


# Focus Groups Synthesis

*for ASD Safety Task Force*

*October 20, 2020*

**Mass insight**  
education & research

## Synthesis

- Overview 
- Strengths
- Stakeholder Areas of Concern
- Stakeholder Reflections on School Resource Officers
- Considerations for the Memorandum of Understanding

## Overview

19 schools represented

16 focus groups

7 classes

106 students

27 family and  
community  
members

43 staff  
members

- All family focus groups included interpretation services for Spanish-speaking families.
- To encourage attendance, Mi sent an invitation email, a calendar invite, and a reminder email to all focus group registrants.
- Due to low student turnout in initial focus groups, Mi joined one class at each middle and high school to ensure student voice was represented.
- Additionally, Mi analyzed key data points from the stakeholder survey.

**STRENGTH ON STRENGTH**


## Focus Group Questions

- 1) On a scale of 1-5 (one being not at all safe, and 5 being very safe), how safe is your school and why?
- 2) What makes your school feel safe? What would make your school feel safer? What makes your school feel unsafe?
- 3) Should schools have School Resource Officers and why? If so, what should their role be? (Examples: mentor student, monitor school grounds, discipline students)
- 4) What are your greatest concerns regarding safety at your school?

- Mass Insight asked each focus group a standard set of questions that the Safety Task Force approved.
- As needed, Mass Insight asked follow-up questions to develop deeper understanding of stakeholder responses.
- The responses led to themes across questions and in many cases, across stakeholders. This synthesis is organized accordingly (overall strengths, overall concerns, and a specific section regarding SROs).
- In organizing the synthesis, student voices are honored first, throughout.

**STRENGTH ON STRENGTH**

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## Stakeholders rate the safety of schools as moderately safe.

Across the focus groups and the survey, ratings of safety were moderate.

- For focus groups, Mass Insight asked all stakeholders to rate the safety of the school or schools they interact with most, with one being not at all safe and five being very safe. There were not any stakeholders who rated their school as not at all safe.
- For the survey, stakeholders were asked to respond yes or no for the following: “Overall, I feel my school is safe.” The results are organized by stakeholder groups below; deeper survey analysis could provide further insight into variance by school.

Stakeholder Group	Focus Groups (1-5 scale)	Surveys (yes)
Students	3.7 (n = 104)	83% (n = 1,775)
Family and community members	3.88 (n = 25)	85% (n = 669)
Staff	3.14 (n = 37)	72% (n = 912)

**STRENGTH ON STRENGTH**

## For families and students, relationships foster feelings of safety.

Family members report feeling safest when there are positive teacher-student relationships in the building and teachers provide structure in their classes. Students report that they feel safe when they have individuals they can trust in the school building, whether that is other students or school staff.

- *“[What makes me feel safe at school is] when I am around a lot of staff and students, and when there are security guards around.” – student*
- *“I feel safe if something happens because I can go to the counselor or to security or other adults.” –student*
- *“My daughter feels safe because she has good relationships with people in the building.” -family member*
- *“Security guards and teams at [school name] know kids’ names, have relationships with them. It’s important for kids to have people that look like them in positions of authority and power.” -family member*

STRENGTH ON STRENGTH


## When there are clear expectations, routines, and procedures in place, this enables feelings of safety for staff.

Staff feel safest when all staff members have a shared understanding of safety procedures and policies, especially policies around individuals entering the school building. There were mixed reports regarding the extent to which this is a reality across schools.

- *“What makes me feel safe is understanding of protocol and of each other... As long as we’re paying attention to the doors to outside, not letting people in, having trust in the team, teachers, and security.” - teacher*
- *“[I feel safe] when I go into buildings and people follow the protocol - makes me feel students are safe.” - teacher*



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## Students feel unsafe when incidents, especially fights, are not handled efficiently or taken seriously by school staff.

Across buildings, students shared that fights, and the way that fighting is handled by school staff, is one of their greatest safety concerns. Additionally, they shared that they feel fights could be prevented or resolved better by school staff, including teachers, counselors, and security guards.

- *“I would have probably felt safer there if the security guards were a little less carefree.” -student*
- *“There are times where even teachers dismiss the fact that students feel unsafe, creating an environment in which students feel like they have no one to talk to. Some staff don’t take situations as seriously as they should.” -student*
- *“A lot of people of color don’t feel safe going to counselors- a lot of the problems they have they can’t relate to them.” -student*
- *“Some of the security guards are way too laid back and they chat up a storm with students instead of focusing on their job. even when they are supposed to be professional, you can hear them cursing and stuff.” -student*
- *“It doesn't seem like the students are really being helped or at least figured out. They just get put in ATS and stuff, and usually any attempts to understand them goes out the window.” -student*
- *“After fights, [students] don’t resolve anything from counselor thing. Counselors don’t say much. Are you still friends? It’s easy to lie to them.” -student*

## All stakeholders have safety concerns regarding what happens outside of school buildings.

Stakeholders shared that there are many schools with busy roads, intersections, or traffic patterns that create unsafe conditions during arrival and dismissal. Students and staff do not always feel safe walking to and from school due to a variety of factors. Some buildings struggle with students exiting the building without permission during the school day, and procedures regarding how to handle these situations are not clear.

- *“When the security guard ends altercations, the fight just starts up again across the street where the security guards cannot get to them because it isn't school property.” –student*
- *“The time right after or before school is where things feel less safe, in the buildings it feels more safe... As kids get older, get out at the same time, things that happen outside the building, near parks, alleys, kids walking home, feels most unsafe.” –family member*
- *“Kids can leave school with no alert. The security there is not all that great... I see a lot of kids at [the] park who shouldn't be in that park during school hours. That's endangering children.” –family member*
- *“The perimeter of our building is very dark. On [street name], we have to cross a playground to get to a parking lot that is not lit.” -teacher*

STRENGTH ON STRENGTH

## All stakeholders report that the state of school facilities are a safety concern.

Across buildings, Mass Insight heard the following:

- reports of doors with missing or broken locks, and exterior doors lacking devices to alert of an opening
- reports of spaces in the schools (“nooks and crannies”) that are out of view of security cameras or where adults are unable to monitor student safety at all times
- reports of the security desk and/or main office being positioned in a manner in which an individual can enter the building without first visiting the security desk or office

- *“[It would make me feel safer to] not to have so many windows, and some more secure windows.” -student*
- *“The security desk is past two sets of stairs. [Someone] could technically be in the building before they go to the desk. It’s not a secure set-up.” -teacher*
- *“We have an old building and the doors don’t lock and get propped open. We have been asking for years for [door alerts].” -teacher*


STRENGTH ON STRENGTH

## Teachers feel that staffing contributes to safety issues, and some students echoed these concerns.

This includes not having enough staff to promote safe choices in common spaces (e.g., hallways, cafeteria) or during transitions (e.g., arrival, dismissal). Staff report that this can often lead to situations that compromise safety being escalated or not responded to in a timely manner.

- *"I feel unsafe when a fight breaks out and there is no one to stop it. I would feel safer if there were more people watching over the student body." -student*
- *"[I feel unsafe] on the stairs." -student*
- *"We have a lot of students with high needs, especially in special education. When we're short-staffed or we don't have proper placements, behaviors escalate and it has been more chaotic because we can't meet basic needs." -teacher*
- *"I feel safe when we're fully staffed. When there's an announcement that there are 20 people out but only five subs, I don't feel safe." -teacher*
- *"I don't think the lunchroom is the safest place when there's only maybe the AP and guidance counselor with the whole grade level." -teacher*

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STRENGTH ON STRENGTH

The majority of all stakeholders (students, families, community members, and ASD staff) support SROs in schools. Stakeholders shared that there is an opportunity to improve the selection and training of officers.

According to the survey, 90% of students and families and 80% of community members support SROs in schools. In both the survey and focus groups, students, families, and community members advocated for specialized training in cultural competence, working with students with special needs, and relationship-building. 95% of staff members support SROs according to the survey. In focus groups, staff reported predominantly positive experiences with SROs in buildings.\*

- *“I don’t think they should be removed, but rather fine-tuned.” -family member*
- *“100% SROs need to remain in the buildings. No question without a doubt.” -teacher*
- *“They are trained to tackle crime, not to de-escalate or mediate situations.” -family member*
- *“[I have] seen SROs where they have their hands resting on the holster, consciously or unconsciously, which is unsettling for parents.” -family member*

*\*In reviewing survey results, open-ended responses indicate that many respondents do not understand the term “School Resource Officer.” Deeper analysis would be needed for greater confidence in survey results.*

**STRENGTH ON STRENGTH**

## While the majority of stakeholders support SROs in schools, a smaller number of individuals across stakeholder groups passionately believe SROs should not be in schools.

Some stakeholders feel that SROs contribute to criminalization of students of color, the school to prison pipeline, and are in conflict with the district's restorative practices approach.

- *"In our school it's just an outlet to convince kids that if they do certain things they're only going to end up in the system. It's just an outlet to go straight to the jail. It's not making kids believe that you can turn your life around, you can be somebody in life. -student*
- *"No, police officers are armed state agents that create a fundamental power inequity in schools. Students are aware that their freedom, future, and lives can be taken away by police officers. In many cases police create traumatic experiences and triggers for students by merely being present." - community member*
- *"I think that police officers in schools teaches students that they are being policed in school, which is supposed to be a safe space for them. Children of color and Black children are policed when they walk to school, are in school, and when they walk home." -teacher*
- *The presence of SROs is inherently threatening. It tells our children that they are criminals-in-training rather than young scholars full of promise. - family member*
- *I think [staff] want them because SROs are more for their protection than students. They make them feel comfortable but they make us uncomfortable. They can call them and someone comes with a weapon. The more cops you put in schools the more they're going to see the more they'll be on the lookout/be on a mission to find something wrong. - student*




## While the majority of ASD stakeholders support SROs in schools, there is a lack of clarity of the roles and responsibilities of SROs.

Not all stakeholders are clear on the roles and responsibilities of SROs. According to the survey, 75% of students, 68% of family and community members, and 69% of staff understand the roles and responsibilities of SROs.

In focus groups, staff shared that the roles, responsibilities, and effectiveness of a given SRO is predominantly determined by the individual and is not consistent across schools or officers. They shared that the most effective SROs have close relationships with administration, staff, and students.

- *"I am not sure of their exact role." –family member*
- *"I'm not sure when or even if the SRO can be used as a resource by teachers and staff to promote a sense of safety and security. Can students go to the SRO for school and community concerns? Can staff?" –teacher*

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STRENGTH ON STRENGTH

# Considerations for the Memorandum of Understanding with Allentown Police Department (APD)

MOU	Consider:
<p>The MOU indicated that the school would share student rosters and yearbooks with the police.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discussing if this aligns with the district’s policies and values around student privacy.</li> <li>• Clarifying if this policy is consistent with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act.</li> </ul>
<p>The MOU specifies that police would only intervene when there is a “clear and present danger of serious physical injury.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clarifying if police intervention would occur for danger to property (school or personal).</li> </ul>
<p>The MOU focuses exclusively on the Allentown Police Department (APD), but does not include anything about other agencies.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discussing and including the extent to which the district would or would not cooperate with APD if they were working in coordination with another agency (e.g., ICE, DEA).</li> </ul>

*At the request of district leadership Mass Insight reviewed the current MOU revisions. The table contains a few noticings, none of which are legal guidance but rather considerations.*

**STRENGTH ON STRENGTH**