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Albuquerque Journal Interviews Maryam Ahranjani, Many Want Police Out of Schools Across NM

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Many Want Police Out of Schools Across NM

By Shelby Perea
Albuquerque Journal
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Two researchers and some parents are calling for the removal of police officers from schools across the state, arguing that their presence could be harmful to students and that the money districts are spending on cops would be better spent elsewhere.

The call comes amid civil unrest after George Floyd was killed by a police officer in Minneapolis, sparking protests and demands for change to law enforcement operations across the country. The movement to get officers out of schools is gaining traction, with school districts in Minneapolis, Seattle and Portland, Oregon, pledging to remove officers from campus, according to The New York Times, which also reported that Denver's school board has voted to terminate its police contract.

In Albuquerque, University of New Mexico School of Law associate professor Maryam Ahranjani and Hope Pendleton, a board member of the Black Law Student Association at UNM, are saying now is the time to remove officers from schools.

"There's a lot of unfortunate downstream negative repercussions for children from having police officers in schools," Ahranjani said.

APS spokeswoman Monica Armenta wrote in a statement that district officials have been examining this topic for years.

"The primary responsibility of school police officers is to maintain order and security on school campuses while nurturing positive and respectful relationships with students. The challenge is always to strike a balance so that the lives of our students and staff are never compromised, at the same time ensuring our diverse student population doesn't feel threatened or unfairly targeted by our officers," Armenta wrote in an emailed statement.

An American Civil Liberties Union report said officers on campus can lead to "greater student alienation and a more threatening school climate," adding that research shows that school health staff such as counselors are more beneficial for students overall. The report says the ratio of students to counselors in New Mexico is 391 to 1, citing 2015-2016 federal data.

Pendleton and Ahranjani helped write a letter to APS Superintendent Raquel Reedy and her leadership team that says funds earmarked for the APS Police Department would be better spent addressing this counselor-to-student ratio and investing in other personnel.

“Reallocating funds away from law enforcement and toward teacher training and additional supports such as social workers, counselors and school psychologists is an evidence-based way for APS and other districts to keep children and school personnel safe in a cost effective way,” the letter says.

According to Armenta, \$6.5 million of the district’s operational funds was budgeted for the APS Police Department – which includes 58 officers – for fiscal year 2020. There are also Albuquerque Police Department officers, Bernalillo County Sheriff’s Office deputies and service aides on some campuses.

Roy Dennis, former president and current member of the Educational Police Officers Association of New Mexico, said it would be a mistake to remove officers from schools.

A sergeant with APS police, Dennis said his experience has been that the officers serve a mentorship role with students.

“Right now, it’s like everyone is lumping us all in the same barrel with the officers in Minneapolis and that’s not the case, especially not with APS police,” he told the Journal.

He said having school police ensures a faster response to an emergency, if needed.

“We give students an added feeling of safety,” Dennis said. “We are there to protect them.”

Ahranjani has researched education law, co-written a textbook on student rights and followed the issue of police in schools for decades. And Pendleton has done national research on school security environments.

They write in their letter that there’s “no evidence based support for the idea that having police officers stationed in public schools yields positive outcomes.”

Lisa Peterson, an assistant professor in New Mexico State University’s school psychology program, says research shows that adults feel safer with officers in schools, but that’s not necessarily the case for middle school and high school students. Peterson – who was a teacher and school psychologist in Texas – said research shows Black and female students feel less safe in school due to police presence, whereas white and male students tend to feel safer.

“If you think about the concept of safety, if you don’t feel safe in your environment, that’s going to affect you psychologically – your focus and ability to learn,” Peterson said.

Pendleton said she saw her children’s Black classmates in Illinois being targeted for arrests by officers at schools because of behavioral issues. Ahranjani said that based on national information available, because of implicit biases, “children of color and children with disabilities are the ones who get much more harshly treated by law enforcement.”

APS police officers have the authority to make arrests. Seven students were arrested last school year by APS police officers, according to Armenta, who added that arrests are a last resort but “inevitable when guns are found on campuses or lives are threatened.”

“We understand many of our students and their families experience public education through a lens not always understood by all, and we will continue to do what we can to eradicate racism where it exists,” Armenta wrote.

APS police are trained in restorative justice practices. But the district didn’t return questions from the Journal on what that training entails.

Pendleton and Ahranjani are also urging for more accessible data on school discipline.

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