



Response to School Resource Officer Crisis at Tolman High School

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Introduction

In October 2015, the City of Pawtucket faced a crisis. During an after-school confrontation, a School Resource Officer grabbed a student and flipped him over at Tolman High School. A classmate recorded the incident on his cell phone, and it quickly went viral on social media before a national audience. This case study examines the actions of different stakeholders during a time of heightened tensions and widespread publicity.

Background of the SRO Program in Pawtucket

In December 2007, the Pawtucket School Committee approved the placement of School Resource Officers (SROs) at Shea and Tolman High Schools.¹ The following April², the Pawtucket Police and School Departments formalized this agreement by signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU).^{3,4} The City of Pawtucket funded the SRO program.⁵ The City implemented this program due to concerns about violence and guns in schools throughout the United States.⁶ As noted in the MOU, the goal of this program was to “ensure that no student’s right to receive an education is abridged by violence or disruption.”⁷ It is important to note that the agreement stated, “The SRO shall not be used as a school disciplinarian...If the principal believes an incident is in violation of the law, they may contact the SRO to see if law enforcement action is needed.” In December 2013, the Pawtucket City

¹ Donna Kenny Kirwan, “Pawtucket School Committee Oks Cops in School,” *The Times* (Pawtucket, RI), December 12, 2007, A1, A8.

² However, according to Chief Paul King, the Pawtucket Police Department started posting officers in a couple of schools about 15-20 years ago- under a former police chief and schools superintendent. King became Chief of Police in 2010; Patti DiCenso’s appointment as Superintendent began in 2014.

³ The MOU stated that junior high buildings would also be assigned SROs.

⁴ As of October, 2015, 29 out of 34 Rhode Island school districts had SROs. See also Steph Machado, “Pawtucket Student Arrests Trigger Questions about School Resource Officers,” *Wpri.com*, October 16, 2015, <http://wpri.com/2015/10/16/more-ri-districts-adding-school-resource-officers-while-aclu-cautions-against-them/>.

⁵ Originally, schools were to provide a \$50,000 reimbursement, per officer, back to the City. See Ethan Shorey, “Leaders Seeking Deal to Fund Police Officers in Schools,” *The Valley Breeze*, October 8, 2013, <http://www.valleybreeze.com/2013-10-08/pawtucket/leaders-seeking-deal-fund-police-officers-schools>.

⁶ During the early to mid-2000s, there were also several notable examples of violent incidents that occurred in close proximity to Pawtucket school buildings. See Douglas Hadden, “School Board Ok’s Budget Dripping Red Ink,” *The Times* (Pawtucket, RI), April 11, 2007, A1, A7; Donna Kenny Kirwan, “Pawtucket School Committee Oks Cops in School,” *The Times* (Pawtucket, RI), December 12, 2007, A1, A8; John Castellucci, “Another Student Beating Reported,” *Providence Journal*, December 13, 2007, D1; Donna Kenny Kirwan, “Violence at Shea, Goff,” *The Times* (Pawtucket, RI), December 13, 2007, A1, A6; Donna Kenny Kirwan, “Superintendent: School Safe,” *The Times* (Pawtucket, RI), December 14, 2007, A1, A8. In 2006, there were also rumors that a “Columbine-style massacre” at Tolman HS would occur. See John Castellucci, “School Board Member Proposes Posting Police in High Schools,” *Providence Journal*, April 5, 2006, D1.

⁷ See Memorandum of Understanding between Pawtucket School Department and Pawtucket Police Department, April, 2008.

Council recommended that Mayor Donald Grebien expand the SRO program to all of the City's schools.⁸ Due to budgetary constraints, the City ultimately expanded the program to solely include junior high and high school buildings.

Pawtucket officials strongly endorsed the City's SRO program. Mayor Grebien said:

"I'm very supportive of it...I grew up in Pawtucket and I was always on the street, my mom and dad, working two jobs, would be out, there was the community policing aspect of it so I always had the respect of the police officer because he or she knew me and I knew them...it's about building that relationship."

Superintendent Patti DiCenso found the program helpful for the Police Department, stating:

"They know the students when they see them in the streets. They know a lot more about our kids outside of being students than my staff knows in some cases. They establish themselves and meet with the staff and the principals when new to the school and they become part of the faculty and part of the school community in that sense."

Police Chief Paul King echoed these sentiments by noting that, due to a decrease in youth crime, the Department was able to reduce its Youth Bureau by two detectives. He stated:

"Essentially, the SRO is an extension of the Youth Bureau. They've been able to work and reduce crime and when an incident does happen they've been able to identify a suspect right away and get things taken care of right away."

The Superintendent was pleased that the program remained a high priority for the School Department over the years. She noted that other districts eliminated their SRO programs once the start-up funding concluded. Superintendent DiCenso deemed that Pawtucket's maintenance of the SRO program signaled a strong commitment towards its students.

Although there had not been a formal evaluation of the SRO program, Superintendent DiCenso maintained that it had a positive impact on the school community. She noted:

"When there was a conversation about reducing the number of SROs, my principal's voice was huge that that could not happen because of the impact it has on the community, so I think that within itself is an evaluation of the need. Unfortunately, when something goes viral on YouTube or the Internet, you do not see the day to day of the SRO."

As an example, she pointed to an instance of a junior high school student involved in something of concern on social media. The Police Chief, SRO, and Superintendent worked in cooperation

⁸ Steph Machado, "Pawtucket Student Arrests Trigger Questions about School Resource Officers," *Wpri.com*, October 16, 2015, <http://wpri.com/2015/10/16/more-ri-districts-adding-school-resource-officers-while-aclu-cautions-against-them/>.

outside of school hours to contact the student's family, and direct the student to the appropriate assistance.

Furthermore, local media covered positive interactions over the years involving SROs. In September 2014, for example, SROs from Pawtucket and neighboring Central Falls accompanied students and other community members on a "Journey for Peace" Walk.⁹ Bill McCaughey, the Pawtucket Police Sgt., commented on his hope that the march "represented a starting point for a sense of peace and respect among the schools and students."¹⁰

The ACLU had longtime concerns about the use of SROs in schools, due to what they viewed as the one-sided nature of MOU agreements. They argued that, under such arrangements, schools ceded too much authority to the local police departments. In November 2011, the organization's Rhode Island affiliate sent a letter to all school districts across the State requesting information about SRO policies and relevant documentation.¹¹ The following March, the ACLU sued the Pawtucket School Department for failure to comply with an open records request.¹² However, once the school district provided that information, the ACLU withdrew the suit.¹³

SRO Hiring and Training

The Pawtucket School Department implemented the SRO program in 2008, following the signing of the MOU.

According to Chief King, officers that wanted to become SROs bid for it by seniority, and were placed in conjunction with the command center. Examples of officer trainings have included NASRO (National Association of School Resource Officers), D.A.R.E. (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) and G.R.E.A.T. (Gang Resistance and Education and Training) programs. Officers would train over the summer following their selection for the new position.

The Pawtucket police officer who had worked at Tolman High School (hereafter referred to as the SRO) graduated from the Rhode Island Municipal Police Academy on June 28, 2002, ranking 2nd out of 40 recruits. By the time of his hiring as an SRO, he had served on the Pawtucket Police Department for nine years. As part of his Academy schooling, he received self-defense

⁹ "Students will Unite for 'Journey of Peace' Walk," *The Valley Breeze*, September 16, 2014, www.valleybreeze.com/2014-09-16/pawtucket/students-will-unite-journey-peace-walk.

¹⁰ "Students Take Part in 'Journey for Peace,'" *The Times* (Pawtucket, RI), September 20, 2014, A1. The School Department canceled what was to be the 2nd annual walk, which had been scheduled for November 2015. See Jonathan Bissonnette, "Journey for Peace March Coordinator Say City Schools Canceled Event without Explanation," *The Times* (Pawtucket, RI), November 7, 2015, A1.

¹¹ Tatiana Pina, "Schools-Safety-The Policy of Policing," *Providence Journal*, May 26, 2012, A1.

¹² Michael P. McKinney, "ACLU Sues School Districts in Pawtucket, Little Compton," *Providence Journal*, March 10, 2012, A3.

¹³ Jim Baron, "RIACLU Sues Pawtucket Schools- Seeks Public Records Regarding Test Policies," *The Times* (Pawtucket, RI), January 4, 2014, A1.

training and obtained a passing grade. He received additional training in the L.O.C.K.U.P. (Law Officers Combat Kinetics Unarmed Panoply) and G.R.E.A.T. programs. L.O.C.K.U.P. was a “system based on strategically applied tactics, techniques, and offensive maneuvers to bring resistant and aggressive suspects into immediate control, which promotes officer safety by teaching a system that demonstrably reduced injuries to both police officers and citizens.” The SRO attended four blocks of L.O.C.K.U.P. training on September 15, 2011, February 14, 2013, March 5, 2014, and September 22, 2015, each lasting one hour. The G.R.E.A.T. Program was “intended as an immunization against delinquency, youth violence, and gang membership for children in the years immediately before the prime ages for introduction into gangs and delinquent behavior.” The certification program was geared toward officers working in elementary and middle school settings who would be teaching the G.R.E.A.T. curriculum in such classrooms.¹⁴ The SRO received this 10-day training in LaCrosse, Wisconsin, from June 23, 2014 through July 2, 2014. He began work as an SRO at Tolman High School in August 2014.¹⁵

The National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO), founded in 1991, is a non-profit organization focused on school officer training. According to the U.S. Department of Justice’s Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, “NASRO takes great pride in being the first and most recognized organization for law enforcement assigned in our school communities.”¹⁶ The National Association of School Resource Officers recommended that all SROs take, at a minimum, a 40-hour basic SRO course. The SRO did not participate in this particular training program.¹⁷

¹⁴ According to the Pawtucket MOU, “The SRO assigned to a middle school will instruct the Gang Resistance Education and Training (G.R.E.A.T.) curriculum. The SRO may also become involved with the school’s curriculum and provide instruction that will enhance the students’ understanding of the police mission and the responsibilities of citizenship. However, the G.R.E.A.T. curriculum instruction in the classroom will always take precedence over responding to incidents or conducting investigations unless the incident is an emergency or requires the immediate response of the SRO.”

¹⁵ Following this incident, news reports brought some details about the SRO’s past to light. For example, an investigation by NBC 10 revealed that the SRO was previously investigated for use of excessive force in the winter of 2014. In this case, he hit an adult male with a baton and used pepper spray. This incident was also caught on video. An internal investigation cleared him of wrongdoing. In addition, the SRO was one of two officers involved in the arrest of a Pawtucket man that led to a lawsuit against the city. Some Tolman students also commented to the media that the SRO was much more combative compared to his predecessor. See: Cierra Putnam, “Tolman Resource Officer Previously Investigated,” *Turn to 10*, October 16, 2015, <http://turnto10.com/news/local/tolman-resource-officer-previously-investigated>; Ethan Shorey, “Officer Boudreault Banned from Tolman, says Superintendent,” *The Valley Breeze*, October 20, 2015, <http://www.valleybreeze.com/2015-10-20/pawtucket/officer-boudreault-banned-tolman-says-superintendent>.

¹⁶ U.S. Department of Justice Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, “COPS Hiring Program School Resource Officer Scholarship Opportunity for NASRO Training,” September 2014, http://www.cops.usdoj.gov/pdf/2014_CHP-SRO-FactSheet3_092613.pdf.

¹⁷ Previously appointed Pawtucket officers did receive the 40-hour NASRO course. See Donna Kenny Kirwan, “Pawtucket Officers get School Training,” *The Times* (Pawtucket, RI), March 6, 2008, A1, A2.

Superintendent DiCenso stated that the SRO was “new, but very well acclimated and very welcomed as part of that school community, and the principal and staff had a very good relationship with him...” Although not considered a formal member of the school’s staff, he was thought of as part of the greater community. The previous Tolman SRO had been there for years before receiving a promotion. In recounting a conversation with Principal Christopher Savastano, Superintendent DiCenso said that there was already a positive connection made between that individual and the SRO prior to the first day of school.

The Incident

October 14: 2:40 P.M. - 2:46 P.M.

During the afternoon of October 14, 2015, the incident in question occurred at Tolman High School.¹⁸ This began with a potential hallway fight at the end of the school day, and the escorting of one of the students (referred to as S1) to the Main Office. After the time that S1 and the SRO entered the office, a crowd of students gathered in the front. The student’s older brother (referred to as S2) entered the office and confronted the SRO. The SRO arrested both students and, in the process, used a flipping technique that was recorded by another student on his cellphone. The SRO then called the Pawtucket Police Department for assistance. From start to finish, the entire chain of events took approximately six minutes.

Fifteen people provided eyewitness details on the events in question. Five of the witnesses were students, three of whom are identified here as SW1, SW3, and SW5. School staff made up the remaining 10 witnesses. This included Michael Cordeiro (Assistant Principal for 9th grade), Kelli Fleury (Main Office Secretary), David Girard (Dean of Students), Colleen McMichael (Nurse), Robin Carlone (Assistant Principal for 11th grade and 12th grade girls), Theo Murray (PE Teacher), Belmiro Pereira (Math Teacher), Christina DiPrete (Math Teacher), Lauren Janton (Math Teacher), and Richard Adarkwa (Math Teacher). In the brief overview of the events below, the younger brother is referred to as S1, and the older brother as S2.

At the end of the school day, SW3 noticed that S1 was “angry and fighting with another kid.” Supposedly, S1 wanted to fight another student in the hallway because the latter kicked him off a group chat or wrote about S1 on social media. Mr. Pereira subsequently approached the students in an attempt to break up the argument. He observed S1 swearing at the other student, trying to pick a fight, and banging a wall. Ms. Carlone was nearby, and saw S1 “talking trash” to the other student. After noticing the SRO approaching, Mr. Pereira advised him that S1 was

¹⁸ Note: Except where otherwise noted, these details come from the joint internal investigation of the Pawtucket Police Department and the Rhode Island State Police, dated November 30, 2015. Officials from Pawtucket, including the Mayor, Police Chief, and School Superintendent all declined to comment on the incident during their interviews due to privacy concerns involving minors and pending court proceedings. The SRO was not interviewed for this case study.

giving the other student a “hard time.” Ms. Carlone asked that the SRO bring S1 to the office. The SRO then asked S1 to “calm down and go with him to the office.”

Mr. Murray saw the SRO and S1 proceed to the Main Office. He described S1 as being “confrontational” and observed him punching the glass with a closed fist and kicking the wood portion of the front desk. He also noticed a large gathering of students in front of the Main Office. Ms. McMichael, who was already in the office when the two entered, said that S1 was very “agitated, not listening, jumping up and down, punching the wall, as well as pushing [the SRO].” According to her, the SRO told S1 to “sit down, calm down.” Ms. Carlone observed the SRO trying to calm down S1 by stating, “cool down, no big deal.” Mr. Adarkwa walked past the SRO, whom he saw speaking calmly to the student. Despite his attempts to quiet down the student, the SRO said that S1 became more enraged and continued yelling. At this point, he began the process of arresting S1 for disorderly conduct.

By this time, a large crowd of students had already congregated in front of the Main Office.¹⁹ S2 managed to make his way into the office.²⁰ Multiple witnesses deemed the situation as chaotic once the second student entered the room. According to Ms. Fleury, S2 yelled to the SRO, “Hey, that’s my little brother, keep your hands off him, don’t touch my little brother.” She then observed the SRO respond, “Mind your business, I’m dealing with [S1].” Ms. McMichael observed S2 state, “I want to help my brother, I want to calm him down.” To that, the SRO responded, “No, leave, stop leave.” She saw the two students become quite agitated. Ms. Fleury saw the two students subsequently jump on the SRO, with one placing him in a “head lock.” Mr. Murray described an emotional scene with one brother trying to get away from the officer, before the two of them turned to attack the SRO. One of the students struck the SRO on the left side of his face. Mr. Murray then heard the SRO say something like, “I’m going to spray.” The SRO proceeded to use his pepper spray. Ms. Fleury saw the SRO call for backup. She also called for help on her radio. Mr. Girard heard the call on his radio: “Emergency, get here as fast as you can, administrator needs help.” According to the SRO’s statement, “...I could still see numerous students trying to get into the office to assault me. Fearing for my safety and for the rest of the school staff, I knew I needed to take control of the situation before I, or the school staff, was seriously injured.”²¹

Mr. Murray turned his attention to the crowd of gathered students in the front, trying to prevent them from gaining entrance. Mrs. DiPrete, who was trying to disperse the crowd, saw Mr. Murray and Mrs. Janton holding the door shut to prevent the students who were “banging on the glass” from entering. She also observed a student (SW1) using his cell phone to record.

¹⁹ Based on different witnesses, the number of students ranged from 50-100.

²⁰ It is not entirely clear how S2 managed to gain entry into the office. There was no video footage inside the front office or directly in front of it. According to one witness, he entered through the Guidance Office door.

²¹ Statements from the SRO are from the arrest report. This document was included as part of the joint police department document.

Between the screaming and the banging that occurred, Mrs. DiPrete described a “riot mentality” outside of the office.

Although he did not see the SRO discharge the pepper spray, Mr. Murray could smell it. He saw both of the students “rubbing their eyes” afterwards. While S2 was already on the ground and handcuffed, S1 remained standing with his back towards the officer. The SRO proceeded to take S1 by the neck and flip him. Accounts of this incident differ. The SRO believed that S1 was about to turn and attack. On the contrary, S1 claimed that he was not about to make a move on the officer: “I already got pepper-sprayed, I didn’t know what to do. My eyes were blurry. All of a sudden he comes from behind, grabs me by my neck and slams me. And puts me in handcuffs.”²² Once the two students were handcuffed, Mr. Girard and Mr. Cordeiro entered the office to provide assistance. The SRO contacted dispatch, requesting officers on the scene. Mr. Pereira stated that had S2 not entered the office, “none of this would have happened.” Mrs. Janton said that S2 was interfering with the SRO the “whole time.” She added that the video looks “awful” unless you were there for the entire situation, as there was so much more to the incident than was portrayed. Mr. Adarkwa stated that the SRO was “doing his job and protecting the school and himself.”

Mrs. DiPrete saw one student on the floor already handcuffed, while Mr. Cordeiro helped the SRO secure the other in handcuffs. After Mr. Cordeiro finished assisting the SRO, Mrs. DiPrete observed him approach SW1, who was still filming. SW1 gave the cell phone to another student who took it and ran off. The Pawtucket Police Department later retrieved the device in order to review the recording. The video captured approximately 20 seconds of the incident.²³ SW5 said that following the flipping incident, the crowd of students became very “hyped up” and “wild.” Once officers from the Pawtucket Police Department arrived at the school, they proceeded to clear students from the parking lot and the inside of the building.

A student posted the cell phone recording online, where it quickly went viral.

Officials Communicate... and a Video Goes Viral

October 14: Late afternoon

Immediately following the arrest of the two students, the Police Chief notified Superintendent DiCenso and Mayor Grebien about what had transpired. Chief King sought more information about the viral video, including who posted it and whether there were any other versions out

²² This statement came from a WPRI.com news report, which was included as part of the joint police department document. According to Hillary Davis of the ACLU, the approach from behind represented a key question for the organization.

²³ In addition to the cell phone video, which quickly went viral, a school surveillance video captured the initial activity in first floor hallway and the crowd in front of the main office. It did not record any of the actions inside of the office.

there. The Superintendent, Police Chief, Director of Public Safety, and the Mayor stayed in contact. According to the Mayor, “We have a good working relationship, so we pick up the phone. So, we were aware of a potential peaceful protest the next day. The police were on top of it. We were having a meeting to handle it and discuss what had happened the day before, the protocol.”

October 14: Evening

Mayor Grebien viewed the viral video for the first time that night. The Mayor, Police Chief, Public Safety Director, and Superintendent had a meeting scheduled for the following morning to discuss a course of action.

October 15: Approximately 7:00 A.M.

The Tolman High School Principal and Superintendent DiCenso learned that the video had been posted to Facebook. The Principal and Superintendent discussed holding a possible meeting with students at the high school. This was an opportunity for officials to explain what had taken place the day before, and how the video represented only a piece of the story. The two also wanted to give students the opportunity to vent about how they felt. However, by that point, the video was picked up on Twitter, and quickly went national. The formation of the protest was a surprise to the Principal. Superintendent DiCenso explained that groups from outside Pawtucket were weighing in on the incident and contacting students through Facebook. “So I think that is where the empowerment came to walk out of the building at 8 o’clock in the morning.” Due to the speed and timing of the viral video posting, officials were unable to hold back the protest. Superintendent DiCenso explained, “...we found out at 6:00 A.M. Maybe if we had found out at 9:00 P.M. [the night before] we could have done something.”

October 15: 8:14 A.M.²⁴

Approximately 50 students stood on a sidewalk directly across the street from Tolman High School. They yelled chants in protest. Police advised the students to remain on the sidewalk, and to not impede pedestrian or vehicle traffic. Superintendent DiCenso remarked that the protesting students did not actually enter the school building beforehand because they wanted to avoid the possibility of suspension for walking out. Chief King remarked that protesters were “maybe three or four deep...and they weren’t disrupting school itself.”

October 15: 8:27 A.M.

Supervising officers cleared police from the scene, with the exception of two officers that remained to observe the students.

²⁴ Times listed below come from the “Pawtucket Police Department Incident Report concerning a Disturbance at Tolman High School, October 15, 2015.” Note: Portions of the report were redacted.

October 15: 8:49 A.M.

Police units were called back to Tolman after the pulling of a fire alarm. A loss of control occurred when everyone, approximately 1,000 students, left the building. Police took into custody the student that pulled the alarm. Nearly all of the students returned to school afterwards to resume their classes. Protesters remained in their original location. They were more agitated – holding signs and shouting. However, they did not obstruct the fire trucks, which had arrived on the scene.

October 15: 9:56 A.M.

Police were once again cleared from the scene. Several officers remained to observe the students.

October 15: 10:10 A.M.

The group from Tolman moved to the front of City Hall. This group included the original 50 students, plus a few more that joined following the fire drill. One protester vandalized a car window by punching it with his fist. The protester fled the scene on foot, but was subsequently arrested. According to news reports, a total of eight teenagers and two adults were arrested during the protest.²⁵ Some small groups remained in the area acting aggressively. They later dispersed.

The Mayor, Police Chief and Superintendent were all on site by the time protesters reached City Hall. Mayor Grebien remarked on the high level of communications that occurred, including from the State, stating:

“It was communication and you talk about even at the state level, the State Police had reached out directly to me, the Governor had reached out to me as well and also at the time he was new to the job, but Commissioner Wagner from the Rhode Island Department of Education, he came down, he wanted to be there as a partner. You know ‘how can I support?’ We all understood that this had the potential to explode.”

Superintendent DiCenso observed members of the media and advocacy groups while on the scene.

Mayor Grebien approached the protesters. He sought to explain to them that their voices were being heard. In describing his goals for meeting with students, Mayor Grebien explained:

“You know that this is a volatile situation, you need to get it under control, as the Mayor of the City you have a responsibility...at that point in time it was instinctive that we reacted, we

²⁵ Sam Wroblewski, “Protesting Tolman High Students Pepper Sprayed by Police,” *WPRO 630*, October 15, 2015, <http://www.630wpro.com/2015/10/15/tolman-high-students-protest-alleged-police-brutality-incident/>.

knew what was right, we wanted to diffuse the situation, we wanted to get everybody back to school.”

The Mayor and Superintendent met with a small subset of students, seemingly the group leaders, at City Hall. The Mayor noted that this allowed students the opportunity to vent, while also demonstrating that officials took their concerns seriously.²⁶ After the City Hall meeting, students went on the intercom to let their classmates know about the meeting and that their voices were being heard.

Reflecting on the day, Superintendent DiCenso believed that some of the protesting students involved themselves as a way to get out of a school day. For them, a protest would be considered “a civil thing” and acceptable to their parents. Some parents participated in the protests. Other students, however, were genuinely interested in speaking with the Mayor. These students were upset that disruptions could reflect poorly on their own efforts. The Mayor appreciated the peaceful nature of the protest maintained by students, despite the interruption from the pulled fire alarm. He added, “I was very impressed that they were really expressing themselves from a civic perspective.”

Local activist groups discussed their own involvement with the SRO incident and subsequent protest.

Zack Mezera, Executive Director of the Providence Student Union, learned about the student protests through social media. On the day of the protest, Mezera, along with another Providence Student Union organizer, drove up to Tolman HS “on a whim to find out what was going on,” and to provide possible support. They were not in the vicinity when the students approached City Hall.

Martha Yager, Program Coordinator of the South East office of the American Friends Service Committee, said that a group of adults were present as observers as students marched to City Hall. However, she was not among those on the scene.

Hillary Davis, Policy Associate for the ACLU of Rhode Island, learned about the viral video and discussion of possible protests from Twitter. The ACLU followed reporters on Twitter who disseminated this information. The organization was aware that protests were taking place once Pawtucket police started arresting students. The ACLU was not directly involved in the protests, but instead started out by monitoring the situation.

James Vincent, President of the NAACP Providence Branch, found out about the SRO incident from the TV news. Upon learning of the events, he took a “wait and see approach,” rather than have the organization insert itself from the outset. According to Vincent, the ACLU took the

²⁶ Mayor Grebien and Chief King also mentioned the positive efforts of Melissa DaRosa, a street worker with the Institute for the Study and Practice of Nonviolence. Attempts to get in touch with her were unsuccessful.

lead in the responses to the incident. Mayor Grebien and Chief King called to inform him personally that there would be a State Police investigation.

October 15: 5:30 P.M.

That evening, at the Cape Verdean American Community Development Center, Mayor Grebien announced that there would be a joint investigation between the Pawtucket Police Department and the Rhode Island State Police. The SRO would also step down during the investigation.²⁷

October 16

By Friday, the situation at Tolman had largely calmed down. As a precaution, Superintendent DiCenso brought in extra staff members to the campus, including two SROs (instead of the usual one), an extra dean of students, and an extra assistant principal. The district also instituted a “shelter in place” for the day, due to an unrelated incident involving a neighboring city.²⁸

On October 20, the RI ACLU circulated a letter to all school districts using SROs, requesting that they re-examine their use and to revise their MOUs. Suggestions included giving school officials “a meaningful role to play in the selection and retention of SROs,” instituting pre-service and annual training requirements on relevant adolescent issues (e.g. development and psychology), and enforcing “clear limits” regarding the use of force.²⁹

In response to the memo, Superintendent DiCenso said that the School Department planned on devising a new agreement regarding the use of School Resource Officers. She expressed the desire to maintain the SRO position at Tolman, but wanted the understanding to be “more of a partnership.” This would entail a greater sense of shared responsibility between the School and Police Departments. The Tolman High School Principal, along with the School Committee Chairman, Michael Araujo, also sought to maintain the program.³⁰

²⁷ “State Police to Probe ‘Takedown’ of Student by Officer that Led to Protest, Arrests at Pawtucket School,” *Providence Journal*, October 15, 2015,

<http://www.providencejournal.com/article/20151015/NEWS/151019570>.

²⁸ Jonathan Bissonette, “School Week at Tolman Ends Quietly, Assembly Planned to Address Student Issues,” *The Times* (Pawtucket, RI), October 16, 2015, http://www.pawtuckettimes.com/news/school-week-at-tolman-ends-quietly-assembly-planned-to-address/article_b942cf54-747a-11e5-895d-873a6c28c5e8.html.

²⁹ “ACLU Calls on Schools to Re-Examine Use of Resource Officers,” *The Valley Breeze*, October 22, 2015, <http://www.valleybreeze.com/2015-10-22/pawtucket/aclu-calls-schools-re-examine-use-resource-officers.;> See also Steven Brown, letter to Superintendent Patti DiCenso, October 20, 2015, http://riaclu.org/images/uploads/SRO_letter_to_Pawtucket.pdf.

State Police Investigation

On November 30, the Pawtucket Police Department and Rhode Island State Police released their joint investigative report. Investigators spoke to more than two dozen people over the course of this process. In addition to the aforementioned witnesses, they consulted with officials from the Rhode Island Municipal Police Academy Training, Pawtucket Police Department In-Service Use of Force, and Rhode Island State Police Defensive Tactics Experts. They also reviewed the viral video.

Officials from those agencies concurred that the SRO acted reasonably in accordance with his training. For example, Sergeant Denis LeFebvre of the Pawtucket Police Department Planning and Training Division was also a Use of Force Instructor at the Rhode Island Municipal Police Training Academy. He noted that the take down had been taught to Pawtucket officers since 2011, which is when the Department started L.O.C.K.U.P. training. Lieutenant Kenneth S. Buonaiuto and Corporal Scot G. Baruti, both Defensive Tactics experts with the Rhode Island State Police, also reviewed the video. Both stated that this action was a reasonable “controlled take down maneuver,” based on use of force protocols.

Investigators concurred that the viral video represented only a small portion of the series of the events that afternoon. They learned that the SRO was assaulted prior to the recorded incident. Based on the witness statements and videos, they concluded that the SRO handled the incident in an “objectively reasonable” manner. He was exonerated of any wrongdoing, and was not to be subjected to further charges.³¹

Upon announcement of the report, several groups, including the ACLU of Rhode Island, the NAACP Providence Branch, the George Wiley Center, the American Friends Service Committee- South East New England, and Providence Student Union, filed an open records request with the Rhode Island State Police under the state’s Access to Public Records Act. They sought evidence from the investigation itself, plus documents relating to the review of the use of pepper spray on the day of the student protest.³²

³⁰ Sam Wroblewski, “Pawtucket Schools to Reevaluate Partnership with Police Department,” *WPRO 630*, October 22, 2015, <http://www.630wpro.com/2015/10/22/pawtucket-schools-to-reevaluate-partnership-with-police-department/>; Ethan Shorey, “School Officials Seeking More of a Partnership on Resource Officers,” *The Valley Breeze*, October 27, 2015, <http://www.valleybreeze.com/2015-10-27/pawtucket/school-officials-seeking-more-partnership-resource-officers>.

³¹ Shaun Towne and Kelly Sullivan, “Officer Cleared of Wrongdoing in Tolman High Takedown,” *Wpri.com*, December 22, 2015, <http://wpri.com/2015/12/22/officer-cleared-of-wrongdoing-in-tolman-high-takedown/>; Ethan Shorey, “Police Clear Officer Boudreault of Wrongdoing in Tolman Incident,” *The Valley Breeze*, December 22, 2015, <http://www.valleybreeze.com/2015-12-22/pawtucket/police-clear-officer-boudreau-wrongdoing-tolman-incident>.

³² ACLU of Rhode Island, “Groups Request Release of State Police Report on Tolman High School Incident,” *RI Future.org*, December 23, 2015, <http://www.rifuture.org/groups-request-release-of-sate-police-report-on-tolman-high-school-incident.html>.

Following the conclusion of the investigation, Superintendent DiCenso stated that the District's first priority was to devise a new MOU concerning the use of SROs.³³ On December 30, the City of Pawtucket announced that the SRO would not return to Tolman High School. He agreed to be reassigned to the Pawtucket Police Department Detective Division.³⁴ After a bidding process, the Police Department assigned a new SRO to Tolman High School.

The Aftermath

A new SRO began working at Tolman High School in January, 2016.

Officials proceeded towards making changes to the SRO process, which included role clarification. Mayor Grebien said that the City was in the process of forming a committee to examine SRO best practices from across Rhode Island and throughout the rest of the country. He expected that such practices would be reflected in future trainings by the Police and School Departments. Mayor Grebien said that both departments were gaining a better understanding of the SRO program and associated processes. "The one thing I think is so important is we're trying to take a look at what our existing policies are. We believe they are good policies but you can always make them better as we move forward." According to Mayor Grebien, the City also planned to reach out to some of the students beyond the committee to work on the SRO policies.

Superintendent DiCenso emphasized a need to clarify the role of SROs versus that of school administrators. This is particularly an issue among newer SROs that strive to be team players, even when their actions are not well-suited for a particular situation. After surveying principals at schools in which SROs were based, she explained, "...there seemed to be some spreading out of a blurred line of what was administrative and what was the SRO's role." For example, an SRO should not oversee an administrator searching a student's backpack. The plan was to bring together all SROs from across the school district to discuss how to move forward in light of these conversations. "...We didn't have an evaluation tool at this program because if it ain't broke don't fix it, but this incident has brought forward some things that we really should have been looking at closer and we will now because it's already been set up by the Mayor's office."

³³ Ethan Shorey, "State Police: Tolman SRO Boudreault Acted Properly; Future Assignment Unclear," *The Valley Breeze*, December 29, 2015, <http://www.valleybreeze.com/2015-12-29/pawtucket/state-police-tolman-sro-boudreault-acted-properly-future-assignment-unclear>.

³⁴ Ethan Shorey, "Tolman High School SRO Boudreault Reassigned to Detective Division," *The Valley Breeze*, December 30, 2015, <http://www.valleybreeze.com/2015-12-30/pawtucket/tolman-high-school-sro-boudreault-reassigned-detective-division>.

Activists expressed mostly disappointment with the City's perceived lack of community follow-up.³⁵

For example, Hillary Davis, of the Rhode Island ACLU, said that the organization was not aware of any possible changes to Pawtucket's MOU regarding the use of SROs. Martha Yager, of the American Friends Service Committee, noted that the organization maintained longtime concerns about student suspensions and the use of police officers in schools. She, too, was disappointed in the lack of community follow-up. James Vincent, of the NAACP Providence Branch, thought it was the correct decision for the SRO to be taken out of the school. However, he "wanted more discussion on the use of force," as applied to juveniles. Young Voices, a student leadership and advocacy organization that previously partnered with Tolman High School, expressed similar sentiments.³⁶

The release of the joint report failed to mitigate activists' concerns. Davis explained:

"The State Police had promised that they were going to release this to the public and it was going to be a whole conversation and everything...the State Police really haven't had a public conversation about it. I'm sure that everyone who wants it can get it but that's really different than saying we're going to really talk about this and what happened."

In May 2016, Mayor Grebien and Superintendent DiCenso publicly announced the formation of a Pawtucket School Resource Officer Commission. This Commission would thoroughly investigate the SRO program, with the goal of implementing a new MOU by the start of the 2016-17 school year. Invited stakeholders included individuals from different levels of government, school, police, and legal communities, the NAACP, and the ACLU.³⁷

Advice for Officials

Officials offered advice for handling communications during a crisis situation. Chief King recommended having communication procedures in place prior to an incident. In Pawtucket, he felt that the Superintendent's office, Police Department, and the Mayor's office all had a great relationship. The open communications were already there, so everyone was on the same page.

Mayor Grebien also discussed the importance of good communication, from the vantage point of officials vis à vis the school community. He sought to bring together students to initially give them the opportunity to vent, and build from there. "This [the protests] had the potential to be so much worse, a volatile situation, but because we were able to do the communication and do

³⁵ Note: Interviews took place before the public announcement of the commission.

³⁶ Ethan Shorey, "School Officials Cut 'Young Voices' Tie after Tolman Survey," *The Valley Breeze*, June 7, 2016, <http://www.valleybreeze.com/2016-06-07/pawtucket/school-officials-cut-young-voices-tie-after-tolman-survey>.

³⁷ Ethan Shorey, "Officials Finalize List of Prospective Members to Serve on Resource Officer Commission," *The Valley Breeze*, May 17, 2016, www.valleybreeze.com/2016-05-17/pawtucket/officials-finalize-list-prospective-members-serve-resource-officer-commission.

those meetings and have dialogue, have the input on both sides and they got to see it from our perspective as much as we got to see it from theirs, it added so much value.”

Principal Savastano noted that during this time of crisis, officials were able to put aside their differences and personal agendas in order to work on the problems at hand.

Superintendent DiCenso appreciated the importance of good communications with the Police Department and Mayor’s office during a time of crisis. She also described the challenges of effectively communicating with the press and community while events developed. She recommended having a city’s mayoral office provide comment to the press while a crisis unfolds. Once the crisis has come to a conclusion, a superintendent is best equipped to speak with members of the media. Chief King also recognized dealing with the press as a challenge that comes with the job.

Finally, Superintendent DiCenso wanted to reassure administrators in other school districts about the positive work performed by SROs. She said that their work was not heavy-handed, and did not make students feel threatened. Rather, these individuals got to know the students and enhanced their learning environment.