

## Waking Up White

La Crosse's Waking Up White Collaborative Steering Committee and the Creating a Healthier Multicultural Community Co-leader team **ask that you convene a committee to examine termination of the School Resource Officers (SRO) contract and re-investment in student-centered services** which follow the national guidelines for staff to student ratios for social workers, psychologists, counselors, and nurses. (1) Presently many of La Crosse Schools do not meet these guidelines including Central and Logan High Schools.

Waking Up White Collaborative and Creating a Healthier Multicultural Community are local collaboratives working to help our community to become a healthier multicultural community.

We firmly believe in the investment in student-centered services and community-based programming that support the safety and well-being of **all students**. Research shows that relationships between students, parents, and school staff are more important in making schools safe than increased security measures (2)

The school to prison pipeline continues to exist for children of color, and our community contributes to it through our high juvenile arrest rates for youth of color. We urge the La Crosse School District to review **current** juvenile justice data and determine if the recommendations made in the La Crosse County Juvenile Justice Best Practices Stakeholder Group 2018 Report (3) have been met satisfactorily and meet the needs of students of color. We are alarmed by the higher suspension rates of Black youth and their continued contact with law enforcement. According to DPI discipline data, the rate of out of school suspension for black students in the La Crosse School District is 5 times higher than the rate for white students. (4) These disciplinary actions put Black youth at-risk for negative life outcomes and increase their risk of involvement with the criminal justice system. We believe that the presence of School Resource Officers creates barriers to building trusting relationships in schools and increases the potential for over-disciplining and criminalizing student behaviors.

As communities across the country consider similar re-investment options, we hope that you will too.

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## YWCA

YWCA La Crosse supports terminating the contract with the School Resource Officers (SRO) program via the La Crosse Police Department. We ask you to join a growing number of school districts around the country and re-imagine safety and education; to explore how to invest in our communities in ways that don't lead to disparate impacts for children and communities of color.

We understand that for many people in our community the idea of school based officers sounds like a good idea. However, we ask that the school board take a critical look at the purpose of the SRO program and how those resources could be used to better strengthen our schools and the communities they are in.

We acknowledge that the school-to-prison pipeline exists and recognize that WI continues to lead in disparate impacts for youth of color. That includes disproportionate minority contact within our own community, especially for Black students. In 2015, for example, Black students were 7.75 times more likely to be arrested than white students. In that year, Black students made up only 4.9% of the juvenile population of the city of La Crosse, yet they accounted for 23.7% of total juvenile arrests,

according to a report conducted by the La Crosse County Juvenile Justice Best Practice Stakeholder Group.

According to that same report, 68.3% of, or 2 out of every 3, black juveniles in La Crosse County were arrested in 2014, compared to only 13.3% of white juveniles. According to that same report, "It is clear {from the table} that at both the state and district level, Black students are suspended at a much higher proportion than white or Asian students. With research confirming the correlation between suspension and arrest rates and the dropout rates, the higher suspension and arrest rates for the state of Wisconsin and in the city of La Crosse likely contribute to the discrepancies in graduation rates for Black students in the state compared to all other students."

While there is very little evidence to support the notion that SROs actually make schools safer, there are other models and methods of school and community safety proven to increase school safety. There are numerous studies suggesting that investing in other resources, such as mental health counselors, social workers, and restorative justice programs, do more to improve school safety than the presence of an armed officer. Many researchers across the country, including the Consortium on Chicago School Research, have found that relationships between students, parents, and staff are more important in making a school safe than increased security measures.

We have attached a link to a Resource Guide that explains some alternative models of school safety/discipline, as an example of what we can and should be doing differently. We urge you all to utilize it to expand your knowledge of alternative models.

[http://www.dignityinschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Resource\\_Guide-on-CNC-1.pdf](http://www.dignityinschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Resource_Guide-on-CNC-1.pdf)

Relationships matter! We need to build on and expand the resources that we already have, such as the System of Care and Restorative Justice, as well as investing in more mental health professionals to help students work through struggles. We must spend our time, energy, and financial resources investing in programs proven to increase school safety.

Many districts across the nation are taking action to sever ties and funding to SRO programs, and pushing for SROs to be replaced with other much-needed resources, such as school counselors, psychologists, paraprofessionals and support staff who can respond to conflicts and incidents as they occur. Even one of the largest teacher unions in the country, the American Federation of Teachers, recently passed a resolution calling for the separation of school safety and policing. One benefit to having more of these resources, rather than an SRO, is the reduction in the risk students being referred to the Criminal Justice System for minor offenses that probably could and should be handled by school staff/administration.

We value strong, healthy communities where every child is both safe and feels safe. We believe in a community-based approach to conflict resolution that focuses on accountability, restoring relationships, and empowering student voices to get to the root of incidents. Simply policing our youth with punitive actions does not promote accountability, growth, or change. As the resource guide we listed above outlines, providing youth with proper support in a safe space can help to reduce recidivism, increase school and community safety, and help to save money with less youth entering the criminal justice system.

While our nation experiences a time of heightened racial awareness, we ask the La Crosse School Board to not look away, instead taking this opportunity to search for new ways of creating safe and equitable schools for every student. At this moment, we ask you to be leaders for change.

We call on the School Board to terminate the contract between the School District of La Crosse and the La Crosse Police Department and remove all SROs from our schools. We ask you to reimagine what equitable education looks like in this community. We ask you to reimagine what community and school safety truly means. Do SROs make schools safer for all students or do they only work for students who fit the majority demographic? The data suggests the latter of those two options.

We ask you to consider the disproportionate minority contact that exists here, and to acknowledge

and actively fight against the school-to-prison pipeline. We call on you to listen to the voices of those most directly, and unfortunately, negatively impacted by the presence of SROs in schools, which are Black students and students with disabilities. We call on you to be Champions for Social Justice, to advocate and act on behalf of the BIPOC students and students with disabilities within our community.  
Thank you.

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### **Logan High School Staff**

Dear Members of the Board of Education and District Administrators,

We are writing to you to offer our support in retaining one of the key members of the Logan Family, Officer Heath Graves. Two years ago Randy Nelson kicked off the school year by reminding District staff that building strong, trusting, caring relationships is the key to helping our students feel safe and learn. We can think of no one who works harder to build strong relationships with young people than Officer Graves. In his work at Logan, O.G. (as the students often call him) is a resource officer in every sense of the word. Here is a short list of some of the many things Officer Graves does for our building:

- He knows almost every student by name.
- He knows students' families and their situations. Those families trust him and are willing to work with him.
- He uses the relationships he builds to diffuse situations along with his calm, patient attitude.
- Many of his positive relationships are with African-American and Asian-American students, our two largest minority groups at Logan.
- He buys students food, clothing, and school supplies out of his own pocket.
- He regularly speaks to classes.
- He personally brings students to school that otherwise would be truant.
- Because of the trust he's built with students, our young people regularly come to him with information to head off dangerous or illegal situations.
- His interventions actually stop many situations from becoming a "police" matter and stop problems before "system" and court involvement become necessary.

At Logan, Officer Graves is the embodiment of the community-policing model that the La Crosse PD is striving for. Students know him, respect him, and our building is a safer place to be in because of him. Without a doubt we need more help to meet the needs of our students of color, our students who live in poverty, our students who are mentally or physically abused, and our students who have way too many ACE's. Removing Officer Graves from Logan, however, will not make any of those problems any easier.

Our staff at Logan (the cooks, custodians, teachers, administrators, AA's, TA's, and O.G.) always goes the extra mile for our students and we will do anything we can to help them grow and learn. Of course, Logan is not a utopia...there are so many ways we can continue to make our school a safer and more welcoming place to be for all students. We look forward to partnering with our BOE and Administration in those endeavors. In that process, though, we firmly believe in the good that Officer Graves does for our school and our Logan family. Consequently, we hope you will consider continuing the SRO program at Logan and for our other District schools.

Sincerely,

**Teachers:**

Joe Hackbarth  
Sam Zwiieg  
Lori Kaminski  
Dorothy Hart  
Eric Martin  
Joe Beck  
Saul Banashak  
Joanne Cappuccio  
Brock Harney  
Cathy Sobania  
Carrie Markos  
Cassandra Tolvstad  
Phil Klar  
Kelly Mikkelson  
Kevin Anderson  
Perianne Olson  
Andy Ellenbecker  
Jessa Ellenbecker  
Allecia Kruser  
Terry Curtis  
Angela Molling-Enright  
Casey Knoble  
Lindsay Knoble  
Ann Koth  
Megan Gerou  
Matt Marohl  
Ryan Schreiner

Carrie Harings  
Justin Pitz  
Rhonda McGowan  
Steve Johnston  
Tom Kammer  
Jodi Mahlum  
Hong Xu  
Andy Hartman  
Mark Lakmann  
Kurt Pahuski  
Katie Beyer  
Kelly Kline  
Andrea Kramer  
Scott Gruen  
Tammy Gruen  
Steve Duffrin  
Julie Slaats Rowe  
Liselotte Kuster  
Garrett Carlson  
Tricia Gibbons  
Shelly Wolter Reinders  
Jill Abing  
Kristin Nedvidek  
Mark Ziegler  
Tyler VonHaden  
Brad Masche  
Ernest Morris  
Marty Eichenberg  
Stacy Chapman

Julie Janke  
Brian Renkas  
Hayley Rice-McMullen

**Support Staff**

Bailey Mcnamer  
Tina Welke  
Kristina Norgaard  
Byron Holz  
Katherine Powell  
Kathleen Leaver  
Laurie Buchner  
Susan Hartleip  
Mark Hollowitsch  
Keith Harter  
Jennie Olson  
Debbie Ames  
Beth Forde  
Jordan Gilge  
Lisa Merfeld  
Sandra Rochester  
Kelly Callister  
Alicia Nielson  
Julie Miller  
Nick Stone  
Elizabeth Banashak  
Kyle Roper  
Beth Hoff  
Stephanie Mancuso

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**La Crosse Education Association**

**RATIONALE:**

The School Resource Officer (SRO) program has existed in the School District of La Crosse since 1993, and in those 27 years, the roles and responsibilities of the program have shifted. As this issue is discussed, we want to be diligent about how the Fund 80 money is invested within our community. The La Crosse Education Association Executive Board understands that our members have widely varying views on this issue, and believe that our teachers, students, families, and other community stakeholders need to have a seat at the table alongside the Board of Education for this important discussion. To accomplish that goal, we propose the following statement be released to the Board of Education and the community at large:

## **LEA POSITION ON THE SCHOOL BOARD'S ACTIONS REGARDING THE SRO PROGRAM IN LA CROSSE**

"The La Crosse Education Association always has and always will stand for the well-being of our students and act as a voice for the educators in our district. As education professionals, we know that students need strong supports for their mental well-being and educational growth. We support investing in community organizations who can help provide that. These supports should be inclusive of a combination of several community organizations who should be trained to work with students and families to support their success in our school system. To that end, if the contract with the La Crosse PD were to be terminated, the La Crosse Education Association believes the Board of Education should provide a comprehensive plan to replace those supports in the schools with input from teachers and other school staff in the district."

The La Crosse Education Association

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Dear Board of Education for the School District of La Crosse, First, I want to thank and commend you for the incredibly challenging and important work that you have been doing for the safety and well-being of students, staff, and administrators as well as the larger community. I cannot imagine that it has been easy to make decisions on virtual learning at the same time that you are reviewing the SRO contract. It is clear that you are making these decisions considerately, carefully, and based on best evidence. I am an associate professor of criminology and sociology at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse. My primary area of expertise in criminology overlaps somewhat with school discipline and school resource officers. I have both reviewed the literature on SRO programs as well as served as a co-evaluator on the Juvenile Justice Task Force for La Crosse of which the System of Care was established. The report I co-authored as part of this task force outlined the incredible disparity in arrests and suspensions of our students of color, particularly black youth, and the high arrest rates of juveniles in the city of La Crosse overall. I understand that you've been hearing from a variety of experts so I will not use this time to review the literature on SRO programs. Instead, I would like to focus on what comes next in case the discussion has not involved plans moving forward. If this has been part of the conversation, I'll just use this statement to add my voice in support of these considerations. The presence of School Resource Officer programs in school and the increased criminalization of juvenile behavior is a product of a larger culture of control in which a tough on crime narrative is preferred. Politicians lose without this narrative and those in leadership positions are scrutinized for straying from this logic. It is the product of exaggerated fears of violent, senseless crime. It is a "better safe than sorry" mentality. There is a belief that we can control crime and prevent senseless, random acts of violence through this approach. This is an illusion of control and is also counter to scientific evidence<sup>1 2</sup> . For example, it is believed that school shootings are random acts of violence but in reality we have a lot of evidence for the reasons these occur: for example, mass school shootings are more likely to happen in rural areas where there is less tolerance for diversity and higher levels of gun ownership<sup>3</sup> . In focusing on exaggerated fears, we lose an understanding of how to prevent crimes but also, how to promote well-being and desistance from crime in the long-term. Overall, we'll never completely prevent crimes and we must be aware that our efforts to control crime actually increase the problem we are trying to prevent. Of course, school shootings are tragic and terrible events and it is important that we work to protect our students from this violence. But tough on crime has not shown to prevent these crimes or protect students. Further, tough on crime comes with a host of other damages. In the long-term, criminalization and tough on crime penalties actually increase criminality rather than decrease it. It does not promote public safety<sup>4</sup> . And we should

be worried about the harm of these policies in the immediate and long-term. All this to say that ending the criminalization of youth behavior and tough on crime approaches will take a cultural shift. It will take an acknowledgment that not all crimes can be prevented but that the harm in trying to so tightly control the population, especially certain populations, in order to prevent all crimes from happening, is both not possible and also causes tremendous harm. It is not just the presence of SROs that have led to the criminalization of youth. It is also teachers, staff, administrators, parents, youth, and community members that contribute to criminalization, embracing the programs that criminalize youth and the harsh penalties that come with this type of response to youth behavior. Evaluating, changing, or removing SRO programs from the school is just a starting point. The work ahead in implementing worthwhile changes to reduce the harm we see in the data will be complicated and challenging and will take a dedicated commitment from the larger community and to evidence-based practices<sup>5</sup>. Without that commitment, whatever changes are made are likely to be used as the culprit of any negative occurrences in the future, whether these changes can be attributed to these changes or not. There will be a desire to go back to the old ways of doing things, to bring back criminalization of youth, and to be tough on crime. To prevent moving backward, it is important to consider the contribution of the environment, all the players in the criminalization of youth, and to shift the cultural thinking that harsh, criminal justice-oriented punishment is the solution to problems. In short, it will take a contextualization of the problem where the significant long-term consequences become part of the conversation on weighing the harms<sup>6</sup>. It will take the white community in La Crosse acknowledging the voices of communities of color and the disproportionate weight of this harm on the shoulders of our youth of color and our youth with disabilities. This is a problem for all of us, not just some of us<sup>7</sup>. The scientific evidence is clear that the punishment/zero tolerance approach is counter to the well-being and the safety of the community and students. Thank you for your dedication to centering evidence-based practices in decisions and conversations about promoting a safe, welcoming, and productive school environment for students. In a time where there is a lot of resistance to scientific evidence, this is no small task.

Respectfully, Dr. Lisa M. Kruse

Associate Professor Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice University of Wisconsin-La Crosse

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### **Leaders Igniting Transformation (LIT)**

In alignment with local, statewide, and national youth movements advocating for justice and liberation, Leaders Igniting Transformation (LIT) calls for the School District of La Crosse to:

- terminate the School Resource Officer (SRO) Program and contract;
- invest resources into restorative justice, counselors, culturally relevant and historically accurate curriculum, teachers, mental health practitioners, and support for BIPOC students;
- continue addressing and mitigating mechanisms of harm and systems of violence against Black and Brown students.

Leaders Igniting Transformation (LIT) is a Black and Brown-led independent nonprofit. LIT organizes to build independent political power for social, racial, and economic justice. We work to build homegrown leadership, expand access, and opportunity by engaging and organizing the incredible leadership of young people. In this community's efforts to review the SRO program in the public schools, we support and fight alongside our young people advocating for educational improvements and better safety measures that do not harm or criminalize Black and Brown students. As a rapidly expanding organization, LIT has established a presence of college fellows on campuses across the state of Wisconsin, including the University of Wisconsin - La Crosse here in our community. LIT's college department recently launched our Dare to Divest Campaign calling for divestment from systems of violence against Black and Brown communities, and investment into resources and initiatives that enable healing, justice, and liberation. Our college campaign goals and calls to action align with the necessary demands from La Crosse high school youth and organizers to end mechanisms that police and criminalize Black and Brown youth in our community, which starts with ending the SRO program in the public schools. LIT stands with Black and Brown youth advocating for the safety and justice they deserve in their schools and communities. Milwaukee public schools have taken this important step toward holistic justice in schools and as a community that prioritizes health and supportive care for young people, we need to do the same. We call for the termination of the SRO contract and program within the schools. We also call for the expansion and improvement of the effective restorative justice programming that exists in our community, hiring more counselors and mental health practitioners, prioritizing spaces that promote healing and identity development for BIPOC students, and following the guidance of Black and Brown youth-led organizations locally and statewide.

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### **Planned Parenthood of Wisconsin (PPWI)**

Planned Parenthood of Wisconsin (PPWI) Background: In August 2019, Essential Health Clinic, formerly called Options Clinic, became part of Planned Parenthood of Wisconsin (PPWI) through a merger of health care centers and staff. PPWI currently operates three of the former Essential Health Clinic facilities in La Crosse, Sparta and Blair. After the merger, the local community outreach and education team continued its important work in hosting public health and outreach events in the community and on campus, conducting educational sessions in and around La Crosse County, and serving on vital public health and safety city, county, community advisory boards and committees. They include but are not limited to the La Crosse County Prevention Network, La Crosse County Human Services Family Policy Board, the La Crosse Task Force to Eradicate Modern Slavery, the YMCA Teen Services Provider Network (TSPN), the Providers and Teens Communicating for Health (PATCH) Program - Coulee Region, and the Gundersen Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Program. Since the merger in August 2019, the Planned Parenthood of Wisconsin team in La Crosse has participated in 12 outreach events in La Crosse County and conducted 159 educational sessions, 135 of which were in La Crosse County schools. The list of high school and middle schools in our region in which the team is regularly invited back to provide these vital education sessions include Holmen HS, Onalaska HS, Logan HS, Central HS, Bangor HS, Mel-Min HS, 7 Rivers Region Community HS, Onalaska MS, Logan MS, Lincoln MS, Longfellow MS, and Mel-Min MS, as well as the Integrated Supports program. The local PPWI educators also work with administrators, staff, and students to provide educational sessions at University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, Western Technical College (WTC), and Viterbo University. Our statement: Planned Parenthood of Wisconsin calls for the termination of the School Resource Officers (SRO) contract in La Crosse when it expires in June 2021. PPWI has a unique responsibility to promote the health and safety of the patients, students and communities to which we provide health and educational services. Part of that responsibility is to use our organizational power and privilege to listen, learn, be in solidarity, and to

take strong action to dismantle institutional racism. It is in this spirit that PPWI believes we must recognize the harm -- identified by community partners and the students we serve -- that comes to Black and Indigenous students of color and students with disabilities, as well as Hmong, Latinx, and LGBTQ+ students from the presence of law enforcement in schools. We also believe we have a responsibility to call for more/ new investment in community-based solutions for education, safety, and health care that support the health and wellbeing of and improve the outcomes for public school students. These calls to action are backed up by a significant amount of social science evidence that indicates educational resource investments in policing often don't keep or make students feel safe, and that investments in supportive community services are needed so that the students we serve can all live connected, represented, and free. At the virtual Community Forum on SROs on October 12, 2020, Logan High School student Chaya Davis stated, "As a black student, seeing SROs in my school makes me feel uncomfortable and unsafe." Lei Tzu Ly-Tong-Pao, a student in the La Crosse School District, gave a statement saying "I believe SROs have no place within the schools... As a person of color, I don't feel safe with the police within the schools." Brianna Washington, a Logan sophomore, talked about the role SROs play in feeding the school-to-prison pipeline. The national, state, and local evidence backs up the experiences of these La Crosse School District students. As a result of these values, the feedback from students, and the overwhelming evidence about what policies are needed to promote the health and wellbeing of La Crosse public school students, Planned Parenthood Advocates of Wisconsin supports the following: 1. The termination of the School Resource Officers (SRO) contract in La Crosse when it expires in June 2021 2. Evaluating school budgets and policy priorities to invest in proven public health and safety curricula that do not bring police officers into our schools 3. Reallocating resources to support the health care, mental health, housing, food security, and education of students and provide teachers and staff the training and tools they need to take a responsive approach to at-risk students 4. Enacting culturally-responsive policies that prioritize keeping students in school, engaging families and the community, and finding resources to aid students in developing the social, emotional and conflict resolution skills 5. Evaluating and eliminating policies that criminalize poverty and disproportionately criminalize students of color, including zero-tolerance policies, SROs patrolling schools, and overreliance on alternative schools and juvenile justice system for disciplinary measures.