Groups in Minnesota currently advocating for investment in retention include [TOCAIT](#) and [Minnesota Education Equity Partnership](#).

#### 5) Invest in applying trauma-sensitive, anti-racist, anti-oppressive teaching practices

According to the Minnesota Department of Health, [over half of Minnesotans have experienced at least one type of serious childhood trauma](#), such as abuse, neglect, natural disaster, experiencing violence, and/or witnessing violence. As a direct response to trauma, racism, and anti-blackness faced by students inside and outside of schools, [anti-oppressive teaching practices](#) support the [removal of zero tolerance policies and other exclusionary discipline practices](#).

In tandem, [trauma-sensitive teaching practices](#) help by [fostering a feeling of safety](#). Neurobiologically and socioculturally, students need to feel safe, known, and cared for within their schools in order to learn. [Investing in trauma-sensitive teaching practices](#), such as being explicit about relationship building, sharing intentional strategies when students are dysregulated, and dissolving practices that exclude or isolate students help schools support [students with experiences of serious childhood trauma at the individual level as well as racial justice at the institutional level](#).

Finally, we know that [addressing racism is not enough](#). Funding [initiatives that eradicate anti-blackness](#) will help schools cultivate welcoming classroom environments and cease harmful teaching practices towards Black, Indigenous, and PoC students. Anti-racist and anti-oppressive teaching is important to the [development of racial awareness in white students; learning with and from critically conscious Black, Indigenous, or PoC teachers](#) is needed for white students to understand how to [eradicate institutional and structural racism](#). Investment in anti-oppressive teaching practices, alongside investment in appropriate implementation of [restorative justice practices](#), hold the potential to bring dignity, respect, [healing, and liberation to marginalized communities](#).

### Message of Commitment

*As a privileged white, heterosexual, upper middle class man, I am continually humbled by how much I cannot see and do not understand, especially with regard to systemic, institutionalized racism. Denise Hanh Huynh, Sean Cameron Golden, and Nick Ezekuel Kleese, with a number of equally thoughtful and committed contributors, have authored a powerful call to action that must be taken seriously. As Chair of the Department of Curriculum and Instruction, I commit to investing in the 5 actions put forward in this brief. And to white leaders, it is time to lead differently—perhaps in ways that most white people are not all that accustomed. It is time to listen more, learn more, and risk more.*

—Mark D. Vagle, Professor and Department Chair

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*On June 5th, 2020, community members gathered in front of Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison's office in downtown Saint Paul to demand justice for George Floyd, an unarmed black man killed in South Minneapolis, Minnesota. The death has been ruled a homicide. Following week long protests in all fifty states and dozens of countries, Officer Derek Chauvin has been charged with second degree murder. Officers J. Alexander Kueng, Thomas Lane, and Tou Thao have been charged with aiding and abetting second-degree murder, and aiding and abetting second-degree manslaughter. Photo credit: [Thai Phy Phan-Quang](#).*

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