

# Review of Police Presence and Programs

## ABOUT

### Police Presence and Programs and this review

School-based police programs involve the use of select police officers who visit schools and lead presentations regarding various social issues such as bullying, drug and alcohol use, and safety. School Resource Officers (SROs) typically enter schools to speak with students, answer questions, and build relationships. The VIP (Values, Influences, and Peers) program is offered to Grade 6 students and includes multiple police-led presentations throughout the school year focused on values and character building. The B-RAD (Bullying, Relationships, Alcohol and Drugs) program is offered in Grade 9 and includes 3 presentations throughout the year. It is important to note that within the Greater-Essex County District School Board (GECDsB), police programs have not been previously subject to review. Additionally, students, staff and community members have not been consulted regarding their opinions of and experiences with school-based police programs prior to this review.

As the Ontario Human Rights Commission highlights, *“the SRO/VIP program has existed since the early 1990s. Since then, equity initiatives have shifted in an effort to keep pace with the changing demographics in our communities and ongoing efforts to dismantle systemic racism.”*<sup>1</sup>

In light of GECDsB’s recent initiatives to provide equitable learning environments for all students, an external consultant was engaged to conduct a review.

The experiences and opinions of students from racialized and marginalized identities were prioritized for the review, as these voices have been absent within literature on SROs in Canada. A student research team was formed to ensure that youth perspectives were brought into the review’s design and methodology. The review team set out to explore the questions below through a combination of literature review, individual interviews, focus groups, and surveys distributed to students and community members (e.g., administrators, teachers, parents, former students).

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/news\\_centre/letter-york-catholic-district-school-Board-review-srovip-programs](https://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/news_centre/letter-york-catholic-district-school-Board-review-srovip-programs)

## Review Questions

1. How is the current community police programming perceived by GECDsB stakeholders? What are its intended outcomes?
2. Are community police program outcomes being achieved? Are the programs having their desired impact on students?
3. Do students of all identities recognize and support the intended outcomes of community policing?
4. Do students of all identities feel safe at school in the presence of uniformed police officers?

## FINDINGS

Many in the GECDsB community acknowledge that police are a part of the community and their job is to enforce the law. Police have many strategies and programs to become involved in the community. Encounters with police outside of the school community often impact perceptions of police within the school community. Various respondents acknowledge that *SROs are part of the larger system of policing, which has a history of violence, persecution, and racial discrimination*. As a result, many racialized and marginalized groups do not have a positive perception of, or relationships with, police. Participants also note that newcomers may be fearful of police due to traumatic experiences with police in their home countries. Others explain that Black community members may be distrustful of police because of instances of police brutality.

*I know that many newcomers are fearful of government and police based on their own lived experiences from their homelands AND this is furthered by legitimate over-policing of marginalized and racialized groups in Canada – GECDsB educator*

### 1. Safety and Presence

Secondary students do not agree that the presence of police in their school leads to enhanced safety. Some students believe that police response may help with issues of violence and bullying, while others defer to school staff, such as teachers and advisors, who often play a role in de-escalation and making the school environment safer.

When asked “How does seeing a police officer at school make you feel: Very Safe, Somewhat Safe, Somewhat Unsafe, Very Unsafe,” students of all identities shared mixed feelings.

- South Asian and 2SLGBTQIA+ students expressed 'very unsafe' feelings around police officers in their school, 31% and 19% respectively.
- Combining the categories of 'somewhat unsafe and very unsafe,' *86% of 2SLGBTQIA+, 69% of Black/African, and 75% of South Asian students do not feel safe around police in their school.*



- The majority of students with disabilities and Indigenous students (over 50%) do not express feelings of safety around police in their school.

When asked “*When you see an officer at school do you avoid them: Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Often, Always,*”

- a quarter of all students would avoid an officer *Often or Always*.
- Student groups most likely to avoid police *Often or Always*: South Asian (50%), 2SLGBTQIA+ (45%), Black/African (44%).
- When combined with *sometimes*, **94% of Black students and 82% of 2SLGBTQIA+ students would Sometimes, Often or Always avoid police in their school.**

Some students are comforted by the presence of uniformed officers at school, while others feel distracted, anxious, and worried. Parents, educators, and other community members also shared their concerns about the presence of police in schools. Police officers are considered by some to be intimidating, particularly when they are in uniform, in a group, or carrying weapons. Some staff members explicitly state they do not feel safe with police presence at school.

Participants asked if officers can visit schools without their uniforms. This question was posed to a number of officers, who generally expressed discomfort with being on duty in plain clothes, mainly citing safety reasons. Some officers also stated it is important for people to get comfortable with the uniform.

## 2. Program Perceptions and Outcomes

The majority of adult stakeholders who have experience with community police presence and programs agree the following activities are at its core: (1) relationship building and mentorship (2) education (3) presenting a positive image of police (4) maintaining order in the school and (5) keeping students out of the criminal justice system.

Looking at individual programs, it was acknowledged by the police and Police Education Liaison Committee members that the Grade 9 B-RAD content required an update. However, it is not clear if B-RAD has specific learning outcomes. The Grade 6 VIP program is more detailed, with a number of outcomes, including self-esteem and confidence building, developing respect for others, recognizing peer pressure, law awareness, saying ‘no’ when appropriate, and making good choices. Students have never been asked for their feedback, which would be useful to assess if the desired outcomes are being achieved (i.e. changes in student behavior, or better decision making).

Several interview participants note the lack of a clear mandate for SRO programs in general. Staff, parents and students explain that the purpose of police officers in schools was not clearly articulated.

### 3. Achievement and Impact

While community members generally appear to be more supportive of school-based police programs, students have divergent views. Some secondary students expressed value and appreciation for the content of the VIP and B-RAD program while others had neutral or negative experiences.

Although feedback on some SRO presentations was positive, several respondents point out that SROs are not trained as educators. Police approaches to engaging and educating children and youth are not grounded in evidence or trauma-informed approaches. Respondents shared that education in the school environment should be led by educators in collaboration with subject matter experts (such as police officers, health practitioners, etc.), individuals with lived experiences, and students themselves. Respondents recognize that children and youth need honest, facilitated, two-way conversations with opportunities to prepare, process, and follow up on critical topics.

Some adult participants spoke highly of individual SROs and their ability to engage with students in a meaningful way. Some Administrators and teachers expressed that VIP officers and SROs can provide valuable support as mediators; when done well, students can be diverted from getting in trouble with the law as SROs can help de-escalate situations and provide alternative solutions to discipline.

Students from various identities had differing opinions about the value and impacts of school-based police programs. Not all students provided specific, positive experiences about the VIP and B-RAD programs, nor were they enthusiastic about the presence of SROs in schools. Thus, this review cannot conclude that the desired impacts of school-based programs is applicable for all GECDsB students.

### 4. Outcomes for Students

Students representing diverse identities do not universally recognize and support the intended outcomes of community policing. It is not evident that the current approach to police-led content delivery is the best way to reach students of all identities.

The VIP program appears to make more of an impact among students, as it includes essential content at a critical time of development (12 years of age). Of 172 students surveyed who took VIP, just under half agree it was valuable.

- White students are more likely to express value.
- 2SLGBTQIA+ students are least likely to express value.
- Some students expressed that by the time they reached high school, they did not recall the program, or simply remembered that “it was about not doing drugs.”

B-RAD experience was limited, with mixed reviews. Of the 90 Grade 12’s who identified themselves in the survey, only 29 were able to share experiences on the B-



RAD program. When asked if the program was a valuable experience, responses are split: 34% Yes, 31% Maybe, and 34% No.

Students from the focus groups explain in order to foster a relationship with them, police must first build trust. Once that trust is established, they can extend the relationship by doing fun activities that are unrelated to work. Students need to know why police are in the school in the first place. They would also like for officers to be dressed more casually instead of in their “big, chunky” uniforms.

### **Summary: More or Less Involvement?**

The one-size-fits-all approach to community policing and police presence is not in all students’ best interests. When asked about future police involvement in schools, student survey responses revealed that 46.6% of students are open to ‘More involvement’, while 53.4% would like ‘Less’ and ‘No Involvement’.

*Overwhelmingly, the following groups want less or no police involvement in school: 2SLGBTQIA+ (91%), Black/African (79%), South Asian (75%).*

Community members from the various demographic groups supported the continuation of police programs. However, members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community expressed concern about the impact of the programs on students who may be uncomfortable with police presence. Community members, GECDsB staff, and police are more aligned in their view of the programs, though there is clear dissent from individuals across identities, particularly community members of racialized and marginalized groups.

A significant number of stakeholders expressed openness to participate in a process of change, and shared ideas that may address some of the existing concerns.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Referencing human rights and equity principles which the GECDsB must uphold, along with the findings from students and community members gathered in this review, the following recommendations are made:

- 1. GECDsB should remove all classroom-based engagements with police services in response to the finding that a majority of racialized/marginalized students report feeling unsafe with police presence in school.**

The goal is to ensure that all non-emergency police presence in schools is facilitated through an equity-focused lens that prioritizes student safety, belonging, and well-being. This means that police officers no longer make informal visits to school communities. Delivery of important non-curriculum content should be led by the school board, with police as invited guest speakers.



Police are part of a school-led, community-involved team that develops content and approaches to delivering material.

**2. All police-school curriculum activities should be optional, require consent and thoroughly communicated**

When using a trauma-informed approach, students of all ages should be empowered to make choices to engage with the police. It is not uncommon to give students the choice to opt out of conversations when the content is triggering, so it is not unreasonable to apply the same concept to police presence in schools.

**3. Grade 6 VIP and Grade 9 B-RAD content should be replaced with programming that engages community members in sharing their lived experiences**

A holistic, student-centred approach to the many issues currently raised in police programming cannot be led by police. Rather, there needs to be a focus on community-building, support, and creating content that meets youth where they are at. Police can be partners in delivering this content where and when appropriate (i.e. through off-site trips, video presentations, social media/information bulletins).

**4. GECSB should provide training for officers who visit schools and engage with students**

When police officers enter schools, they enter an educative environment. As such, they need to be made aware of what their presence means, how it impacts students, and how it might be interpreted by staff and community. Accordingly, they should receive some training that seeks to provide an equity-focused lens on their encounters as guests within the school environment.

