

Fresno Unified School District
Board Communication

BC Number EA-1

From the Office of the Superintendent
To the Members of the Board of Education
Prepared by: Kristi Imber-Olivares, Director
Cabinet Approval:

Date: February 26, 2021

Phone Number: 457-3896

Regarding:  Student Focus Groups on Policing Summary

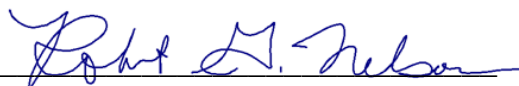
The purpose of this communication is to provide the Board information on the summary report that synthesized qualitative data toward our work to understand our students' perceptions and opinions of police on campus. Equity and Access, Communications, Operational Services, and the Office of African American Academic Acceleration partnered to conduct student focus groups with middle and high school students.

Seventeen virtual student focus groups were conducted with students in grades 7 to 12 from January 18 to February 11. Facilitators and note-takers were trained on January 12 and 13. Notification letters were mailed out in early January to the parents/guardians of selected students to inform them about this opportunity and we partnered with school sites to conduct outreach to chosen participants. Schools and classrooms were randomly selected to ensure a representative sample of the larger student population. In addition to partnering with schools, we engaged our Student Voice Initiative groups to lead focus groups as well. These students will represent mixed ethnic/racial backgrounds and include English Learner students, African American students, foster youth, homeless students, Gay Straight Alliance club members, and students with disabilities. A content/thematic analysis was conducted of the qualitative data gathered from these student focus groups to identify themes.

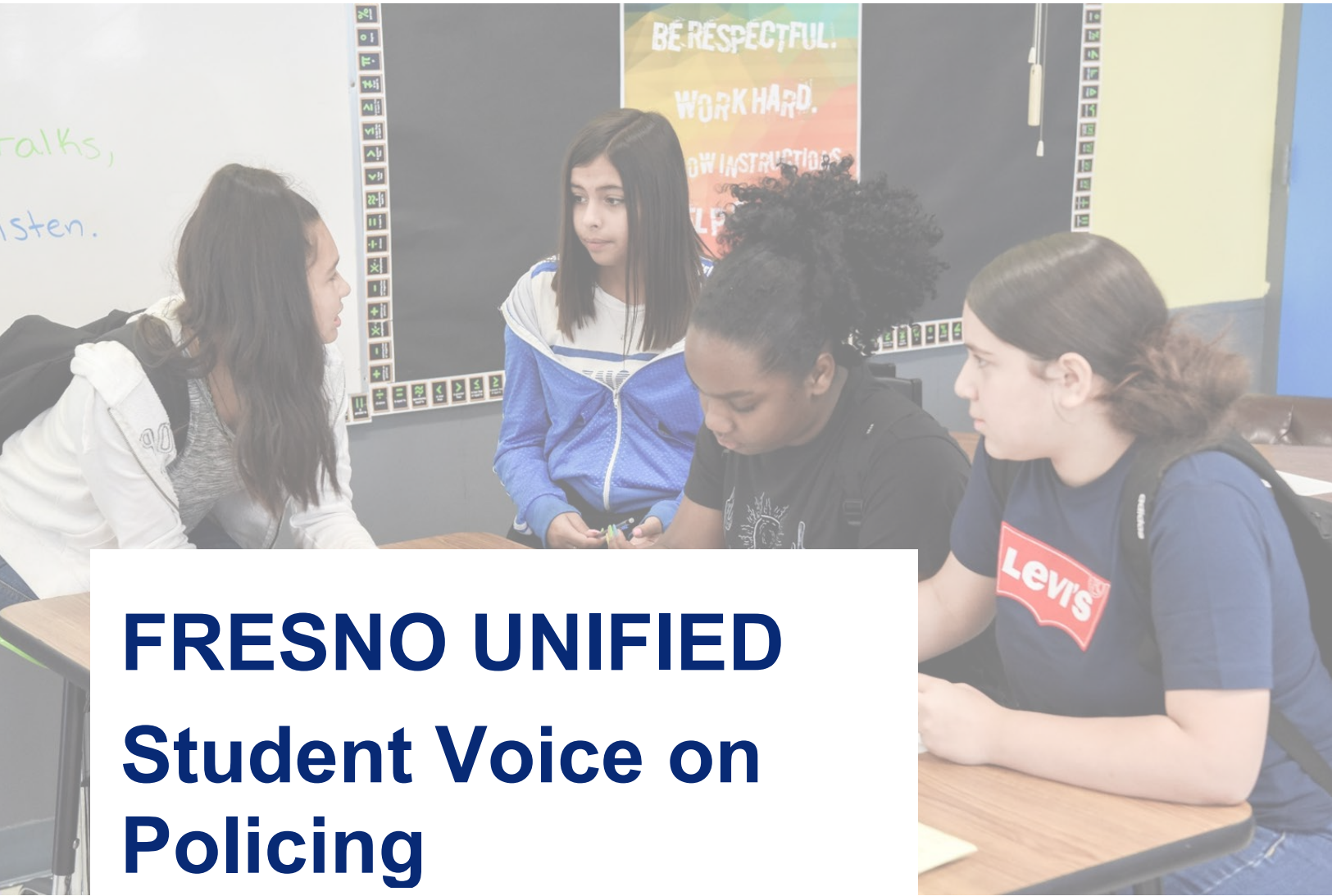
Included with this communication is the Student Focus Groups on Policing Summary report which provides more details of the methodology, findings, and recommendations.

If you have further questions or require additional information, please contact Lindsay Sanders at 457-3471.

Approved by Superintendent
Robert G. Nelson Ed.D.



Date: 02/26/21



FRESNO UNIFIED Student Voice on Policing

FEBRUARY 22, 2021

EQUITY AND ACCESS

Introduction

A movement to reform California public school policing and rethink school safety has been gaining momentum amid nationwide protest against police brutality. In recognition of our need to better understand the impact of police officers on our school campuses, Fresno Unified has put together a cross-departmental team to lead in a process to engage our students, families, and school site staff in a deeper discussion and gather their perceptions and opinions of police on our school campuses. Equity and Access, Communications, Operational Services, and the Office of African American Academic Acceleration collaborated to plan and conduct student focus groups with middle and high school students to address the following questions:

- How do students perceive police officers in their community and on campus?
- What factors influence how safe students feel on campus? What do students believe is working well and what may need improvement on a school campus in regards to safety?
- If police officers were to be removed or remain on campus, how would students feel?

Methodology

Seventeen virtual student focus groups were conducted with students in grades 7 to 12 from January 18th to February 11th. Facilitators and note-takers were trained on January 12th and 13th. Notification letters were mailed out in early January to the parents/guardians of selected students to inform them about this opportunity and we partnered with school sites to conduct outreach to chosen participants. Schools and classrooms were randomly selected to ensure a representative sample of the larger student population. In addition to partnering with schools, we engaged our Student Voice Initiative groups to lead focus groups as well, and conducted the following sessions:

- 8 Student Voice Initiative student focus groups
- 9 school-based student focus groups

In total, 114 students participated in these focus groups. Sessions were held with diverse students from mixed ethnic/racial backgrounds and included African American

students, EL students, foster youth, BSU club members, homeless students, GSA club members, and students with disabilities. A content/thematic analysis was conducted of the qualitative data gathered from these student focus groups to identify key and sub-themes.

Key Findings

- **Students perceive police in their community and police on campus differently, with students having more direct interactions with police on their school campuses and less direct experiences with police in their community.**
- **Students shared mostly positive experiences and perceptions of having police on campus.**
- **Trained police officers on campus and caring staff make students feel safe on campus, with student-adult positive interactions as the most influential factor.**
- **Students shared that there is a lack of consistency of police officers' interactions with students across Fresno Unified.**
- **If police were to remain on campus, students would like to see more positive interactions with students and a district-wide focus on trust building between police and students.**
- **If police were not on campus, schools would be more vulnerable to dangerous situations and students would not feel safe.**
- **All schools should hire more diverse staff that represents the racial and ethnic make-up of their student body.**

Students perceive police in their community and police on campus differently, with students having more direct interactions with police on their school campuses and less direct experiences with police in their community. Students shared mixed feelings about police in their community. Some students expressed feeling safer having police in their community, while others shared negative experiences with police in their own personal neighborhoods, leading them to feel less safe. Some participants shared how police in their communities make them feel more comfortable and protected, while other students discussed viewing police confrontations in their neighborhoods or hearing of incidents where police have used unnecessary force with community members. Students shared how they and most people stereotype police more now

based on what is shown in the media and that they recognize that their perceptions at times may be influenced by media experience rather than personal experiences. In particular, students cited the media's coverage of the George Floyd incident as instilling a sense of fear of the police and a belief that all police are racist. While the majority of the students who shared during these focus groups stated that they did not have direct experiences with police in their communities, a handful of students described their interactions with police in their communities. For example, one student shared how they saw a police officer while playing basketball at a community park and immediately felt fearful. However, to this student's surprise, the police officer brought them lunch and played basketball with them.

"I feel some sense of ease or safety when I see a police officer nearby especially where I live where there are occasional shootings."

- Middle School Student

Students shared mostly positive experiences and perceptions of having police on campus. Students shared that police on campus reassure them and make them feel safe, especially in regard to school shootings, bullying, and violence on campus. For example, one student recalled an incident where they had a shooter lockdown during one of their rallies and it was frightening, but they felt reassured knowing a police officer was on campus. One of our students with a hearing impairment shared an experience where a stranger came on campus and a lockdown was occurring, but due to their inability to hear the bell and announcement, they were stranded out in the hallway. A police officer found them and pulled them into the classroom. Students also stated that police support with suicide prevention, break up fights, reduce drug use on campus, de-escalate problems, and step in to support during emergency situations. One student shared that they had a friend who was feeling depressed and they were worried their friend might hurt herself. The student confided in their campus police officer about their friend and he stepped in to support and worked with the school social worker to get that student help. Students also shared that police officers on campus serve as role models or mentors to students and try to foster relationships with students. In fact, during one focus group session, students shared that they have observed their peers who have been suspended or often get in trouble, have positive,

close relationships with the police officer on campus. Some students shared that they purposefully engage police officers to build relationships with them.

“Even if I don’t see police officers around campus every day, just the knowledge of their presence on campus makes me feel safer”

– Middle School student

A small portion of student participants stated that they try to avoid police officers and felt that police on campus made them feel anxious and overwhelmed due to their race/ethnicity. One student shared that they noticed police officers to be more visible around certain groups of students, mostly African American, which makes them feel uncomfortable. Another student shared that they witnessed a police officer breaking up a fight and he used physical force to hold the one of the student’s head down which made them feel worried and unsafe.

“If I get in trouble and the security guard is coming, it's no big deal and I feel comfortable. But if I get in trouble and a police officer comes to me, I'm scared and don't want to be in the situation.”

- High School Student

Trained police officers on campus and caring staff make students feel safe on campus, with student-adult positive interactions as the most influential factor. Adults who are positive, present, and available makes students feel safer on campus. Students shared that having police officers on campus makes them feel safe because they know there is someone trained to handle dangerous situations such as school shootings, fights, and someone bringing a weapon to school. One student shared that their school is being purposeful in holding rallies and providing communications about police presence on campus, which helps students feel safer on campus. Focus group participants also expressed that having staff on site who genuinely care and interact positively with students help them feel safe on campus. One student shared that teachers on their campus open their classrooms at lunch to let students come in and that helps students feel secure. Another student shared that when they can openly share negative experiences or when they feel unsafe, that makes them feel safe on campus. When staff communicate with students about a problem or when an emergency situation

arises, this also helps students to feel safe because they are aware of what is happening.

The majority of students cited that positive interactions with police officers and staff were the biggest factor in whether or not students felt safe on campus. While some students felt that merely the presence of police officers made students feel safe, more students cited that police officers who have good relationships with students and interact positively make them feel safe. In addition, one focus group session brought up the importance of having staff and police officers who look like the students at the school. For example, one student stated that they would feel safer knowing there is an African American police officer, male or female, on their campus. This student shared that it is difficult in general to make a connection with adults who do not look like you. Another student shared that at their high school, the police officer is White and some students feel he is intimidating and not approachable, just because he does not look like them. However, this same student recognized that the portrayal of police in the media may makes them feel more fearful of White police officers. A couple of students shared that they did not feel comfortable or safe with anyone on campus carrying a gun. Further, some students cited physical structures, such as gates and cameras, as influencing how safe students feel on campus.

“I want everyone to know that we can have a connection and we can talk to police on campus and not be afraid. As an African American student and everything going on in the world, we need to know that we can have a connection.”

- High School Student

Students shared that there is a lack of consistency of police officers’ interactions with students across Fresno Unified. The majority of students who participated in these focus groups discussed how most police officers are effective at protecting students, keeping the campus safe, and positively interacting with students. However, some students cited negative and inappropriate behavior of some police officers on their campuses. One student shared an experience where during a fight, a police officer accidentally took out their gun instead of the taser and it made the student feel

uncomfortable. Another student shared that a police officer on their campus stood idly and let a fight happen and did not intervene until the principal came out. Students cited the inconsistency in police behavior and treatment of students on campus speaks to a need for more accountability and district-wide retraining of police officers. Some students suggested that police officers need additional training on specifically treating and interacting with children. One student shared that the police officer on their campus was often “grouchy, moody, and mean.” This spurred discussion of how police officers should have more positive attitudes especially when interacting with students. In addition, students shared that there should be standard expectations of how police officers should behave and interact with students. For example, one student shared that police officers should introduce themselves to students and conduct presentations in classrooms. Students also shared that some police officers know how to appropriately interact with students with mental health disorders, while others do not.

“Schools should make the officer more a part of the culture of the school instead of just being there on campus.”

- Middle School Student

If police were to remain on campus, students would like to see more positive interactions with students and a district-wide focus on trust building between police and students. While most students shared experiences of positively interacting with police officers, some participants in the focus groups expressed that they felt that police need to do a better job engaging with students outside of discipline. However, some students stated that when it comes to mental health issues, there needs to be more social workers and counselors available on campus instead of having police officers handle it. Some students also felt that police officers need to be intentional in building trust with students and be more approachable. One student said that they would like to see “more visible police”, going on to describe student contact that is positive and fun on their campus. Another student shared that there is a lot of tension between students of color and police, which negatively impacts how students view police on campus. Students in the focus group also indicated that providing students more opportunities to positively interact with police on campus would make them feel more comfortable and foster trust.

Once again, students stated that student perception of police are skewed by the media. One participant suggested that if students had more opportunities to positively interact with police and build relationships with them on campus while they are still young, then this would help students grow into adults who had more of an open mind about police officers and what they saw in the media. Similarly, students discussed that schools need to develop ways to get police officers in front of students more and not just when students misbehave or break the rules. For example, students discussed engaging students and police in fun activities, to give students opportunities to interact with police and help to foster trust. One student recommended that police officers go into classrooms to talk with students about safety or to answer questions students may have about their role on campus. Another student recommended police officers get involved in morning announcements and rallies. In addition, students cited that more school communication about police on campus is needed, as some students do not know what their roles are or why they are on campus other than to break up fights and for school shootings. Some focus group participants also discussed better concealment of police weapons as something they would like to see more of. For example, a student shared that when a police officer is trying to de-escalate a situation and calm students down, seeing their gun does not help to calm students and can create more anxiety. Lastly, a couple of students discussed an alternate approach to searching bags and felt this was an invasion of student privacy. These students suggested that schools should have metal detectors set up that students walk through when coming on to campus and student backpacks only be inspected when the metal detector goes off.

“Students not knowing the officers can be a barrier and they can’t expect students to be comfortable with them.”

- Middle School Student

If police were not on campus, schools would be more vulnerable to dangerous situations and students would not feel safe. While participants in the focus groups acknowledged that there are improvements to be made with police on campus, overwhelmingly, students expressed concern and feeling unsafe if police were

removed from their school campuses. While a couple of students expressed not caring one way or the other, the majority of students shared that if there were no police on campus, schools could become more of a target for dangerous situations, such as school shootings or strangers coming on to campus. However, not all students agreed that having police on campus was a benefit. For example, a few students shared that they believed police on campuses perpetuates the negative relationship between youth and police officers. Students also shared that this issue is not isolated to just school campuses – it extends to neighborhoods and communities - and that across the board, some students felt that police officers should be replaced with community workers and neighborhood watch.

While students recognized that there are other adults on campus to keep them safe and protect them, they questioned if teachers would be trained to handle an active shooter on campus or to step in to break up a fight. Participants also asked if Fresno Unified was planning on adding more cameras on school sites and teaching students and school staff how to defend their schools from school shootings or when outside people walk on campus without police. Students shared that police provide an additional layer of security, especially when the surrounding school neighborhood is unsafe. Some students stated that they would not want to attend school in-person if there were no police on the campuses, citing fights, weapons, and drug use on campus may increase as a result. For example, one participant expressed that students would feel more anxious and worried because anyone could come on to their campus and bring weapons without police officers there. In addition, students discussed that having safety procedures and gates were not enough to protect them and questioned who at their school would replace police officers, particularly for schools where there are no gates or fences. Lastly, students raised concerns of how fast city police would respond to a school incident or emergency if police were not already on their campuses.

“There’s a big difference from having a safe campus and having students feel safe on campus. We all have procedures and drills and are prepared for a crisis, but that does not mean we would feel safe without police officers at school.”

- High School Student

perceptions of police, students often discussed the importance of not only hiring police officers who look like students, but also ensuring that there are more diverse staff on campus. Throughout these discussions, students cited that school staff also contribute to how safe students feel on campus, and often spoke about the challenges students experience interacting with staff who do not look like them. Students felt that police officers and other school staff should be more racially diverse and believed that this may help in fostering relationships with students, particularly students of color. One member of the focus group shared that our district is made up of such a diverse study body, and yet the majority of school staff do not represent the race and ethnicity of the student population. At the end of most sessions, many students expressed their gratitude of police officers and recognition of their difficult jobs. Students also appreciated the opportunity to participate in these student focus groups.

“I just feel better with people who looks like me on campus, and that can be teachers or counselors or police.”
- High School Student

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the student focus groups, there are five recommendations that emerged from synthesizing the cross-departmental team feedback for Fresno Unified to consider:

- SROs need to build **intentional relationships** with students by creating additional **opportunities to interact** with students outside of discipline.
- SROs should participate in **ongoing student-centered** and **cultural proficiency trainings** to better understand the populations they serve.
- SRO roles and expectations need to be **consistently communicated and implemented** across school campuses.
- SROs selection should mirror the **diversity** of the student population.
- SROs should **limit the exposure of weapons** while on our school campuses.

Appendix: Student Focus Group Questions

Introduction Question

1. What is your perception or experiences of police in your community?
(Probing: What is your perception or experiences of police at your school?)

Exploratory Questions

2. What factors do you think might influence how safe students feel on campus? (Probing: What is your school doing to cultivate a safe campus?)
3. How do police on campus make you feel? (Probing: Do you feel more safe? Unsafe? Why do you feel that way? Provide examples. How have you observed interactions on campus with police? What are some positive interactions you've observed? Negative interactions?)
4. If police were to remain on campus, what would you like to see more of? (Probing: What could be improved? What are some actions your school could take to promote good police-student interactions? What are the barriers to good police-student relations? What steps do you think your school can take to eliminate those barriers?)
5. If police were not on campus, how would that make you feel? (Probing: What concerns would you have if there were no police on campus? What actions would your school need to take so that students feel safe?)

Exit Question

6. Is there anything else you would like to say about police on campus?