

Recommendations for Supporting a Positive School Climate and Safe Schools



Includes:

- A Model Memorandum of Understanding for School Districts and Law Enforcement Agencies
- A Graduated Response Model for Responses to School Discipline



NOTICE AND DISCLAIMER

This document, including the model Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) template and accompanying recommendations, is provided by Rhode Island KIDS COUNT (RIKC) for informational and guidance purposes only. It is intended to assist school districts and law enforcement agencies in developing their own memoranda of understanding regarding School Resource Officer (SRO) programs.

This document does not constitute legal advice. Nothing contained herein should be construed as legal counsel, a legal opinion, or a recommendation to take or refrain from taking any particular action.

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The provision of this model MOU template and recommendations does not constitute RIKC's endorsement of School Resource Officer programs or any particular school safety or discipline strategy. The decision to employ an SRO remains a local decision to be made by each school district in consultation with its community and legal counsel.

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I. Introduction

The federal *Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)* recognizes the strong relationship between positive school climate, student learning, and academic success and requires states to include data related to school climate and safety in annual school report cards. School climate is the character and quality of life within a school building and is defined by several indicators including the relationships among students, teachers, families, and the broader community; facilities; the availability of school-based health supports; academic outcomes; safety; and discipline policies. All students need safe and supportive classroom environments to progress academically and developmentally, and this effort needs to include strategies that enhance school climate. Effective school disciplinary practices promote a safe and respectful school climate, support learning, and address the root causes of student misbehavior.¹

According to the U.S. Department of Education, recent data suggests that the use of unfair or inconsistent discipline policies contribute to disproportionate disciplinary outcomes for some students, particularly Students of Color.² In the U.S., Students of Color are more likely to report being victims of unfair treatment because of their race compared to white students. Discrimination or expecting future discrimination from teachers is associated with increased stress, decreased engagement in school, and negative academic outcomes. Stress caused by discrimination or stereotype threat (a feeling of apprehension about confirming negative stereotypes) impacts attention, memory, and executive functioning, increases anxiety, anger, and depression among Students of Color, and is connected to disparities in academic outcomes.³

In Rhode Island, during the 2017-2018* school year,

- Black students represented **9%** of the student population but represented **20%** of students referred to law enforcement and **19%** of students with school-related arrests.
- Hispanic students represented **25%** of the student population but represented **31%** of students referred to law enforcement and **36%** of students with school-related arrests.
- White students represented **58%** of students enrolled but represented **38%** of students referred to law enforcement and **35%** of students with school-related arrests.
- Students with Individual Education Plans represented **15%** of the student population but represented **22%** of students referred to law enforcement and **16%** of students with school-related arrests.^{4,5,6}

*Most recently available complete dataset from the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights.

As Rhode Island local education agencies are committed to ensuring safe and supportive learning environments for all Rhode Island youth, all students need to feel safe to learn in their classrooms and be free from disproportionate arrests and referrals to law enforcement. Creating and implementing racially aware policies and practices can improve school climate and increase equity.⁷

II. Purpose

The U.S. Department of Education recommends several evidence-based guiding principles for achieving a healthy school climate. One of their primary guiding principles is to “Ensure the fair administration of student discipline policies in ways that treat students with dignity and respect.”⁸ Rhode Island’s Basic Education Plan (BEP) requires each school district to create a climate of safety, security, and belonging for all students and adults as well as administer fair disciplinary actions for all students. The BEP also states that, “each LEA shall develop protocols that define a set of discipline strategies and constructs that ensure that students and adults make positive behavioral choices and that are conducive to a safe and nurturing environment that promotes academic success.”⁹

It is imperative that these discipline strategies align with developmentally appropriate responses to student misconduct and are structured in a way that prevents unnecessary escalation. There is a strong body of research that supports the use of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) in classrooms and schools to improve student outcomes, reduce exclusionary discipline, and improve teacher outcomes. PBIS is an evidence-based, tiered framework that supports students’ behavioral, academic, social/emotional, and mental health. PBIS is a research-backed strategy to create positive, predictable, equitable and safe learning environments where everyone thrives, and it is used in classrooms and schools across the country as well as in Rhode Island. Schools already have strategies to deescalate in classrooms, including the use of PBIS tier supports, Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS), and when a crisis is severe, the ability to send for greater support.¹⁰

A developmentally appropriate discipline strategy also includes preventing the unnecessary use of law enforcement to address non-criminal student misconduct. It is important for students to feel safe at school for them to thrive academically and socially. Rhode Island’s BEP allows each school district to create a safe school climate. Some districts may choose to have a school resource officer (SRO) stationed within their district. An SRO is a sworn law enforcement officer in a community-oriented policing role who works specifically with schools and community-based organizations. While the goal of an SRO program is to increase school safety, build relationships among students and police officers, mentor youth, and educate youth on crime prevention and safety, research suggests that the presence of an SRO may also increase both exclusionary discipline practices and school-based arrests. Research also suggests that the presence of an SRO can exacerbate feelings of fear and both perceived and actual discrimination among Students of Color compared to their white peers. Due to these potential adverse outcomes, the choice to employ an SRO should be cautiously weighed.¹¹

*Having an SRO employed in a school district is a local decision, and in accordance with the **U.S. Department of Justice Office of Community Oriented Policing Services** we recommend that all districts explore the wide range of interventions and programming to promote safe and positive school climates, **driven by student, parent, and community input**, before making the decision to have law enforcement within respective LEAs.^{12,13}*

Districts must examine the feasibility of the SRO program in their district including consideration of funding, staffing, and rigorous hiring criteria to ensure that if they move forward with their decision, their SROs are well positioned to work with children and understand youth developmental stages and needs. It is imperative to understand that an SRO cannot take the place of a school psychologist, counselor, or social worker. If their intended role is to enhance the school climate, then their specific roles and responsibilities need to be clearly outlined to contribute to that result.¹³

The U.S. Department of Justice Office of Community Oriented Policing Services recommends that school districts that employ an SRO develop a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with their local law enforcement agency that outlines the roles and expectations for all parties involved including school staff, the SRO, the law enforcement agency, students, and parents.^{14,15} When there is a shared, clearly stated understanding of when an incident should be handled by school administration and when the incident requires an SRO, all groups are better off, increasing both public safety and public trust.^{16,17}

*Therefore, **the purpose of this tool** is to provide support to school districts who have School Resource Officers (SROs) at their schools with a **model Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)** for defining the clear roles for school administration and SROs in school-based incidents.*

III. Memoranda of Understanding Terms of Agreement

Establishing clear terms of agreement between school districts and law enforcement agencies can prevent inconsistent responses to school incidents that lead to biased discipline and unacceptable disparities, reduce school-based referrals to law enforcement and the Court, and reduce school-based arrests.

Elements to include in a Memorandum of Understanding:

- **Statement of Purpose** – Include goals and objectives for the SRO program within the district, list all agencies entering the partnership and include an effective date and term limits. For consistency in relationship building, consider requiring the same SRO to be at the same school for at least a full school year, to allow the opportunity for trust building among students. Mid-year turnover can have a negative effect on student relationships with SROs.
- **Employment and Assignment** – Ensure that the parties agree about hiring, training, and funding. It is recommended that training and ongoing professional development include trauma-informed and restorative practices as well as alternatives to arrest, referrals to mental health professionals, child and adolescent development, and emergency response.¹⁸ Consider requiring restorative-justice training as well as cultural and linguistic competency trainings. Students have appreciated when SROs can identify with them and when they come from similar backgrounds and/or communities as the students.
- **Clearly Defined Duties and Responsibilities of the School Partner** – It is the responsibility of the school to uphold school rules of conduct and provide students and teachers with the support they need to prevent and address behavioral issues.
- **Clearly Defined Duties and Responsibilities of the SRO** – SROs can provide information and presentations on how to prevent violence or bullying at school as well as cultivate meaningful mentorships with students and provide swift emergency responses. When it comes to school discipline, it is imperative that all schools utilize every resource available to them before involving SROs or other law enforcement. Language in the MOU should explicitly state that SROs will not be involved with standard student code of conduct violations or student misbehavior. Their involvement is permitted as a last resort if student misconduct involves a crime. Consider including language that imposes consequences for noncompliance with this part of the agreement.

- **Data and Monitoring** - The school district and the law enforcement agency should establish a streamlined data collection method and data sharing agreement to collect and analyze data required by **R.I. Gen. Laws § 16-2-17** and produce an annual report to monitor the SRO program. This report should be used to “determine whether the discipline imposed has a disproportionate impact on students based on race, ethnicity, or disability status and to appropriately respond to any such disparity.” The data collection and reporting must abide by privacy laws. The school district should also seek qualitative feedback from students and parents on the SRO program to include in the report as well. It is also recommended that a timeline is established for regular MOU reviews to adapt to changing needs, feedback, and data trends. To enhance transparency and trust among the community, engage parents and community members in SRO program evaluations.

- **Further Terms:**

We recommend that the description of partner roles and responsibilities include a **graduated response for school discipline**. Much like a Multi-Tiered System of Support, this graduated response system should include a continuum of supports from universal supports that benefit all students, to more targeted and specialized supports for those with more specific needs. The graduated response should start with the discipline responsibilities of the classroom teacher and then building or district leaders, school-based clinical professionals, and finally law enforcement. Each level should be detailed and specific to reduce the possibility of disproportionate consequences.

An example of a graduated response model that can be adapted for each district is included on the following pages.

Graduated Response Model Chart¹⁹

for

Revised as of _____

Lead Responsibility	Level 1 Classroom	Level 2 School Administration	Level 3 Student Support Professionals	Level 4 Law Enforcement
	Classroom Teacher	Principal or Administrator	School Social Workers/ School Psychologists/ School Counselors	School District SRO or Local Police
Types of Misbehaviors	Selected school policy violations (detailed and specific for your district) • Dress code violation • Tardiness • Class absence • Pass violation • "Horseplay" • Inappropriate language • Cheating • Plagiarism • Internet misuse • Cell phone misuse	School policy violations outside the classroom. Selected school policy violations (detailed and specific for your district) Repetitive patterns of: • Cutting class • Leaving school grounds • Absence/truancy • Tobacco/possession/smoking/alcohol/drug possession • Vandalism • Theft • Threatening/bullying (including cyber-bullying) • Fighting/physical intimidation • Missing detention Repetitive misbehavior means 3 or more incidents of the same misbehavior in the same marking period, but not necessarily in the same day.	Misbehavior leads school administration to seek input from school-based mental health providers, including an assessment of the student's need and recommendations regarding referrals to school and/or community services.	Criminal acts. Serious criminal acts may include: • Weapons possession • Robbery • Serious assault • Sexual Assault • Arson Emergencies

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Lead Responsibility	Level 1 Classroom	Level 2 School Administration	Level 3 Student Support Professionals	Level 4 Law Enforcement
	Classroom Teacher	Principal or Administrator	School Social Workers/ School Psychologists/ School Counselors	School District SRO or Local Police
Interventions	At the onset of each intervention level, the first step must include a conversation between the student and the designated school staff member (e.g., teacher, administrator, counselor, or SRO) to ensure the student fully understands: Why the behavior is not aligned with school policies and expectations and potential consequences of continued behavior. The purpose of the graduated response model is as a supportive framework to help the student make more positive choices. During this conversation, the staff member may review the Graduated Response Model Chart with the student so they are aware of how future incidents may be addressed. The goal is to create clarity, promote accountability, and encourage behavioral growth through shared understanding. Each level intervention should be documented by the level lead and reviewed on a regular basis to identify where prevention efforts need to be strengthened and potential opportunities to support unique and emergent student needs.			

	<u>Level 1 Interventions:</u> • All initial interventions should include strength and asset-based diversion and prevention including using PBIS • Redirection • Moving seats • Verbal warning • Student/teacher conference • Parent contact • Detention • Behavior contract • Parent/guardian/teacher conference • Referral to school resources • Loss of classroom privileges • May refer to Level 2 after documenting at least three level 1 interventions have not addressed the student's need • If attempts are unsuccessful - may refer to social workers, school psychologists, or counselors to target and support root cause of behavior	<u>Level 2 Interventions:</u> • Any Level 1 intervention(s) • Office detention • Restriction of school privileges with the opportunity to regain access through demonstrated improvement in behavior. • Formal written warning • Principal/student conference • Student/parent/guardian/principal conference • Referral to community/diversion programs • Restitution • May refer to Level 3 • In-School or Out-of-School Suspension pursuant to RI General Law § 16-2-17.1 • May refer to Level 4 if the misconduct is determined to involve a crime	<u>Level 3 Interventions:</u> • This assessment level prioritizes a holistic approach to understand the root causes, "The Why," behind the behaviors • Students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) should have their plans evaluated / updated if to address any unmet need. • Assessments • Community service/restitution • Referral to community/diversion programs • Referral/ call to mobile response and stabilization services (MRSS) • Case management programs • Referral to the Support and Response Unit warm line 1-888-RI-FAMILY (1-888-743-2659) for potential wrap around services for youth and/or family	<u>Level 4 Interventions:</u> • Verbal warning • Conference with appropriate people (parents, guardians, etc.) • Referral/ call to mobile response and stabilization services (MRSS) • Arrest (with efforts to minimize trauma (e.g., avoiding handcuffs when feasible and appropriate)) • Referral to Juvenile Hearing Board (JHB) if there is an arrest made • Referral to court • Evaluation by threat assessment team if needed, and if the district has established their team in accordance with R.I. Gen. Laws §16-21-23.2
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Lead Responsibility	Level 1 Classroom	Level 2 School Administration	Level 3 Student Support Professionals	Level 4 Law Enforcement
	Classroom Teacher	Principal or Administrator	School Social Workers/ School Psychologists/ School Counselors	School District SRO or Local Police
Data Points	By student - Demographic characteristics (gender, race/ethnicity, age, grade, disability status, MLL, free/reduced lunch) to the extent the data is available - Parent contact (in-person or not) - Disciplinary incident by type (based on level) - Intervention by type (based on level) - Outcome/recidivism	By student - Demographic characteristics (gender, race/ethnicity, age, grade, disability status, MLL, free/reduced lunch) to the extent the data is available - Parent contact (in-person or not) - Disciplinary incident by type (based on level) - Intervention by type (based on level) - Outcome/recidivism	By student - Demographic characteristics (gender, race/ethnicity, age, grade, disability status, MLL, free/reduced lunch) to the extent the data is available - Parent contact (in-person or not) - Disciplinary incident by type (based on level) - Intervention by type (based on level) - Outcome/ recidivism	By student Comply with R.I. Gen. Laws § 16-2-17 (e) when a referral to law enforcement or the court, disciplinary action and/or an arrest is made – complete reporting form provided by RI Department of Education. - Demographic characteristics (gender, race/ethnicity, age, grade) - Parent contact (in-person or not) - Disciplinary incident by type (based on level) - Intervention by type (based on level) - Outcome/ recidivism

IV. Conclusion

School policies and practices that promote safety and encourage student belonging are important, especially during the first years of secondary school. Prioritizing the dignity and respect of students through fair and restorative practices is a shared goal across agencies. Positive disciplinary practices are effective approaches for creating positive student-teacher relationships, improving students' sense of belonging, building safe schools, and increasing academic outcomes. Restorative practices hold students accountable for their actions and support students' efforts to make changes needed to avoid negative behavior in the future. This is how children and adolescents learn best from their mistakes and should be prioritized as the first response, without the unnecessary early involvement of law enforcement.²⁰

Sample Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)

[This is only a sample, and may not include some standardized clauses, precedent clauses, or general provisions. Districts and Law Enforcement Agencies to add what clauses need to be included for their legal agreements.]

Between [School District Name] and [Law Enforcement Agency Name]

Effective Date: [Insert Date]

Term: [Insert Term – e.g., One School Year]

I. Statement of Purpose

This Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) establishes a formal partnership between [School District Name] and [Law Enforcement Agency Name] to define the roles, responsibilities, and expectations of School Resource Officers (SROs) and school staff. The primary purpose is to ensure a safe, inclusive, and supportive learning environment for all students while minimizing the involvement of law enforcement in non-criminal student behavior.

II. Goals and Objectives

- Promote a positive school climate and equitable discipline practices.
- Ensure student dignity and trauma-informed responses in all disciplinary interventions.
- Clarify the role of SROs and prevent their involvement in non-criminal, school code of conduct violations.
- Enhance collaboration between school staff, mental health professionals, families, and law enforcement.
- Establish shared accountability through data collection, monitoring, and community engagement.

III. Employment and Assignment of SROs

- [Law Enforcement Agency Name] agrees to provide an SRO to [School District Name].
- SROs will remain employees of [Law Enforcement Agency Name], and all costs associated with their employment will be addressed per this agreement.
- SROs shall complete training in trauma-informed practices, youth development, restorative justice, and cultural/linguistic competency prior to placement.
- To ensure relationship continuity, assigned SROs will serve a full academic year when possible.
- The SRO remains responsive to the command of [Law Enforcement Agency Name], yet respectful of the operations and policies governing the [School District Name].

IV. Duties and Responsibilities

A. School District Responsibilities

- Enforce school policies and student codes of conduct.
- Respond to student misconduct using a graduated response framework.
- Ensure staff utilize classroom- and school-based interventions before escalating to law enforcement involvement.
- Partner in annual training and MOU review processes.

B. SRO Responsibilities

- Provide mentoring, classroom presentations, and emergency response as needed.
- Refrain from involvement in standard disciplinary matters (e.g., tardiness, dress code violations).
- Engage only in cases involving criminal behavior or emergencies.
- Conduct any necessary arrests with dignity and trauma-informed care (e.g., avoid use of handcuffs when feasible).

V. Graduated Response to Student Behavior

The parties agree to implement a four-tiered response to student behavior, as outlined in the *Graduated Response Model Chart*, which prioritizes school-based interventions and limits the role of law enforcement to Level 4 (criminal conduct or emergencies).

Every level begins with a student conversation to explain the behavior, consequences, and next steps in the response model.

VI. Data Collection, Monitoring, and Reporting

- Both parties will collect and share data (consistent with FERPA and state laws) related to student disciplinary incidents, demographics, and interventions. Both parties will work in coordination to establish a streamlined data collection method and data sharing agreement to collect and analyze data required by R.I. Gen. Laws § 16-2-17 and produce an annual report to monitor the SRO program.
- Data shall be reviewed annually to identify any disparities and adjust practices as needed.
- The district will seek qualitative feedback from students and families regarding the SRO program.
- A community-facing summary report will be issued annually.

VII. Community Engagement and Oversight

- The school district will convene an annual public meeting to discuss the effectiveness of the SRO program and share findings from the annual report.
- Parents, students, and community stakeholders will be invited to participate in feedback and planning sessions related to school climate and safety.

VIII. Review and Amendment

- This MOU will be reviewed annually and revised as necessary based on data trends, stakeholder feedback, and changes in policy or staffing.
- Either party may propose amendments in writing, which must be approved by both parties.

IX. Signatures

Superintendent

[Name]

[School District Name]

Date: _____

Chief of Police / Designee

[Name]

[Law Enforcement Agency Name]

Date: _____

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