

**FEBRUARY 3, 2025**

The Honourable Lisa Beare, MLA, Minister of Education and Child Care, and;  
The Honourable Garry Begg, MLA, Minister of Public Safety and Solicitor General  
PO Box 9282 Stn Prov. Govt  
Victoria BC V8W 9J7

Via email

**Re: School Police Liaison Officers**

Dear Minister Beare and Minister Begg,

Congratulations on your appointments as Minister of Education and Child Care and Minister of Public Safety & Solicitor General, respectively. I look forward to working with you both of in these roles.

As you may know, over the past several years, I have engaged extensively on the topic of School Police Liaison Officers (SPLOs). I am writing because I believe the failure of the Provincial Government to fund research to develop evidence on which to base its SPLO approach, as I have been calling for over three years, is contrary to its human rights obligations and undermines its stated values to combat racism in our communities and improve public safety. Below, I summarize my past statements and reiterate my calls for action.

While decisions about SPLO programs must remain within the jurisdiction of individual school boards, I believe the Province has a vital role to play in ensuring that regional governing bodies—including school boards and police boards—have the necessary evidence to make human rights-based policy decisions. This is of particular importance given the recent developments in the Victoria area regarding SPLOs and the growing polarization in that community. The firing of the SD61 School Board on January 30, aside from directly undermining the Province's previous statements on the authority of school boards, effectively makes SPLO programs mandatory across the province. This further bolsters the Province's responsibility to fulfil my recommendations to invest in research to support these policy decisions.

The politicization surrounding this issue raises strong feelings on all sides, so I want to start with our shared goal: we all want our schools to be safe places for our young people to learn and thrive. The key question is, what does the evidence show to be the best way to achieve that goal?

Summary of past correspondence

Since publishing our report [\*\*\*Equity is Safer: Human rights considerations for policing reform in British Columbia\*\*\*](#) in 2021, I have been calling for the implementation of the following recommendation:

School boards should end school liaison officer (SLO) programs unless they can demonstrate an evidence-based need for them that cannot be met through other means. In making this

assessment, school boards must centre the impact of continuing SLO programs on Indigenous, Black and other student populations.

The psychosocial and educational roles of SLOs should be re-assigned to civilians with experience in coaching and leading other extracurricular activities, child and youth counselling, trauma-informed practice, sexual assault prevention, substance use education and bullying prevention. The funds and resources which would otherwise go to SLO programs should be redirected to civilians to fulfill these roles.

In my letter of June 14, 2022, to Ministers Whiteside and Farnworth, I elaborated on the need for evidence-based decision making, stating:

I recommend that your ministries jointly fund a provincial study of SLOs that centres the perspectives of marginalized students and employs evaluation strategies that lead to independent, credible, definitive, and externally valid findings. [...]

I also recommend accelerating the collection and use of disaggregated demographic data to understand if marginalized students are subject to higher rates of disciplinary measures such as suspensions and expulsions, regardless of SLO involvement. [...]

On November 24, 2022, I wrote to all school districts across British Columbia. In that letter, I said,

Out of respect for the rights of students, I strongly recommend that all school districts end the use of SLOs until the impact of these programs can be established empirically.” Adding, “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 wrote the Ministries again on July 24, 2023. I had been encouraged by the response I had received from Minister Farnworth that made clear your government was prepared to move ahead with my recommendation for further research into SLOs, recognized the importance of the perspectives and experiences of people from historically marginalized communities, emphasized that school districts must each consider the unique needs within their jurisdictions in exercising their authority over SPLO program decisions, and acknowledged that research plays an important role in decisions around maintaining or implementing SLO programs. However, in my response I note the continued lack of follow-through on the commitment to conduct research and the explanation from senior staff at the Ministry that cost was an obstacle to conducting the research. I note:

However, given the resources at your disposal compared to the cost of a single research project, I consider this an issue of will and not of funds. I first recommended this research in November 2021, and I believe it is past time that funding is formally set aside for it.

I received a response from Minister Farnworth on April 10, 2024, more than eight months later and after further follow up from my staff. In it, the Ministry indicated that the recommended research would not be conducted due to “limited resources available for public safety research”.

#### Continued call for evidence-based decision making

I continue to call for the Province to provide a factual basis for its decisions on SPLO programs.

Evidence-based policy is more effective and more likely to avoid bias, stereotypes and reinforcement of systemic discrimination. The debate on police in schools has been muddied by misinformation and misunderstandings, fear-mongering and tenuous claims about the relationship between the program



and children's safety have proliferated. For example, our team at BC's Office of the Human Rights Commissioner (BCOHRC) has reviewed the data from 2015 to 2024 made available by police in the Victoria area, and it shows no clear correlation between an increase in gang activity in schools and the end of the SPLO program. Victoria and Esquimalt police data show that callouts to elementary schools in SD61 between 2015 and 2024 have remained relatively stable, reaching a high in 2020, while police callouts to high schools have decreased between 2015 and 2024.

The decision to fire SD61 board members—and effectively make SPLO programs mandatory across the province—was ostensibly based on concerns about student safety, and yet the lack of transparency in this process belies a commitment to evidence-based decision-making. If the Ministry or Police Board has data in their possession demonstrating that there is an increase in gang or other criminal activity in schools or how the apparent increased gang activity in the school district is related to the presence of SPLOs—including to the cessation of the Victoria and Oak Bay SPLO program—I urge you to release it. With no publicly available evidence to either show that SPLO programs are effective in *preventing* harm to our young people or that they are not themselves the *cause* of harm, it is difficult to see this decision as being a principled one or indeed, as anything other than playing politics.

Our research for [Equity is Safer](#) shows significant racial disparities in policing affecting Indigenous and Black people, and people of West Asian or Arab descent. In Victoria, recent data released by police shows a disproportionate use of force against Indigenous and Black people.<sup>1</sup> Given these numbers and experiences, we know that Indigenous, Black and other racialized children are witnessing their communities be disproportionately impacted by negative interactions with police—and therefore may themselves have well-founded fears about the police. Though one of the stated aims of SPLO programs is to counteract these fears and humanize policing amongst disproportionately affected groups, there is no non-anecdotal evidence supporting claims these outcomes are occurring, and the available anecdotal evidence has not been analyzed or researched.

If we discover (through B.C. based research that centres the voices of marginalized youth and their families) that SPLO programs create more harm than they prevent, we must build up educational supports to replace them. If we discover these programs are as valuable as proponent organizations suggest, we can act accordingly. It is difficult for me to understand what the objection to implementing this modest and low-cost recommendation might be. This is a call to action that could unite all of us: who among us doesn't want to know what actually keeps our kids the safest?

To be clear, ending or revising SPLO programs does not entail hindering or limiting the role of police when it comes to emergencies, investigations, or responses to criminal activity in or around schools. On the contrary, enforcing the law is an appropriate role for the police. What is being called into question is the benefit of the role of police when the objective is simply to build relationships with children and youth, and if it outweighs the potential harms.

**In short, there are significant gaps in the evidence supporting SPLOs. There is a need for research in the Canadian context that centers the experience of marginalized students. We simply don't have enough research to say definitively one way or another whether they will help keep our young people safe and thriving. The Province has an obligation to fill this gap.**

#### Next Steps

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<sup>1</sup> <https://vicpd.ca/2025/01/15/vicpd-use-of-force-data-2018-2023/>; <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/victoria-police-disproportionate-use-of-force-indigenous-1.7435068>



It has been three years since I recommended the provincial government gather the needed evidence, yet no action has been taken to conduct high-quality research on current and recently ended SPLO programs that centres Indigenous, Black and other acutely affected student populations, nor to build up viable educational supports to replace them. Research funded by PSSG entitled *Addressing the Effectiveness and Efficiency of School Liaison Officers in BC: A Qualitative Study of School Liaison Officers and School District Administrators* did not engage with students, thus replicating the same methodological problems as other Canadian research. And yet, without the benefit of this data or any other effective evaluation of SPLO programs, outside the normal democratic processes, and without fulfilling its human rights obligations to ensure that public services do not perpetuate systemic discrimination, the provincial government has now taken the extraordinary step of effectively mandating SPLO programs.

Therefore, I reiterate the need for your Ministries to fund a provincial study of SPLOs that centres the perspectives of marginalized students and employs evaluation strategies that lead to independent, credible, definitive, and externally valid findings. As the Esquimalt and Songhees First Nations have pointed out, meaningful consultation and collaboration with First Nations is essential to good governance on these issues, and to fulfilling the Province's legal obligations, particularly in relation to Indigenous-specific SPLOs. In addition to consultation and cooperation with nations and other impacted Indigenous communities, the experiences of all impacted learners and their families must be respected and the rights of Indigenous, Black, other racialized and disabled children must be prioritized.

To protect the safety and human rights of children, and to bridge the gap between people on each side of this issue, I encourage you to act now. Please do not hesitate to call on me and my Office if you require more information or support as you consider these issues, as I know our ultimate goals to keep our children safe remain aligned. To support my commitment to public accountability and responsibility to serve the people of British Columbia, this letter may also be made public.

Sincerely,



**Kasari Govender**, Commissioner  
BC's Office of the Human Rights Commissioner

cc: The Honourable Terry Yung, Minister of State for Community Safety and Integrated Services, [Terry.Yung@gov.bc.ca](mailto:Terry.Yung@gov.bc.ca)  
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