

# As police return to Fort Collins schools, resource officer program's future in question

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Israel Herrera Santos remembers dodging school resource officers in the halls when he was a Poudre School District student, not because he'd done anything wrong but because his encounters with them never went well.

He never thought to tell his parents, who aren't originally from the U.S.

"I'd be late to class because I was trying to run away from the cops or (take a different route)," he recalled. "My friends were going straight through, but then for me, it would be like, 'Let me check your backpack' or 'Why do you have a big coat on?' It's crazy, looking back now, because at the time I thought it was just something I had to do."

To Santos, the memory illustrates how normalized the tradition of having police assigned to schools has become since PSD started the program in 1995. The youth organizer for School Justice PSD uses the same word — "normalized" — when he talks about the return of police to PSD schools in full force this week, [for the first time since he and others advocated for their removal this summer](#).

In Fort Collins, about half of the resource officers never left schools: PSD kept on seven of the 14 Fort Collins Police Services officers assigned to school-based duties while schools were closed to the majority of students amid the COVID-19 pandemic, at an estimated cost of about \$70,000 each to the district and the city of Fort Collins between July and September.

Members of School Justice PSD, the group campaigning to end the program that assigns officers from local law-enforcement agencies to schools, say the district is being overzealous in funding officer staffing at the cost of other PSD and city priorities. The district and the city of Fort Collins split the \$1.69 million annual cost of locating officers at every traditional high school and middle school in Fort Collins. PSD recently cut \$4.2 million from its 2020-21 fiscal year budget, and Fort Collins is in the process of finalizing more than \$13 million in budget cuts for 2021.

"We're in the middle of a pandemic, they're trying to figure out how to get virtual school back up and running, they're talking about laying off janitors, and then you have SROs patrolling (empty) schools," Santos said. "It's kind of hard to believe the district was able to make that choice so quick" after the school board voted in June to approve officer contracts for this school year and

spend the next year gathering data and deliberating over whether to renew the contracts in 2022, he added.

PSD's Board of Education is approaching a spring vote on the future of the program. PSD provided the Coloradoan with information about the next steps for program review but declined to make administrators available for an interview.

School resource officers kept busy since school went remote last spring, said FCPS Lt. Jerry Schiager. The Fort Collins officers who stayed on duty spent their time catching up on administrative and emergency planning projects; assisting teachers; and responding to Safe2Tell calls, many of which are related to student mental health concerns, Schiager said.

Now that students are back in middle and high schools, the seven Fort Collins officers who were temporarily assigned to other departments will return to schools. Their duties will be largely the same as they were pre-pandemic, but the schools will have half as many students in them.

Schiager and other proponents of the program say school resource officers keep students safe, and they argue that officers may be even more necessary than before as students return to school during a mentally taxing global crisis.

"We're hoping just to be supportive and be prepared for whatever the needs are of the population, both the staff and the students," Schiager said. "We're doing our best every day with what we know and what we can predict to have the right staffing in place. ... Our school resource officers have amazing relationships with students, and I know they've turned lives around by just having good relationships with students."

## **What's next for officers in PSD schools**

Deliberation about the future of PSD's resource officer program is continuing in a series of closed-door meetings.

The district selected three students, eight community members and five administrators from a pool of more than 100 applicants to serve on the Community Engagement Team, one of two new boards the school board created this summer. Santos, who is one of the engagement team members, is pushing for non-renewal of the 2022 contract. Failing or in advance of that, he and School Justice PSD want to see a number of reforms to the program, including:

- Enhanced documentation of officer-student contacts
- Creation of an anonymous reporting system for students to share concerns about officer conduct
- Barring officers from sitting in on administrator meetings with students, to prevent the possibility of content from those meetings being used in a criminal case against the student
- Allowing students to record their interactions with officers
- Shifting disciplinary responsibilities from officers to school administrators

- Redirect spending on the resource officer program to mental health and supportive social services

Parallel to the engagement team's closed-door meetings, an SRO Evaluation Team made up of PSD administrators and representatives from FCPS and Larimer County Sheriff's Office is reviewing the program and creating new set of standard operating procedures for officers.

The review process will culminate with a PSD staff recommendation on the future of the program in spring 2021, when the board will vote on whether to renew the district's contract with Fort Collins police, the sheriff's office and Timnath police.

The Community Engagement Team is tasked with reviewing disciplinary data and searching it for evidence of a school-to-prison pipeline, according to information provided to the Coloradoan by PSD. Members of School Justice PSD said the evidence of the program's flaws is plainly available.

They point to district disciplinary data, reported to the state for years, that shows non-white students are disciplined at higher rates than their white peers. In the data for 2018-19, the most recent year available, Latino students (18% of the district's student body) account for more than one-third of disciplinary actions. Opponents of having officers in schools say the program has contributed to systematic targeting of non-white students, who are more likely to be branded "troublemakers" and face discipline over relatively small infractions. The result, they said, is demoralizing at best and a pathway to juvenile detention or deportation for undocumented students at worst.

"I've been dealing with immigrant youth since 2003, and I have never seen a good result for a kid from an SRO referral," said Kim Medina, a Fort Collins immigration attorney.

Resource officers take a weeklong, specialized training course in addition to implicit bias, diversity and crisis intervention trainings to prevent biased decision-making and help them respond to mental health crises. To be considered for a position, an officer must have three years of experience and undergo review by a specialized board. The officers selected for the positions care deeply about the students they work with and are dedicated to ensuring good outcomes for them, Schiager said.

But implicit bias is "entrenched in the profession" of policing, argued Cheryl Distaso of School Justice PSD. She said the officers' volume of training doesn't compare with that of a mental health or social work professional.

"What they're doing in schools to provide school safety should not be performed by police," Distaso said. "It should be carried out by social workers and counselors and other professionals who are trained to look at the whole student, the whole child."

Schiager said the data on school discipline warrants further investigation, particularly looking at the outcomes of disciplinary action, but it doesn't concern him at face value.

“Out of 30,000 students at PSD, we wrote about 215 tickets in a whole school year,” he said. “It’s a pretty small number, really.”

Most of the tickets written are for relatively minor offenses like disorderly conduct or marijuana or alcohol possession, he said, and more than half of them typically go to diversion programs automatically, meaning students can get their records expunged after carrying out juvenile court-mandated sanctions.

An untold story about diversion, though, is how the process fares for students who are eligible for DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals), Medina said. She’s worked with students whose parents didn’t accompany them to court hearings because they feared contact with immigration enforcement officials.

Parents are required to attend diversion hearings with their children, so those students were denied diversion, Medina said. In other cases, students’ families couldn’t pay the fees associated with diversion program requirements, or they couldn’t get a ride to required classes. Some ended up being deported; others ended up in juvenile detention facilities for offenses as minor as talking back to a teacher or stealing a backpack.

“We lose these kids,” Medina said. “If we made a real investment in mental health and supportive services at the front end, and if we did everything possible to keep these kids out of the juvenile justice system, we would have better results.”

In 2018-2019, the most recent year for which data is available, PSD made 225 referrals to law enforcement. Non-white students, who make up about 27% of the district’s students, accounted for 41% of those referrals. Other types of discipline included in-school and out-of-school suspension and expulsion.

The data reported to the state doesn’t account for lower-level student-officer interactions, like an officer stopping a student in the hall to talk to them or searching a kid’s backpack. Medina and others are advocating for enhanced documentation of those interactions, which they believe disproportionately target non-white students.

Schiager said school resource officer program leaders have a responsibility to listen to criticism and consider improvements to the program — and he said community critique of police programs has always resulted in better programs. But he said removing resource officers from schools would only result in less-experienced officers responding to police calls at schools.

He was a Fort Collins police officer in the 1990s, before the resource officer program started. He remembers responding to at least one call at the old Fort Collins High School every day.

“There’s a couple thousand students in the school — it’s a small community; it’s got all kinds of issues going on,” he said. “But when you don’t have SROs, you get officers that aren’t specially trained, they don’t know the juvenile systems as well, they don’t know all the resources available

to families and kids. I think having those specially trained folks (working with students) reduces the number of criminal charges that we're putting on people.”

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## **School resource officers in Poudre School District**

The renewed school resource officer contracts with three Northern Colorado law-enforcement agencies will cost PSD \$1.02 million this school year. The district covers half of the pay for officers placed in district schools. The agency or municipality covers the other half. The district will pay:

- About \$844,000 to Fort Collins Police Services for half the cost of 11 officers, two corporals and one sergeant working 220 days
- About \$172,000 to Larimer County Sheriff's Office for half the cost of two school resource officers, a school resource officer supervisor, two patrol vehicles, a supervisor vehicle and capital replacement and administrative costs for 192 working days
- About \$12,900 to the town of Timnath for half the cost of one school resource officer, one patrol vehicle, and capital replacement and administrative costs for two hours per day for 182 days

Fort Collins Police Services and Larimer County Sheriff's Office have provided resource officers at select PSD schools since 1995, according to PSD documents. Fort Collins police are located at each comprehensive high school and middle school within Fort Collins. Larimer County deputies are located at Cache La Poudre and Wellington middle schools. Timnath police began providing officers at Timnath and Bethke elementary schools in 2019.