

Keeping the Peace

What you should know about staffing
a school security department

BY KENNETH S. TRUMP

Cops on the beat might not be your image of school security, but maybe they should be. Increasingly, school leaders in urban, suburban, and rural districts alike are hiring personnel dedicated exclusively to security duties as part of the district's school safety plan. If your district is hiring security personnel, questions probably will arise about the most appropriate role these employees should play in school operations.

Some school district staffs included security personnel as early as the 1970s, but interest in this strategy has surged since the mid-1980s. The increased interest has not resulted in the most professional and effective use of these staff members, however. Typically, school administrators and board members view the presence of security and law enforcement officials in schools as a reactive and punitive measure. And in that kind of organizational culture, even the best security staffing model cannot be truly effective.

As school leaders, you must set aside image concerns if you sincerely desire safe schools. Zero-tolerance policies won't work if concern over adverse media coverage and community reaction keep people from reporting crimes and using security and law enforcement resources. Instead, se-

curity measures—including personnel and enforcement practices—must be integrated in a comprehensive school safety plan that is balanced with prevention, intervention, and enforcement techniques.

Students, parents, staff, and community members rank safety at the top of their list of concerns. Consistent crime reporting, sincere law enforcement relationships, and the effective use of security personnel can reduce school liability and serve as a positive public relations tool for educators. Most important, safe schools contribute to improved attendance, increased student achievement, and enhanced community support.

Selecting a model

Teachers, administrators, and support staff were the original school security personnel. As disruptive student behavior grew—along with teacher workloads, budgetary constraints, and contractual obligations—these duties were passed along in many districts to hall monitors or aides. These individuals are generally successful in dealing with regular students, but their presence poses little threat to the more disruptive offenders. It's this small percentage of students who generate the need for a stronger, more professional security presence on campus.

Although the need for a security presence might be clear, what form this staffing should take is often a point of debate: Do we hire more aides? Do we create an in-house security department? Do we bring in the police?

Various forms of security staffing are being used across

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the country. No single staffing method is considered the only and absolute approach for all schools, although I will suggest an option later that can work both politically and operationally in many districts. First, however, you should be familiar with the three most popular staffing approaches and some of their pros and cons:

- **School security departments** are made up of specialists employed by the district to perform specific security duties. Their numbers and duties typically vary from district to district and, in many cases, from school to school within the same district. Depending on their level of training and on local or state laws, these specialists might have limited arrest powers and be authorized to carry weapons.

One plus to setting up a school security department is that you can employ individuals who become experienced in dealing with kids and familiar with school operations; another is that the district has control over personnel selection and assignments. On the negative side, poor pay and training can result in low organizational status and inadequate levels of professionalism among school security personnel.

- **School police departments** are common in some states, particularly in the western and southern parts of the country. These are regular law enforcement entities with police authority that work for, and are paid by, the school district.

The positive aspect of this approach is having a full-time school policing program committed specifically to your district. That means that a dedicated in-house force with full police authority is available at all times, staffed by individuals who work regularly with schools and kids. But because of their training, authority, and operational needs, school police departments generally require larger budgets than do security departments, and some school leaders believe the cost of operating such a department is too high.

- **School Resource Officer (SRO) programs** are becoming increasingly popular across the country. SROs are usually city or county law enforcement officers assigned by their departments to work in the schools within their jurisdiction.

For schools, the advantage of such programs is having sworn officers with full police authority and street experience available not only to enforce the law on campus but also to provide classroom education and student counseling. But before implementing an SRO program, various administrative issues must be worked out, including determining and maintaining funding agreements, establishing guidelines for personnel selection and supervision, and working out related operational details.

Although these three options are the most common, some districts are content with other approaches such as using off-duty police officers on a rotating, part-time basis or using contract security personnel. Both approaches have drawbacks: The trouble with depending on off-duty police officers is the potential for inconsistency. What's more, these officers' primary responsibility must be to their regular police department job—not to the school district. For their part, contract security employees usually receive low pay and have a high turnover rate, which can also lead to inconsistency in enforcing security measures.

A number of districts use a combination of staffing options. For example, some schools have in-house security that

is supplemented with SROs. Others use in-house security for daily duties and contract security for special purposes, such as securing bus depots or buildings used at night.

When school leaders ask me which of the three models is the best approach, I generally say that the most appropriate and specific staffing plan can be decided only after a district assesses its security needs.

Increasingly, though, I am convinced that the SRO model is a “win-win” proposition for schools, law enforcement agencies, and the community. An SRO program provides high-quality service that is cost-effective for schools and police departments alike. It can also enhance school crime reporting procedures and the sharing of information on school and community juvenile crime activity between the district and the police.

Some school districts might need only an SRO program or an in-house security presence. Many districts with growing security threats, however, might benefit from combining SROs and in-house security staffing. When both models are in use, the SROs can focus their efforts on enforcing and investigating criminal offenses, classroom instruction, and student counseling. Meanwhile, in-house security personnel can conduct preventive patrols, supervise common areas, conduct security assessments, and assist staff with disruptive students.

Getting started

Step one in addressing school security needs is to conduct a full assessment of your district's current security operations and specific security needs. By conducting such an assessment, school security specialists can help you determine the most appropriate staffing model, staffing level, functions, and operating guidelines for your district.

The assessment should be conducted by current in-house security directors; trained and experienced law enforcement officers who are trained and experienced in school security; or specialized and experienced outside school security consultants. An assessment of staffing needs—combined with an assessment of district crisis preparedness, physical security, education and training, personnel and internal security, and community coordination—can provide a cost-effective blueprint for implementing effective school security.

Once you've assessed your school district and decided which staffing model or combination of models would work best, you'll still need to address some important questions:

- **Should personnel be armed or unarmed?** It's sometimes hard to know what school leaders fear most: armed students or armed officers on campus. Disarming a certified, trained police officer seems to defy logic, but I've often encountered situations in which school officials or even law enforcement administrators debated stripping SROs or other qualified police officers of their guns while they're on school campuses in order to avoid creating a hostile or prison-like image of the schools.

From a professional security and a liability perspective, I strongly encouraged these officials to think again: Taking away a tool of the trained officer increases security risks. It also raises liability questions as to why school officials would value school image over student, staff, and officer safety.

If there are enough threats to school safety to justify having a certified, trained SRO or school police officer on cam-

pus, it's logical to conclude that the same threats justify having that officer being fully and properly equipped. The potentially harsh image can be softened without jeopardizing anyone's safety by having officers wear polo shirts with identifying insignia, rather than standard police uniforms, and by having them carry their weapons in shoulder holsters under jackets.

• **How big a staff do you need?** There is no magic formula for determining how many security personnel a particular school or district should have. And even if there were, each school is unique and requires its own security assessment to identify peculiar circumstances and dynamics that might influence security staffing and operations. Such assessments should be carried out by school security professionals.

Data on incidents and offenses should be the primary guide in assessing staffing needs. The data should include the number of criminal offenses and non-criminal school rule violations reported at each building. But the data won't be helpful in determining staff needs unless your district has a mandatory, consistent reporting mechanism for each school.

The absence of consistent reporting can create a false perception of needs if the person conducting the security assessment doesn't look beyond mere numbers. For example, high school A might have significantly fewer incidents than nearby high school B, which is in the same district. Is school A "safer" than school B, and does it thus require fewer security personnel? Or do administrators at school A underreport incidents? It could be, in fact, that school A actually needs more security help than school B, which reports and deals with problems.

The number of students enrolled and the size of the physical plant should also be considered in determining staffing levels. These factors, combined with solid incident data and an examination of individual building needs, provide a starting point for determining the number of security staff to assign per building. And regardless of how many you decide to assign at first, be prepared to be flexible: Periodic reevaluations and emergency circumstances might warrant changes on short notice.

• **What should the security staff do?** Identifying the functions to be performed by security personnel will help determine how big a staff you need—and provide clear guidance to security personnel and education staff alike about the role and function of the school security department. One of the most common problems I find in my assessments of school security departments is the use of security personnel to perform duties that are not related to security. I've seen security officers cleaning lunchroom tables, taking out garbage, cleaning lockers, delivering mail to other schools, and running errands for principals—leav-

ing the hallways unpatrolled.

Such inappropriate use of security personnel increases safety risks by removing the deterrent presence of the security officer and making the officer unavailable for a timely response to an urgent situation. Imagine trying to explain to a parent—let alone to a newspaper reporter, judge, or jury—why the school security officer was cleaning the cafeteria while a student was attacked in the hallway that the officer was supposed to be monitoring.

To avoid this situation, be sure the district develops written job descriptions and work plans that clearly identify responsibilities and tasks to be performed by security personnel. Their highest priority, of course, must be to enforce and investigate violations of the law and school policy. Other responsibilities should include assisting in developing and implementing school crisis preparedness guidelines, conducting security assessments, serving as liaison with outside safety agencies, and conducting training and education programs.

• **What about professionalism?** Many school security programs fail to make the grade when evaluated for professionalism. In addition to the organizational, structural, and functional deficiencies previously mentioned, a large percentage of school security personnel receive inadequate training. Administrators, teachers, and other certified school personnel tend to receive many more in-service training opportunities than do support personnel, including security officials, which can leave these individuals and their districts open for liability.

To compound the problem, security personnel are often supervised by individuals with no security experience or training. In conducting security assessments, I have found security personnel reporting to maintenance supervisors, business managers, curriculum directors, principals, and other administrators who have rarely been exposed to professional security training and standards. Security personnel should be selected, supervised, trained, evaluated, and, if necessary, terminated under the direction of a trained and experienced security professional. Any other arrangement not only raises liability concerns, but also communicates indifference to school safety.

Finally, "you get what you pay for" is more truth than rhetoric. Districts with minimal educational and experience requirements for security personnel, and those that pay minimum wage and provide marginal benefits, should expect only minimal quality in their security programs. And conversely, districts that raise the requirements for security staff, conduct thorough and regular background checks, integrate the security staff and programs into their organizational culture, and pay wages and benefits comparable to industry standards are much more likely to have strong, professional school security operations. ❖