

Salem Youth Organizations Lead Efforts To Remove Police From Schools

By Levi Herrera-Lopez

Students in the Salem-Keizer School District are asking adults to imagine an approach to student safety that works for ALL students. More specifically, a number of current and former students are telling adults,

- The School Resource Officer (SRO) program does not keep them safe,
- Students of color, in particular, feel targeted by SROs,
- They want to change the systems that contribute to creating a school to prison pipeline in our schools, beyond just the SRO program,
- They want the SRO program to end, and instead investments to be made in student supports, restorative justice, and in the classroom; all of which contribute to greater student wellbeing, academic achievement, and attachment to school and community.

In this they are backed up by research from across the nation. For example, Everytown For Gun Safety's "Keeping Our Schools Safe: A Plan for Preventing Mass Shootings and Ending All Gun Violence in American Schools"¹ report says that,

"There is no research indicating that SROs prevent mass school shootings..."

"...Increasing armed presence in schools is associated with an increase in middle school discipline rates, a decrease in high school graduation rates, and a decrease in college enrollment..."

"...A program which increased exposure to police in high crime areas in New York City was associated with lowered educational performance of Black male students during the years in which it was in effect..."

And locally, no data has been presented in support of this program either. In fact, according to local law enforcement, most SROs spend as much as 40% of their time away from their assigned schools on much needed investigations². This means it is impossible for them to meet their desired goal of serving as mentors and teachers (of safety). And, according to available data from throughout the nation, even if they did, the impacts on students of color and students with disabilities would still be negative. Local students and families have brought complaints to the school district about an estimated 100-200 interactions with SRO's. Their stories are gut wrenching.

Salem-Keizer Schools have given SRO's the freedom to interrogate a student without the presence of their parenting adult or legal counsel. And our students are, regardless of their age or developmental stage, expected to understand the nuances of criminal and civil rights law when they speak to a law enforcement official. This is an alarming abuse of civil rights.

Youth from the LUS youth organization have been uplifting this topic over the past two decades. There is nothing reactionary about it. Sadly, a majority of our Salem-Keizer School Board has refused to listen to the community voices who've come before them and shared gut-wrenching experiences. In these public meetings, we've also heard the assertion that this is an attack on individual officers. It is not. But the research clearly shows that the SRO program itself has a negative impact on our most vulnerable students.

This doesn't mean police officers wouldn't be able to set foot on campus. They will, and should, be called upon when needed -- and remember, they already spend nearly half of their time away from their assigned building. And the reason they do, is because they are often dealing with abuse investigations. This is needed work, but nowhere is it written or mandated that it be done by SROs. Instead, why not create a specific unit to focus on this work? In my personal opinion, this is something that should find much support from all sectors of the community.

On June 9th, the Salem Keizer School Board listened to more than three hours of public testimony before the school board delayed the budget vote. Public testimony overwhelmingly asked the board to end contracts with local law enforcement agencies. The district spends roughly \$1 million to station 11 officers in our schools. They are being asked to spend that money on more mental health support or education services.(3)

The community has told law enforcement over the past two decades to get tough on these kids; to discipline them so they learn to be good citizens; and if they won't, to lock them up and throw away the key. In order for public education to work for the good of our community, it needs to work for the good of all of our children. Another generation of students who feel unsafe in our schools are, yet again, rising up and telling us they are not safe. What we are doing is not making them safe. It is hurting them. If an intervention is unsafe for some students, then we must change it. Period.

The Salem-Keizer School Board has refused to listen to the concerns of this new generation of youth leaders, thus far. Your help is needed to amplify the voices of these youth. Please email your comments to:

Board Chair Chandragiri (Chandragiri_Satya@salkeiz.k12.or.us),

Vice-Chair Bethell (Bethell_Danielle@salkeiz.k12.or.us),

to the general public comment address for the Salem-Keizer School Board

(publiccomments@salkeiz.k12.or.us),

And to Superintendent Christy Perry (Perry_Christy@salkeiz.k12.or.us).

Please help spread awareness and build additional support among your networks to get the School Board to listen to the demands to remove SRO's from our schools, to stop spending our education dollars on unneeded police presence, and to reinvest those dollars in more meaningful ways.

You can find the contact information for all relevant persons at the following webpages:

<https://salkeiz.k12.or.us/schoolboard/>

<https://www.keizer.org/city-council>

<https://www.cityofsalem.net/city-council>

And follow Latinos Unidos Siempre (L.U.S.) Youth Organization on Facebook (@LUSsalem) to stay informed about this and other youth-led work to bring social justice and equity to our community

Footnotes:

1 - Here's the link to read or download the entire report, which contains a large number of references to additional research and data. These quotes appear mostly in section 6 of this report:

<https://everytownresearch.org/reports/keeping-our-schools-safe-a-plan-to-stop-mass-shootings-and-end-all-gun-violence-in-american-schools/>

2 - SRO Roundtable conversation hosted by Jackie Leung, current candidate for Oregon House District 19 on her Facebook page (@JackieForOregon), published on June 22nd, 2020; attended by Lieutenant Debbie Aguilar, Salem PD

3- Rachel Alexander, "Should police stay in Salem-Keizer schools? Here's what local citizens are saying.", Salem Reporter, June 12, 2020