



“Unthinkable”

A History of Policing in New York City Public Schools & the Path toward Police-Free Schools

Despite being named “unthinkable” by officials in the 1950s, for more than two decades the New York City Police Department (NYPD) has controlled policing inside the City’s public schools. Much has been written about the 1998 transfer of school safety authority from the school system to police under former Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, but very little about what accelerated that process or the landscape that preceded it.

This report provides a condensed political history of policing and schooling in New York City, and offers a frame for using this history to move forward a future of police-free schools. This overview collects popular reporting since the early 1900s, chronicling the shifting of school safety – referring at times to police officers assigned to targeted schools, and at other times to “security aides” employed by the Board of Education (BOE).

In reviewing this long history, we came upon many familiar talking points. One letter to the editor from 1910 insisted students refuse to listen knowing that teachers are powerless to punish.¹ This framing persists today, as appeals to “classroom chaos” so often seek to justify the criminalization of youth.²

This history is especially relevant now. The City recently announced a newly amended memorandum of understanding (the document that outlines the relationship between police and schools), and Council Members have publicly raised restoring the responsibility of school safety to the Department of Education. This history is also essential to understanding the current student-led movement to redefine school safety to mean restorative justice and ending the practice of arresting and issuing summonses to students in school.

Today, there are 5,322 School Safety Agents and 189 uniformed police officers budgeted for the NYPD’s School Safety Division. Over the last decade advocates have pointed out that our School Safety Division is larger than the police departments of Washington DC, Dallas, Boston, or Las Vegas, and outnumbers the Department of Education’s staffing of school guidance counselors and social workers.³

These are not the only police in schools. Most police activity in schools is carried out by police officers outside of the control of the School Safety Division. For example, in 2018, 74% of all school-based arrests were conducted by additional police in and around our schools – either a Detective from the Detective Bureau or a Patrol Officer.⁴

This report also documents the ballooning budget allocations sustaining school policing over time. What was a \$1.5 million budget request in 1968 (the equivalent of a little over \$11 million in 2019) is now a \$431 million annual expenditure for school policing. The most recent city budget for police in schools is, not surprisingly, the highest it has ever been and a startling response to growing evidence demonstrating how problematic current school policing is as a safety strategy.

We conclude with a call for deep structural change. Rather than continuing to tinker with a system that has failed to address the underlying conditions that lead to conflict and violence, and routinely compromises students’ access to education, we must:

- Disrupt the normalization of police in schools;
- Transform fiscal priorities;
- Create the conditions that make removing police a reality; and
- Center bold demands.



Acknowledgements

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Mission

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Early History

The first children's court was established in Chicago at the turn of the century, with that reform effort soon after reaching New York City. Some of the first mentions of a relationship between policing and schooling emphasized the positioning of these courts as an extension of school discipline. In 1901, the New York State Legislature passed the Revised Charter, reviving local school boards, and centralizing the Board of Education's professional staff under a single city superintendent. This early era brought a social-work approach, later known as "progressive education," where the school was charged with responsibilities which previously belonged to the family, the settlement house, and the community – responsibilities including discipline. During this period, police were not placed within City schools, and the school system considered what strategies it could employ to control youth behavior, including corporal punishment, separate schools, and dedicated curricula.⁵

1900

The State Board of Charities adopted a resolution approving the establishment of children's courts in the City of New York, a reform centered on keeping children apart from adults.⁶

1902

The new Children's Court was opened for its first session. On that first day the court heard claims of theft, gambling, being out late at night, playing ball in the street, and throwing sticks and stones.⁷

1906

Judge W.H. Olmsted said of the Children's Courts, "A very large proportion of the youngsters arraigned ought not to be brought here at all," claiming that the City's Board of Education (BOE) looked to the court to do its work with regard to school-based discipline.⁸

1907

Gen. George W. Wingate, the founder of the Public Schools Athletic League, created a system where boys elected their peers to be "policemen" for the league, patrolling the athletic fields to preserve order, and placing peers under arrest. Arrests would not involve imprisonment, but prevented the person from participation in the league or entering any of the athletic fields.⁹

According to a special committee of the BOE investigating whether to restore corporal punishment in schools, there was a strong feeling among superintendents, principals, and teachers that it should be permitted, arguing it is impossible to maintain order in the schools. At the same time, the New York City Teachers' Association arranged an address by Justice Wilkin of the Children's Court to discuss how enlarging the powers of the court could solve the question of student discipline.¹⁰

1913

It is reported that there was one truant officer for every 7,000 or 8,000 children, and some political will to reduce that ratio to 1 for every 4,000.¹¹

1917

Less than three weeks before the Mayoral election, over 1,000 students in NYC protest against the Gary system, a new "work-study-play" plan for schooling that emphasized manual labor and training. Critics claimed the program targeted children of poor parents, while unions disparaged the opportunity for training workers' children "to be efficient cogs in the industrial machine." Mothers are reported to have attempted to prevent protesting children from being taken to the police station.¹²

1920

The Chairman of the BOE's Committee on Buildings and Sites submits a letter to the City Superintendent of Schools, describing continued vandalism by youth despite police efforts, and requesting that parents be held accountable for damage.¹³

1925

Teachers' complaints to a School Survey Committee included suggestions for handling the problems of discipline, such as designating a school in each district as a corrective school to deal with "problem" children.¹⁴

1926

City Police Commissioner McLaughlin urged parents to encourage their children to take a more active part in school athletics, as an instrument against "juvenile crime."¹⁵

1928

The report of the City's Baumes Crime Commission recommended that the school curriculum be adjusted to meet the "special needs of delinquents."¹⁶

A Class for Teachers at the Academy

Concerns about “juvenile delinquency” continued in the wake of reforms to the court system, inspiring a new police/educator collaboration, decentering educators as experts on the behaviors of young people in schools and heightening the emphasis on a criminal justice response. Meanwhile, the Depression shifted the landscape of the school system: funding was curtailed, cutting programs, teaching positions and salaries, as class sizes grew, and evening schools and summer schools were ended. These cuts in services occurred at a time when more students stayed in school longer due to the lack of jobs for young people. As part of this new partnership between teachers and police, the City began training educators at the police academy, using a criminal justice lens to instruct teachers on how to manage the classroom.¹⁷

1933

A class was started for City school teachers at the Police Academy to train them to “fight juvenile delinquency.” Police instructors coordinated the courses and teachers were instructed on how to combat juvenile delinquency from the police standpoint.¹⁸

1934

A group of 650 New York public and parochial school teachers completed a four-month course at the Police Academy. Deputy Chief Inspector John J. O’Connell, Dean of the Police Academy, who had been in charge of the courses, reported that he looked forward to a planned cooperative effort in which both the police and the schools would have a share in working to prevent juvenile delinquency over the next twenty years. The work, he said, “would go forward with a broadening scope.”¹⁹

1935

Dr. Harold G. Campbell, Superintendent of Schools, wrote to all elementary and junior high school principals requesting that they designate teachers to represent their schools in courses on safety and juvenile delinquency to be taught by veteran police officers.²⁰

1939

It is reported that the Juvenile Aid Bureau of the Police Department guided teaching staff in the prevention of delinquency; police officers visited City schools and taught children how to avoid accidents, and teachers’ payrolls and pay checks were distributed monthly from police precinct station houses.²¹

Growing Attention to “Delinquency”

As the media increasingly covered public dissatisfaction with young people’s behavior, the City shifted away from court-based responses, encouraging police to work with school administrators. Despite concerns about safety in schools, the City’s Superintendent explicitly rejected placing police there.

1941

The New York City school system announced a new approach to “juvenile delinquency,” whereby students were treated in a sympathetic, considerate manner. Characterized as an effort to reduce the use of court and jail, reports state that previously court action almost automatically followed any disruptive behavior. Under the new approach, the arresting officer would record the name and school of the student, and the student and officer would report the interaction to the principal to be responded to with the resources of the school system. It is reported that the procedure proved successful and met the approval of school officials.²²

1942

City Superintendent of Schools, Dr. John E. Wade, announced the appointment of two committees to inquire into whether “delinquency” in the schools had increased. This followed a resolution passed by the Teachers Alliance and a letter sent to Police Commissioner Valentine by the New York Teachers Guild requesting more police protection for teachers “who might be threatened by students or intruders.”²³

1943

A six-point program to respond to the citywide “delinquency problem” was outlined by the principal of Samuel J. Tilden High School. This included a substantial reduction in class size, full utilization of social service agencies, use of police to keep intruders out of the schools, enlargement of the Bureau of Child Guidance (a training school for child guidance work, the equivalent of a contemporary social work school), full utilization of the city’s recreational facilities, and the enlargement of the adult education program.²⁴

1945

The Police Department and the Board of Education considered building up programs to “combat teenage crime,” specifically how to tie in the program of the Education Department with that of the Police Athletic League.²⁵

1948

Reports indicate the occasional stationing of uniformed police officers at a Bronx school, but not as a fixed post. In response, the Superintendent of Schools, Dr. William Jansen said “We have never approved the use of police during regular school sessions because we believe that there is no need of such authority in the more than 700 schools in the school system. We found it completely unnecessary, even during the war, to ask for, or make, any such arrangements for school control.”²⁶

School Safety as Traffic Safety

Reports begin to define “school safety” as a concept focused on ensuring student safety traveling to and from school, given the growing use of car transportation in the City. What started as a civic engagement and leadership opportunity for young people later became the framework and professional title for police department employees policing students in their own schools.

1939

For five years children had been part of the “Safety Patrol,” helping other children with street crossings. There were 400 junior safety councils in schools, with approximately 10,000 students participating, and besides doing duty as safety patrols the members acted as monitors on landings, in corridors and on playgrounds.²⁷

1946

Reports indicate 12,500 students joined the Automobile Club of New York, serving as members of the “School Safety Patrol.”²⁸

1947

Mayor O’Dwyer sets “School Safety Patrol Day,” in tribute to the 12,500 children who help monitor school crossings.²⁹

1951

Mayor Impellitteri proclaimed a School Safety Patrol Week to honor the children who participate in patrol duty at street corners, guarding their peers against traffic accidents.³⁰

1954

Mayor Wagner held a Traffic Safety Conference and planned to staff 2,262 school crossings in the city with civilian guards to direct children at an estimated cost of \$2,150,000 a year. Civilians who qualify would take a four-day preparatory course at the Police Academy.³¹

1958

Police Commissioner Stephen P. Kennedy ordered the Police Department to “exert maximum effort” to protect the 1,000,000 city children who were expected to return to school that September. At that time the Commissioner had assigned more than 500 police officers to areas near the schools to augment existing police details and the 1,250 school crossing guards.³²

In the Wake of *Brown*

It is often cited that the first permanent assignment of law enforcement officers to schools occurred in 1953 in Flint, Michigan, as part of a community policing strategy to respond to segregation. Similarly, the Los Angeles School Police Department grew from a unit designed in 1948 to patrol schools in racially integrating neighborhoods. In New York City during the 1950s and leading up to the 1960s, the school system juggled concerns including public perception of youth as increasingly unmanageable, challenges around student retention, a teacher shortage, and mounting racial segregation. The growing attention to delinquency became enmeshed in the BOE's response to the conflicting demands around school integration, as claims of so-called discipline and safety concerns became strategies for white families and their allies to resist integration.³³

1954

The New York City Youth Board reported "delinquency" among children under 21 increased 18.5 percent between 1952 and 1953, the highest it had been since 1946. The Vice President of the BOE contended there was no connection between the reported growth and the school curriculum, declaring more funds are needed to reduce class size, hire more guidance personnel and psychologists to meet students' needs, and to improve the school program.³⁴

1955

A three-article series on problems of discipline and delinquency in the public schools took the position that "gross and criminal misbehavior" in the city schools was not a new phenomenon. Rather, many teachers believed that "the 'tough' schools of 1955 are nothing in comparison with those to which they were assigned, say, in 1935." However, a post-war trend of less respect of students for teachers was noted, including by the then-president of the BOE. It was also reported that when incidents occur in or near the schools, both education and police officials were likely to invoke arrest only as a last resort.³⁵

Later that year, Mayor Wagner asked the BOE's new Commission on Integration to submit to him recommendations for addressing school segregation.³⁶

1957

In Woodhaven, Queens, petitions were circulated by a "Committee for the Preservation of the Neighborhood Schools and Equity," expressing worry over bus and police problems.³⁷

1958

A reported outbreak of violence in public schools led the BOE to establish that all students charged with a violation of law involving violence or insubordination would be suspended from school. Previously, schools accepted students pending disposition of their cases.³⁸

1959

250 protestors from the Glendale-Ridgewood section of Queens marched at City Hall protesting Superintendent Theobald's decision to transfer students from overcrowded schools in Bedford-Stuyvesant to less crowded schools. Another point at issue was the transfer of a Police Captain out of a Glendale precinct after he was reported to have taken part in a meeting protesting the school transfers.³⁹

Meanwhile, a parent group reported a coordinated school boycott, protesting school conditions and the "inferior and substandard education in Harlem schools."⁴⁰

The Kings County Grand Jury

Leading up to the 1960s there was a highly publicized incident of violence in a Brooklyn school that fueled existing public concern over student behavior and how to maintain order among youth. Subsequently, a newly formed committee offered one of the earliest calls to station police officers in schools for the purpose of policing students. The proposal was denounced as “unthinkable” by the City’s superintendent of schools while the Commissioner of police called it “neither practical nor morally desirable.”

1957

At the direction of Kings County Judge Samuel S. Leibowitz, a Brooklyn grand jury was empaneled to investigate “crime and juvenile delinquency” in Brooklyn schools and how the BOE had responded – referred to as the “Kings County Grand Jury Investigating Lawlessness in Brooklyn Public Schools.” According to reports, this came after a high profile incident where a student in Thomas Jefferson High School threw liquid lye in a classroom. The grand jury was headed by a real estate broker and composed mainly of “businessmen and merchants.”⁴¹

One of the early recommendations called for the stationing of police officers in schools to patrol the corridors, the stairways and the recreation yard of schools or to establish a special school police force made up of retired police officers and firefighters who would serve for a few hours each day at schools in their own neighborhoods.⁴²

At that time, Superintendent of Schools Dr. William Jansen termed the plan “unthinkable” while Police Commissioner Stephen P. Kennedy described the assignment of a policeman to every school as “neither practical nor morally desirable.” The Police Commissioner described the proposal as being an inadequate immediate or long-range response to youth behavior at school, and constituted drastic action.⁴³

1958

It was reported that the BOE opposed the recommendation to station police at schools as it would surrender authority over students, but ultimately left the decision up to individual principals. Forty-one principals thereafter requested assistance.⁴⁴

Reports associated with the Kings County Grand Jury described thirty-nine policemen stationed at forty-one schools, although not necessarily inside the buildings. Most were assigned in February 1958, but others had been on duty for a year and a half. The Police Commissioner disclosed that, under an arrangement with the BOE, patrol officers were stationed in five schools: two schools in Brooklyn, two in Manhattan and one in Queens.⁴⁵

1960

By March of 1960, the Kings County Grand Jury ultimately suggested:

- Closer cooperation between school principals, the police, and the courts;
- A strong suspension policy for pupils;
- The expansion of special schools for “problem children;”
- Bonuses for teachers handling “problem children;”
- A reduction in the waiting period for psychiatric examination of pupils;
- State custodial schools similar to the youth-camp program in California;
- Legislation to permit children with poor school records to seek full-time employment at 15 rather than the legal age of 16.⁴⁶

Suppressing Student Unrest

The matter of maintaining student compliance in school grew complicated as the 1960s was marked by frequent student protest and organized discontent, leading to coordinated police response and increasing interactions between students and police in schools. Police officers were assigned to schools to suppress student organizing and movement building, and displayed police power as one tactic of preserving order in response to conflict in and around schools.

1962

The United Federation of Teachers assigned members to picket posts outside the city's schools, leading the Police Department to designate at least 1,200 uniformed officers to patrol school areas. Police officers regularly assigned to duty in school yards were ordered to be on their posts ninety minutes early. Multiple reports described students joining the teacher strikes and crowds of students being disbanded by heavy police presence.⁴⁷

1964

Scores of police occupied the area around John Jay High School in Park Slope, Brooklyn following the arrest of thirteen young people for fighting. Further large details of Transit Authority police occupied the subway stations and rode the subways that carried students to and from school. Meanwhile, the principal of Canarsie High School was said to have requested extra policemen in the school – “but only to allay the fears of parents.”⁴⁸

1966

Reports of fighting at John Adams High School in Ozone Park, Queens, led to the stationing of 24 patrol officers around the school. Meanwhile, in response to “racial tension” at Lafayette High School in Brooklyn, a police officer and eight four-person patrol cars were assigned to the area around in the school. The police then established a command post on the main floor of the school.⁴⁹

1968

Community members in Ocean Hill-Brownsville, Brooklyn protested the stationing of 1,000 police officers around schools in the neighborhood, including police standing inside barricades set up outside schools. In Red Hook, Brooklyn, the principal of an elementary school was escorted by police following protests demanding the principal's transfer.⁵⁰

In December, multiple student groups, including the Citywide Student Strike Committee, the African-American Students Association, the High School Coalition, and the Citywide High School Student Union, organized efforts to shut down high schools to demand student representation in policymaking and community control of schools. They were met with police repression in the form of mass arrests and, in one instance, a “wall of helmeted policemen awaiting them.” According to one report, three students mounted a light-pole base and unfurled a banner that read: “Student Strike Against Racist Teachers, Extra Time and Cops in Schools. Youth Against War and Fascism.”⁵¹

1969

100 students at Taft High School in the Bronx protested the suspension of a Black student for giving another student a copy of the *Black Student Union Press*, breaking a rule about giving out unauthorized material in the building. The protest resulted in the arrest of seven youths. At the time of the report, large police details were assigned to two other high schools, Andrew Jackson in Queens and Canarsie High School in Brooklyn. Forty police officers patrolled Canarsie high school and students had to pass police barricades set up in front of the building.

It was reported that the President of the BOE, John Doar, arranged a meeting with Police Commissioner Howard R. Leary to discuss school problems.⁵²

Creation of a School Security Force

Calls for community control combined with decades of mounting concern around preserving order in schools led to the creation of what was described as a citywide school security force for the first time. The public justification was a fear of unwelcome outsiders entering schools, though there is no doubt that City policymakers were interested in policing young people attending their own schools.

1968

Schools Superintendent Dr. Bernard E. Donovan, reacting to an incident of violence against a junior high school principal in the Clinton Hill section of Brooklyn (who had been allegedly approached by four men accusing him of keeping children outside despite sub-freezing temperatures), asked the BOE for an emergency allocation of \$1.25 million to establish a security force in the city's public schools.

Parent organizations in District 13 released a statement arguing the BOE "consistently closed its ears to the legitimate demands of the Black and Puerto Rican community." "Therefore," they wrote, "we must condemn the school system that denies our community the control necessary to educate and protect its children."⁵³

Superintendent Donovan recommended the creation of a new position of school security aide and said he would confer with the Police Commissioner in order to qualify aides as auxiliary police with limited powers of arrest. Superintendent Donovan's original proposal was controversial, with some groups asserting that the use of security guards would create a police climate in the schools.

By February, the BOE hired close to 700 people to help protect teachers and pupils from intruders. The Board decided to employ school aides assigned to security duties rather than set up a special auxiliary police force. The total cost would be \$1.5 million annually, staffed by people from the communities in which the schools were situated.⁵⁴

1969

Superintendent Donovan ordered every high school and junior high school in the city to name a security official as part of a plan to stem increasing student disruptions. Those officials would be responsible for overseeing that school entrances were being watched, maintaining regular contact with the police, and working with parent associations.⁵⁵

Growth of School Police Powers

As school policing became an increasingly politically palatable response to community discontent, the BOE took steps to strengthen school security in a number of ways, including the growth of bureaucratic infrastructure. These shifts moved the city closer to cementing the relationship between police and school. By the mid-1970s, the City had nearly 1,000 security staff patrolling schools and equipped with the power to arrest students.

1969

By April, 80 security guards were assigned to 25 city schools, hired by the BOE and given special-patrolman status, meaning they had arrest power but were not police officers. This is a departure from the role of security aides.⁵⁶

1970

The BOE asked the City's Criminal Justice Coordinating Council for \$1.5 million to hire 300 additional security guards. At that time, the system had 300 guards. New Chancellor Harvey B. Scribner directed the City's high schools to tighten security and take other measures to promote safety. The directive included the following measures:

- Each principal should assign a supervisor to coordinate school security measures;
- Every student and staff member should be provided with some means of identification and should be required to carry it in school;
- All side doors to schools should be locked from the outside and capable of being opened from the inside;
- Principals should work closely with school groups and outside agencies and organizations to prevent disruptions;
- The principal should summon the police promptly when their aid is deemed necessary;
- Staff members who participate in activities threatening the safety, good order or normal operations of schools should be charged with conduct unbecoming a teacher; and
- The principal has the responsibility and authority to limit admission to the school building to those persons who have legitimate business within the building.⁵⁷

1971

The BOE and the United Federation of Teachers agreed to appoint, on a six-month-trial basis, a two-person team to advise principals at "violence-prone" schools on security systems. In March, the 380-person school guard force grew to 430. Since the start of that school year, 80 guards had been added to the system at a cost of \$1 million.⁵⁸

1972

The BOE created a new position of safety director for the city's public schools and appointed Eldridge Waith, a former commander of patrolmen in Harlem. Mr. Waith's appointment came at a time when the teacher's union has called in its contract demands for the hiring of more than 6,000 trained security guards—one for every 175 students—in addition to a mobile security patrol for each borough.⁵⁹

By the beginning of the new school year, a trained force of 300 student-service officers (the new designation for security guards with special patrolman status) were on duty in high schools, and 150 more were assigned to certain junior high schools. The new contract agreement between the BOE and the United Federation of Teachers called for the employment of 1,200 safety aides without special patrolman status, at a projected cost of \$6 million in the 1972-73 school year, with a salary of \$3 to \$4 an hour, and a five-day, five-hour training course at the BOE headquarters or at local schools.⁶⁰

1973

That January, there were more than 700 security officers assigned to high schools and decentralized community school districts, with a plan to add about 700 more by the end of February at a cost of \$7.5 million. By March, the City Council moved to transfer the authority to hire school guards from local school boards to the BOE. By September, there were then 1,424 guards on duty.⁶¹

1975

Reportedly due to the city's financial crisis and subsequent budget cuts, the number of school guards in the system was reduced from 1,948 to 970.⁶²

A Climbing Budget

The commitment to a school police force set in motion an unprecedented grab for public resources. By 1978 there was a Mayoral inquiry into shifting authority for school security from the Board of Education to the NYPD. At the same time, police and security in schools expanded to take on new forms, requiring more funding than ever. Within a decade, the number of guards patrolling schools doubled to 2,200.

1978

Outgoing BOE Chancellor Irving Anker requested from the Koch administration that police officers be stationed outside each of the city's 250 junior and senior high schools, but City Hall turned down his request. However, the Koch administration had been negotiating with lawyers for the BOE about the authority of police officers to take action in the schools, and whether principals must authorize police entry into a school and the relationship between the police and school security officers.

Further, the Koch administration had been looking into the possibility of bringing school security personnel under the charge of the Police Department.⁶³

1980

It is reported that a "Mobile Task Force" was reported as active for 18 months – a force of guards handling school disciplinary emergencies and patrolling select schools. At that time, there were 45 special guards altogether, 15 in each borough and 30 at headquarters, tasked with clearing hallways and stairwells, keeping watch at entry doors and conducting "sweeps to thwart students cutting classes."⁶⁴

1981

The BOE announced a plan to expand the number of security guards in schools when they opened in September – 1,100 security guards would be on duty in the high schools, compared with 786 the last September, and 420 in the middle schools, compared with 288 the year before. Further, 125 guards would be posted for the first time at the city's special-education facilities. New school guards hired by the Bureau of School Safety would receive 140 hours of training, 35 hours of which would involve courses in state-certified peace officer training. The guards' previous uniforms were replaced by blue blazers and gray slacks in an attempt to promote a friendlier atmosphere, according to Chancellor Frank Macchiarola.⁶⁵

Mayor Koch and Chancellor Macchiarola formed a special panel after the 1980-1981 school year – *The Mayor's Interagency Task Force on School Safety* – deciding that every public school would be required to establish a discipline code to list what the school considers to be misbehavior and the corresponding punishment. Until that point, some public schools had voluntarily drafted their own codes, but there had not been a citywide model nor were any schools required to have codes.⁶⁶

1982

The security force was enlarged by 455 members – numbering 1,705 and part of a \$24 million BOE security budget.⁶⁷

1986

The city budget included \$2.5 million for a new security guard at each of 95 elementary schools and two security guards to be deployed by each of the 32 school districts. The board had already employed 1,732 unarmed uniformed security guards at the junior high and high schools. \$2.4 million was ultimately provided. While all the city's 111 high schools had full-time school safety officers trained and salaried by the board, only 140 elementary schools had such guards.⁶⁸

1987

Reports indicate that the city school system employed 2,200 unarmed guards and had a budget of \$43 million for school safety.⁶⁹

Introduction of Metal Detectors

The drastic increase in police presence brought with it new surveillance systems, significantly altering the dynamics of authority in schools. In 1982 it was reported that students had been searched for weapons by security officers with hand-held metal detection equipment in about a dozen schools. In one case, the principal of Thomas Jefferson high school asked the Board of Education's security office to conduct a search of students after twelve young people had been suspended for possession of weapons.⁷⁰ Six years after these early reports, five schools participated in a pilot program using metal detectors, chosen largely because they had principals interested in what was described as a comprehensive security program. Students fought back against the policy, but it continued to expand, with detectors installed in more than 60 schools by 1994.

1982

Hundreds of students at Thomas Jefferson High School in East New York successfully protested an attempt to bring in metal detectors.⁷¹

1988

An experiment began at five high schools to search students with metal detectors.

The Director of the Office of School Safety at the BOE, Bruce A. Irushalmi, had been asked by the Schools Chancellor, Dr. Richard R. Green, to study the feasibility of using metal detectors. The chair of the Council Education Committee, Herbert E. Berman, introduced a bill that would require metal detectors in all of the city's almost 1,000 public schools, estimated to cost \$4 million.

A city officials' summit meeting resulted in a plan to install standing metal detectors in five high schools, later announced with great fanfare by Mayor Koch and others. When it was learned that it would cost \$9 million, it was scrapped.

The Schools Chancellor offered a scaled-down \$2.8 million version, under which 40 guards would use hand-held metal detectors to search for weapons at the five schools: The High School of Graphic Communication Arts in Manhattan, Evander Childs High School in the Bronx, Andrew Jackson High in Queens, and Prospect Heights High and William E. Grady High School in Brooklyn.⁷²

1989

The metal detector pilot program expanded to 10 additional high schools, with up to 100 schools receiving new outside patrols by a special security taskforce. At that time there were 2,200 full-time security officers assigned to schools, responsible to the BOE. Every junior high and high school, and half the elementary schools, had at least one security guard, while the Board had requested funding in the next year's budget to install a guard in every school.⁷³

1992

Mayor David N. Dinkins announced a \$28 million program to identify 40 public high schools and middle schools and to bolster security at them, in response to Chancellor Joseph A. Fernandez requesting an expansion of the use of metal detectors at 21 schools. By the 92-93 school year, the rotating metal detection program had expanded to 40 total high schools, so that each school was visited at least once a week.⁷⁴

1993

By November, hand-held metal detectors were used daily in 51 schools and randomly in 10 more.⁷⁵

1994

The program expanded to 59 high schools, and Chancellor Cortines called for the installation of walk-through metal detectors in 50 schools. That year, metal detectors were placed in over 60 of the 1,136 public schools.⁷⁶

An Advisory Panel on School Safety

As policing responses inevitably fell short, police reform efforts grew, continuing to characterize police as problem-solvers in schools and side-lining students, educators, and families from participating in real change. These reforms influenced new spending and growth, resulting in City school based safety costs rivaling the budgets for entire municipal police departments outside of NYC, and solidifying an era of hardening schools.

1993

Chancellor Joseph A. Fernandez called for changing New York City's force of 3,000 school safety officers into a better-trained, better-educated department modeled in many ways on big city police departments. While the officers would not carry guns, they would be hired, trained and promoted in much the same way as the New York City police officers were – particularly in community policing tactics. At the same time, Chancellor Fernandez proposed a shift from reacting to problems to preventing them. For the first time, each high school would have a security force headed by a safety supervisor who would be a security professional, rather than an educator.⁷⁷

Among other recommendations, Chancellor Fernandez called for:

- The issuance of photo identification cards for all high school students that can be read by machines at school entrances. Such cards were already in use at 41 schools.
- Experimenting with the use of airport-style metal detectors. At that time, in the 41 schools where metal detectors are used, only hand-held devices were available. At some schools, X-ray machines for packages were being introduced.
- Drug testing and psychological screening, character investigations, and Civil Service testing of all school safety officers, similar to procedures used in hiring city police officers.
- Assigning safety officers, rather than principals, to report on safety incidents at schools and issue annual reports, an effort to curb underreporting.⁷⁸

At that time, the BOE was spending \$72 million a year on unarmed security officers and metal detectors, with more than 2,900 safety officers. The year prior, Chancellor Fernandez dismissed the division's executive director and two other officials after discovering financial irregularities, naming an outside panel headed by a deputy police commissioner, Jeremy Travis, to recommend reforms.⁷⁹

That Advisory Panel on School Safety released a report in April 1993, accusing the BOE's Division of School Safety of inadequately screening job applicants, offering weak supervision to its officers, and failing to coordinate its operations with school principals and superintendents.

The newly hired Executive Director of the division, Zachary Tumin, matched the Chancellor's intent to bring community policing to the division. In schools, according to Tumin, "this mean[t] reaching out to principals, teachers, custodians, students, parents, community leaders and the police to define each school's specific security problems and to forge cooperative methods for keeping students and staff safe." It was later described as "school officials trained the safety officers to be not merely hallway sentries but violence-prevention experts collaborating with school staff members."⁸⁰

1994

The BOE's Division of School Safety was said to be as big as the nation's ninth largest police department, with 3,200 officers, a \$73 million budget 90 vehicles, and a weapons-detection system placed in 61 schools.⁸¹

A Law & Order Mayor

New York's new mayor, a former prosecutor, quickly positions the NYPD as a solution to economic or social problems and formally introduced the proposal for police control over security in schools. By this time, the school system had decades of familiarity with school-based policing, which served as scaffolding to support the new initiative.

1994

Rudolph Giuliani's campaign platform included shifting responsibility for school security to the NYPD. At that time, the NYPD said that for at least two decades police officers have been working inside some schools, and that officers walk daily beats in and around 2 elementary, 13 junior high and 52 high schools.⁸²

1995

Following his election, Mayor Giuliani recommitted to his plan to put the 3,000 existing school safety officers under the control of the NYPD, to be trained and screened by the NYPD and to develop "more of an enforcement strategy."⁸³

In June of 1995, Mayor Giuliani signed an executive order establishing a commission to investigate the BOE's Division of School Safety, later facing criticism for packing the panel with his employees and friends.⁸⁴

At that time, then Chancellor Ramon C. Cortines was willing to have the NYPD take over the screening, recruitment and training of school safety officers, but believed that the Division of School Safety should remain under the control of the BOE, which was independent of the Mayor while the NYPD was not.⁸⁵

The Commission released the following:

The Problems

- The Division of School Safety (DSS) failed to maintain a system of statistics;
- DSS, the BOE, and school principals consistently underreport incidents;
- Safety officers are assigned to schools without regard to safety needs;
- DSS has failed to define clearly the role of its school safety officers;
- Supervisory ratios can be as high as 90:1;
- DSS has failed to establish clear lines of supervisory authority over officers;
- School safety officers are inadequately recruited, screened and trained;
- School safety officers lack a clear career path, do not have meaningful opportunities for advancement and suffer from persistent poor morale;
- DSS and the BOE are incapable of making or unwilling to make serious, significant, forward-looking, material changes in the way DSS operates.

The Recommendations

- The NYPD should develop a uniform set of criteria to measure incidents;
- The collection and analysis of safety-related incident data should be administered by the NYPD;
- The NYPD should be responsible for allocating school safety officers to schools;
- The role of school safety officers should be clearly defined as having as its primary function the enforcement of criminal laws and the insuring of the physical safety of students, teachers and school administrators. Secondly, school safety officers should share the responsibility for rendering assistance and providing information to principals as to violations of the chancellor's disciplinary code;
- Ultimate authority over school safety officers should rest solely with the NYPD;
- The NYPD should assume control for the recruitment, screening and training of school safety officers.⁸⁶

The School Safety Transfer

Mayor Giuliani codified the trajectory of school policing by officially establishing NYPD control over school security. The subsequent community opposition was largely disregarded and no real positive transformation of safety in public schools followed. Not surprisingly, expanding police power in schools was not the only extension of the NYPD during the Giuliani administration. During the years leading up to the transfer of school safety from the BOE to the NYPD, a series of similar transfers took place; in 1994 and 1995, Giuliani transferred the NYC Housing Authority Police Department and the Transit Authority Police Department to the NYPD.⁸⁷

1996

Giuliani's commission concluded school safety should be managed by law enforcement. Chancellor Ramon Cortines – who was said to have later resigned in large part because of his opposition to police control of school safety – and his successor Rudy Crew both objected to the plan.⁸⁸

1998

The BOE voted unanimously on September 16 to transfer control of school safety to the NYPD, despite public opposition. Chancellor Crew agreed to the plan after a compromise in which the NYPD would not increase its personnel in the schools. At the time of the vote there were 3,200 officers in the BOE's Division of School Safety.⁸⁹

In response to the transfer, the BOE developed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Mayor's Office and NYPD. A key question among critics of the plan was whether principals would truly maintain their authority over school discipline. The language of the MOU left considerable room for interpretation.⁹⁰

The NYPD took control of security in the city's schools on December 20 of 1998.⁹¹

2000

Mayor Giuliani announced the release of the first annual joint committee on school safety report. That report stated that for school year 1999-2000 the use of criminal court summonses increased by 101%.⁹²

2001

Three years after the original MOU went into effect, the Joint Committee on School Safety asked principals whether they thought safety had improved in their schools since the NYPD takeover of the School Safety Division; 67 percent of principals polled reported there that there had been no change in their school's climate of safety.⁹³

Two Decades of NYPD School Policing

In February of 2019, the School Diversity Advisory Group, established by the DOE to make formal recommendations to the Mayor and Chancellor, released a series of recommendations including analyzing moving School Safety Agents to DOE supervision from the NYPD. In response, the head of the Agent's union remarked "I was there... There was chaos in the schools. Now we want to go back to that?"⁹⁴

Through decades of the City's history, the press, government officials and others justify police and policing approaches to school safety as responding to the public desire for social order and a concern for the wellbeing of young people. However, public anxiety in response to student political activism and unrest suggests that fear of young people demanding self-determination overshadowed other issues of their wellbeing. This kind of moral panic continues today as public money directed to school policing grows year after year, with little accountability for what those dollars actually pay for or the cost to student dignity.

In 2003, Mayor Bloomberg announced the Impact Schools Initiative, modeled on the NYPD's Operation Impact – a policing program that was implemented from 2004 to 2014 and increased the intensity of broken windows policing in targeted neighborhoods. When a school was designated as an Impact School, each school received additional School Safety Agents and a task force of uniformed NYPD officers.⁹⁵

A recent report out of NYU found a substantial negative impact from aggressive, order-maintenance policing on the educational outcomes of Black students who lived in Operation Impact neighborhoods – noting that racial disparities in the criminal justice system help perpetuate racial inequalities in education.⁹⁶

This parallel between policing strategy and schooling is being replicated today; in March of 2018, the Mayor utilized a youth town hall on school safety to claim support for his community policing philosophy as a solution to youth concerns of feeling criminalized by school police.⁹⁷ Further, as the NYPD's Neighborhood Policing initiative grows, it is being adapted through the adjustment of Neighborhood Coordination Officers to fit in school settings, with the launch of "School Coordination Agents" in the Bronx this past school year – a pilot that has expanded citywide this school year.⁹⁸

The result is that youth today are likely to be subject to policing in and around their schools through a number of different City projects and agencies.

The City's parallel approaches to policing and school safety became even more clear in June 2019, when during the announcement of a revised MOU dictating the role of policing in schools, the Mayor praised community policing, saying, "With neighborhood policing there's a different philosophy about how you enforce the law, how you communicate, how you interact with a community, I want you to know that our school safety agents... are embracing that neighborhood policing orientation."⁹⁹

This reliance on police is in stark contrast to mounting recommendations to minimize police contact with youth and drive down school-based police activity.

In May of 2013, the New York City School-Justice Partnership Task Force released their report and recommendations, finding that in SY2012, Black students were 14 times more likely and Latinx students were five times more likely to be arrested for school-based incidents compared to white students.¹⁰⁰ One of the Task Force's lead recommendations was for the next mayor to lead an initiative that established a shared goal among agencies to reduce the use of school-based summonses and arrests.

In February of 2015, Mayor Bill de Blasio launched such a task force charged with examining data and studying best practices in order to, in part, update the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the NYPD and the DOE.¹⁰¹ MOUs are one tool to decouple policing from school discipline; as of the writing of this report, the impact of the newly adopted MOU is not yet known.

Police reforms continue as data reported by the City continues to show that Black and Latinx students are disproportionately subject to police surveillance and intervention and are much more likely than their white peers to be the subject of arrest and summonses by NYPD in their schools. Further, as the overall number of reported arrests and summonses in schools is decreasing, the total of all police interventions in schools is not.¹⁰²

A Way Forward

We know that our history of school policing does not dictate our future. Attention to the school-to-prison pipeline has resulted in some changes, but these disparities remain deeply entrenched as policing in New York City schools is part of a long historical narrative of school reform and movement building. While the City has made new investments in restorative practices in schools, the reliance on policing must change. To move toward a more just and equitable system for students, we must:



Disrupt the Normalization of Police in Schools.

Limiting our imagination of what schools can look like, particularly by normalizing policing and surveillance in and around schools, pressures us to accept policies that are inconsistent with student safety and well-being. The prevalence of police in New York City Schools is, at its core, an issue of education equity, and policing constantly re-legitimizes itself through reinvention and adaptation in order to continue despite the demonstrable harm of youth criminalization.

Reframing criminalizing responses as unacceptable, and as an issue of education equity will strengthen concurrent citywide demands that government prioritize caring for young people and their families and retreat from policing strategies.



Transform Fiscal Priorities.

Youth organizers have already framed much that can be done with the public funding currently being used to police, surveil, detain and imprison young people. We join our coalition partners in calling for the divestment from law enforcement and criminalizing infrastructure in schools.

At the same time as the DOE is growing schools' access to restorative justice tools and training, the NYPD's School Safety Division budget is the largest it has ever been – strategies that are in contradiction with each other. While our estimates of the annual cost of the NYPD's School Safety Division reaches \$431 million, this does not capture the cost of police outside of the Division that patrol and surveil students in and around schools, or the cost of criminalizing infrastructure like metal detectors and cameras. The full scope of resources that are squandered on youth criminalization must instead be invested in supporting schools and communities to be healthy and whole.



Create the Conditions that Make Removing Police a Reality.

While decoupling policing and schooling will require deep structural change, there are ways to reduce the harm of police in schools right now, through decreasing the scope and power of the police that are there, but also seeking to prevent and respond to conflict in ways that do not prioritize processes that criminalize youth as a solution and do not respond to harm with more harm.

Students and educators continue to push for self-determination in schools and already many school communities are working to create the conditions that students and families want and need. The City must give more legitimacy to restorative practices and healing responses to conflict and harm.



Center Bold Demands.

It's an important moment to lift up what students want and need and to be creative when envisioning what the public education system can and should look like. At the same time as demands for police-free schools circulate, demands for fully-funded schools, after-school and youth employment programs, free access to public transportation and much more are also active and growing.

It is essential that our advocacy moving forward be guided by an awareness of history and the longevity of these systems and struggles. As long as policing continues to be advanced as the solution, all of the inequalities responded to with criminalization and punishment will persist. Going forward, we must invest in a transformative vision for education justice and equity.

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