

Depolicing Schools

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During this moment of nation-wide opposition to police killings of Black men and women, we should consider ending two longstanding NYC public school security policies – the NYPD’s control of the city’s School Security Agents, and the imposition of metal detectors in selected city schools. So kudos to Chalkbeat’s Alex Zimmerman for reporting on the demands to remove more than 5,000 School Security Agents from the NYPD and return them to the jurisdiction of the city’s Education Department.

Some history may help contextualize these school policing policies. During the late sixties, community control activists fought for self-determination for public schools serving Black and Latinx students, including the power to set academic and discipline policies. But the movement extended beyond education as activists sought control over policing policy in their communities. After a protracted struggle, the city’s political leadership and the teacher’s union suppressed the movement for community control, and the state legislature enacted a limited administrative decentralization policy for the city’s schools.

In 1969 the Board of Education enlisted the NYPD to train a cohort of school-based safety personnel. The Board subsequently formed a Division of School Safety, increased the numbers of school safety officers, and negotiated the placement of a limited number of NYPD regular officers in a selected subset of city schools. By the 1990s, the cohort of school safety officers had grown to several thousand personnel. In 1998, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani’s administration transferred the Division of School Safety from the Board of Education to the NYPD, in keeping with the regime’s overall tilt towards repressive policing policies. Thousands of school safety personnel became uniformed School Security Agents (SSAs) hired, trained and supervised by the police department. Research studies and student testimony suggest that interactions between students and SSAs that ultimately induct students into the school-to-prison pipeline often result from bias, stereotyping or misperceptions of student behavior by SSAs. (For a searing analysis of the coercive controls imposed on NYC students by the police and the SSAs, see Kathleen Nolan’s *Police in the Hallways, Discipline in a Bronx High School*, University of Minnesota Press, 2016.)



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In March, 2018, Mayor DeBlasio ordered the removal of some 200 police officers assigned to patrol selected city schools, arguing that the 5,000 plus SSAs were fully capable of maintaining order and discipline throughout the school system. Outraged attacks from conservative news sources and social media condemned the Mayor's action. Opponents accused the Mayor of sacrificing the safety of the city's public school students to burnish his liberal credentials. Critics predicted an onslaught of school violence and disruption.

A little more than two years later, many New Yorkers may not even remember that uniformed, armed police once patrolled some of the city's schools. Rather than a wave of school disruption, data on student suspensions and school arrests have registered a steady downward curve, a trend that began late in the Bloomberg years and has continued throughout the DeBlasio administration. (Part of this reduction resulted from more restrictive regulations governing arrests and suspensions, as well as the introduction of alternative discipline and restorative justice measures.) The steady decline of incidents of violence and disruption in our public schools mirrors the city's overall crime reduction trends that have made New York one of the nation's safest cities.

Since the city successfully managed the removal of armed police from our public schools, it may be time to consider severing the NYPD control of the SSAs and returning them to the jurisdiction of the Department of Education. It may also be the right moment to consider ending the imposition of metal detectors in selected city schools. Currently some 90 secondary schools serving predominantly Black and Latinx students require thousands of those students to spend considerable wasted time lining up, sometimes in rain, snow or freezing weather, to be scanned by metal detectors before they begin their school day. Other secondary schools are selected for random and unannounced temporary scanning procedures.

It is not clear, given the limitations of the data the NYPD releases, whether the potential weapons confiscated through scanning are worth the manifold indignities that scanning procedures impose on our students. Our free speech and free movement rights are currently jeopardized by the out-of-control abuse of protestors by the city's police. We should begin to reassert some public management rather than police control of our city's public safety measures by limiting policing in schools and ending the humiliation that scanning imposes on our public school students.