

Recommendation xx: MPD should consider moving to a “soft” alternative uniform for EROs, as a means of reinforcing the unique mission of these officers in the school setting. [OIR 57]

Discussion: As the OIR report noted, “the presence of uniformed officers [the Educational Resource Officers, or “EROs”] on campus was inherently unsettling for some students, whose personal or cultural backgrounds did not mesh with notions of the police as a reassuring, supportive influence.” Mike Gennaco of OIR explained to the Committee that the impetus for this recommendation was that in their outreach, OIR had heard repeatedly from MMSD students, and particularly students of color, that coming to school and seeing a uniformed police officer every day was off-putting and uncomfortable, and that the presence of a gun in what was supposed to be a learning environment was off-putting. OIR believes that use of “soft” uniforms could help ameliorate this discomfort, and help project accessibility and a positive presence for EROs.

In response to this recommendation, MPD stated: “It is important to note that EROs have routinely found themselves in the midst of significant disturbances and confrontations while in the schools. The ‘soft’ uniform can adversely impact the EROs ability to respond effectively or be identified as an officer while doing so. The department will maintain the current practice of utilizing the standard MPD uniform for EROs, while allowing for a ‘soft’ uniform to be approved for specific assignments.” Assistant Chief Vic Wahl informed the Committee that this year’s school resource officer contract codified that “SROs, at their discretion and approval of command staff, may occasionally wear a ‘soft’ uniform or plain clothes uniform,” reflecting a general practice that MPD had now adopted for all specialized officers.

MPD and OIR clarified for the Committee that officers in “soft” uniform would continue to carry a firearm (though it may be concealed). Mike Gennaco also noted that “[i]t’s a ‘consider’ recommendation. We’re not insisting that every day a school resource officer can’t wear their uniform anymore.... The recommendation is really to provide more flexibility for school resource officers to come dressed in different ways, so the students get to see them in different ways.” MPD could use its professional judgement on how much to soften the uniform.

Various community members argued that merely changing the style of uniform – a change in image – did not address the root of the issue (i.e., potential harm associated with policing in schools and the school to prison pipeline), and a former MMSD Board member noted that what she had often heard from students in meetings is that “it’s actually the presence of the gun and the ability to shoot and kill students that’s the concern”—a factor that would remain unchanged with the shift in uniform.

The Committee recognizes that such a change in uniform is merely symbolic, but appreciates its potential benefit and agrees with OIR that MPD should consider having EROs move toward use of “soft” uniforms insofar as feasible.