

## Press Clippings 10-15-20

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### Elgin police defend use of school resource officers in U-46

By: James Fuller



Elgin Police Chief Ana Lalley describes the role of school resource officers as that of "teachers, mentors and counselors."

Elgin police officers spent Wednesday night explaining and defending the presence of resource officers in local U-46 schools.

The city council is debating the future of the school resource officer program, with seven Elgin City Council members taking a closer look at a disparity in the number of Black and Hispanic students arrested at local schools.

Police Chief Ana Lalley defended the nearly 40-year history of school resource officers Wednesday night.

Police in Elgin schools wear body cameras and have more specialized training than the average department officer, Lalley said. And they put that training to use in developing relationships with students and parents that play key roles in keeping area youth out of the juvenile justice system.

"Not having a school resource officer in the school is not going to prevent officers from responding to the school," Lalley said. "But they are not going to have the luxury of the relationships, the trust, the knowledge of the staff, knowledge of the parents."

Lalley described the role of officers in the schools to be that of "teachers, mentors and counselors."

As of six years ago, when a change was made to a new intervention program featuring conflict resolution, school resource officers do not enforce school conduct violations when no potential crime is involved. They do not engage in drug or weapon searches unless notified by school staff that drugs or weapons were found. And Lalley emphasized the positive impact of reducing gang activities in school hallways. She said Elgin police have identified only 15 gang members in the city that are younger than 16. Two of those gang members don't even attend local schools.

"In 1996, the schools and the gang issues were very different than they are today," Lalley said. "Our partnership has allowed for those numbers to continuously go down."

The defense didn't impress several citizens who watched the presentation in the city council chambers.

Matthew Thomas, whose Facebook profile identifies him as a master's degree candidate in social work, said the data he obtained on arrests for Elgin Unit District 46 schools with a police presence show Black students tallied as much as 52.5% of the arrests (in 2019) despite being about 6.3% of the total student population. White students, who are about 26% of the school population never represented more than 3% of the arrests.

"It's obvious the non-white populations are disproportionately targeted by the school resource officers," Thomas said.

He encouraged the city council to let the existing teachers, mentors and counselors in the school act as teachers, mentors and counselors instead of police officers. School district officials have publicly recognized a disproportionate number of arrests of both Black and Hispanic students is occurring.

Lalley presented stats specific to Elgin juvenile arrests, including those by school resource officers, for the past five years. Those numbers showed the number of arrests dropping from a high point of 510 arrests in 2010 to a steady drop toward 234 arrests in 2019.

"The numbers are going down," Lalley said. "When it comes to why is that happening, I think it comes back to the restorative justice approach and some of the programs implemented by U-46 and by the (police) department."

Elgin, Larkin and Central high schools represented 150 of the juvenile arrest reports in local schools the last five years.

Kimball, Ellis, Abbott and Larsen middle schools accounted for 72 juvenile arrest reports in the last five years.

Many of the arrests resulted in multiple criminal charges. Most of the charges involved battery stemming from students fighting.

The 222 juvenile arrest reports since 2015 involved 353 total juvenile offenders. Black students represented 27% of the offenders. White and Hispanic students each represented 36% of the offenders. And Asian students represented the remaining 1%.

Lalley said Elgin schools often have a higher number of minority students than the school district at large. For instance, 72 of the 101 arrests at Elgin High School in the last five years were Hispanic students, but Hispanics represent 75% of the student population at that school. Districtwide, about 55% of the student population is Hispanic.

Black and Hispanic students also comprise 61% of the victims of the crimes. White students were the victims 39% of the time. There were also 32 instances where school resources officers were the reported victim.

City officials told the council they were not yet seeking a decision from the council on the future of the program Wednesday night.