



British Columbia's
Office of the Human Rights
Commissioner

NOVEMBER 24, 2022

Suzanne Hoffman, CEO
BC School Trustees Association
4th Floor – 1580 West Broadway
Vancouver, BC, V6J 5K9

Via Email: shoffman@bcsta.org

Re: School Liaison Officer programs

Dear Suzanne Hoffman and British Columbia School Trustees,

As part of my statutory responsibility to promote and protect human rights in the province, I am writing regarding the continued use of School Liaison Officers (SLOs) in our schools. My legislative mandate extends across the province, including municipal governing bodies, and I write in my capacity under s.47.12(1)(c) of the *Human Rights Code*, which provides that “The commissioner is responsible for promoting and protecting human rights, including by... making recommendations or using other means the commissioner considers appropriate to prevent or eliminate discriminatory practices, policies and programs.”

As I’m sure you are aware, Indigenous, Black and other marginalized students—as well as their parents and communities—have raised significant concerns about the harm caused by having police in schools.

Last year, in an effort to better understand both the positive and negative impacts of SLOs, my Office funded (through a grant) [research on the state of school liaison officer programs in Canada](#), conducted by Dr. Kanika Samuels-Wortley, assistant professor with the Institute of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Carleton University. I invite each of you to review her findings, which include:

- Only a few peer-reviewed studies have examined Canadian school liaison programs, and these employ small, non-random samples or have other methodological limitations that render their conclusions suggestive rather than definitive.
- The literature on SLOs in Canada tends to focus on the perspectives or opinions of police personnel rather than students. An extensive review of the Canadian literature revealed no peer-reviewed studies that explore the impacts on marginalized students. Thus, as noted by the Ontario Association of Chiefs of Police, Canadian SLO literature maintains a “race-

absent” approach that ultimately fails to explore the systemic challenges faced by Indigenous, Black and other racialized students.¹

- The much more robust body of American research finds that SLOs make marginalized students feel less safe at school, contributing to a sense of criminalization and surveillance. Furthermore, the impacts go far beyond perception of safety. Researchers have shown that SLOs discipline Black students and students with disabilities at disproportionately high rates in the United States. Unfortunately, British Columbia lacks the disaggregated data to understand whether this is true of our officers as well.
- Overall, the research across jurisdictions suggests that students generally feel safe at school regardless of whether an SLO is embedded in their school. Some of the most methodologically sound research concludes there is no evidence to support the notion that SLO programs make schools safer.

Clearly there is an immediate need for research conducted in British Columbia that centres the experience of marginalized students and employs high-quality evaluation strategies. I have written to the Minister of Education and the Minister of Public Safety and Solicitor General urging them to commission this research without delay, and I have also recommended that the provincial government guarantee funding for civilian alternatives to SLOs – civilian coaches, youth counsellors, substance use educators, restorative justice initiatives, etc. – so that no school district feels it is forced to rely on uniformed officers to provide services that should be delivered through the education system.

In the meantime, marginalized students, parents and communities are raising concerns that call into question the legitimacy of a police presence in our schools. I applaud those school boards who, after considering the available evidence and alternatives, have joined a movement of boards across Canada in ending their SLO programs.

Nevertheless, SLO programs continue in many school districts. At this moment, the Vancouver School Board (VSB) is considering bringing back a “revised and reimagined” SLO program over the objections of marginalized voices.² It is troubling that the VSB motion implies, without evidence, that SLOs are necessary for school and community safety and that tweaks to the SLO construct will be sufficient to address community concerns of harm and discrimination.³

In November 2021, my office released a [report on systemic racism in policing](#), based on what we understand to be the most extensive research ever conducted on policing data in Canada.⁴ The data showed the highly disproportionate impact of certain policing practices on Indigenous, Black and other racialized people. For example, in Vancouver, Indigenous men are 17.3 times more likely to be arrested than their presence in the population would predict. In Nelson, Black people are 4.7 times more likely to appear in mental health incidents involving the police than their presence in the population would predict. I offer these examples to show that the presence of police in our communities impacts different racialized groups differently, which supports the finding in the U.S.

¹ Ontario Association of Chiefs of Police. “Statement: School Resource Officer Programs.” Posted July 20, 2020. <https://www.oacp.ca/en/news/statement-school-resource-officer-programs.aspx>

² “Dozens to speak for and against return of police to Vancouver schools.” CBC News. November 23, 2022. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/vsb-school-liaison-officers-1.6661081>

³ Vancouver DPAC [@VanDPAC]. November 21, 2022. “Vancouver School Board @VSB39 releases School Officer Liaison Program Motion just 4 hours before delegations are set to speak to it.” Twitter. <https://mobile.twitter.com/VanDPAC/status/1594836772756000772>

⁴ See p.59 of the report for recommendations concerning SLOs.

literature that SLO programs often make racialized students feel *less* safe rather than meeting their goals of increasing student safety.

Out of respect for the rights of our students, I strongly recommend that all school districts end the use of SLOs until the impact of these programs can be established empirically. For school boards who choose not to take this step, it is incumbent on you to produce independent evidence of a need for SLOs that cannot be met through civilian alternatives and to explain the actions you are taking to address the concerns raised by Indigenous, Black and other marginalized communities.

I know that we share the goal of creating safe and inclusive schools that uphold human rights. I appreciate your attention to these important issues.

I ask that the BC School Trustees Association share this letter with all school trustees in the province as soon as possible. To support my commitment to public accountability and responsibility to serve the people of British Columbia, this letter will also be made public.

Sincerely,



Kasari Govender
Human Rights Commissioner

CC: The Hon. Jennifer Whiteside, M.L.A.
Minister of Education

The Hon. Mike Farnworth, M.L.A.
Minister of Public Safety and Solicitor General