

JCPS

Poll: Police in schools favored

Of 500 residents, 57% think they are needed

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A majority of Louisville residents think public schools should have school police, a new poll suggests.

The poll from USA TODAY/Suffolk University finds the idea has support across almost all demographics — a stark difference to volatile debates that play out in front of the Jefferson County school board, which has final say over school security decisions.

Of the 500 Louisville residents polled, 57% felt police officers should be stationed in Louisville's public schools.

Another 37% of respondents said police should not be in schools, with the rest saying they are undecided. The poll's margin of error is plus or

minus 4.4 percentage points.

The new polling offers a temperature check on a long-simmering issue as Jefferson County Public Schools prepares to collect community feedback on its plan to make schools safer. A final proposal is expected to face a school board vote by the end of February.

District spokesman Mark Hebert declined to comment specifically on the polling, deferring to school board members to weigh in.

Some divides on police in school

Almost all demographics leaned toward putting police in schools, but some divides were clear.

White respondents, for example, said they wanted police in schools by 60% to 35% opposed. Black residents had lower levels of support, with 53% supporting police and 43% opposing — and the margin of error for Black residents' responses is large enough to flip the results.

Younger respondents tended to be more likely to oppose having police in schools. The 18-to-24-year-old age bracket was split 48% in favor and 45% opposed.

Democrats made up one of the lone groups to say they opposed police in schools, with 50% saying no and 46% saying yes.

In contrast, 71% of Republicans and 62% of Independents said they wanted police on campus.

The poll comes with caveats. The poll's margin of error is 4.4 percentage points for the full sample, but is higher for demographic subgroups.

The margins of error totals 8.7 percentage points for Black residents' responses and 5.6 percentage points for white residents' responses.

The question posed — “Do you think police officers should be stationed in Louisville's public schools – yes or no?” — did not leave room for nuanced feedback on if those officers should be armed, to whom they should report or if they should be in every school or on select campuses.

Findings unsurprising to some

When approached about the findings,

school board members and state lawmakers weren't surprised.

Most of the people he has talked to seemed to like the idea of an internal security team at JCPS, board member James Craig said. The poll results reinforce that.

“For our school security plan to work, we need broad community support,” Craig said. “Whether the plan is popular with 57% of a survey's respondents doesn't mean that it will work, or that protests from a smaller percentage of the community won't derail it.”

Opponents frequently say more officers in schools worsens racial disparities in discipline, putting students of color on track for early involvement in the criminal justice system.

“The resistance to police in our schools has come from a vocal minority who show up at meetings when they are told this may be a discussion topic,” said board member Linda Duncan, a vocal proponent of school police.

Board member Chris Kolb, who has opposed police in schools, also said he wasn't

surprised — but for a different reason. “I don’t think people are aware of different possibilities outside of the option presented in the poll,” Kolb said.

Some of those possibilities, he said, will be discussed in the coming weeks as JCPS turns to the community and school board with potential security changes.

District leaders have not shared specifics of the plan, but said last month it may include arming existing district security officers and assigning them to clusters of schools.

New technology, extra training and a new “safety administrator” position that would focus on “proactive steps” to boost security inside schools could also be on the table. Hebert said they expect to announce details about community feedback sessions “very soon.”

Could legislation impact security talks?

Proposed state legislation may give JCPS little wiggle room over its approach to school security. A bill co-sponsored by four Louisville Republicans would ax loopholes from state law and require one officer for each campus by August, regardless of whether funding or personnel are available. A recent report from Kentucky’s School Security Marshal found more than half of Kentucky schools do not have an officer.

Rep. Kevin Bratcher, one of the bill’s co-sponsors, said the USA TODAY poll signals “most people are crying out for (Kentucky’s school security) law to be followed.”

Bratcher, a frequent critic of JCPS’ refusal to have SROs, said he has “been informed” of the district’s upcoming security proposal. A district spokesman said they had “received positive feedback” from legislators on the security concepts they’re considering. But Bratcher said, “While I commend (Pollio) for trying, I don’t believe it is enough.”

“It is a stretch to say that this new plan satisfies state law,” he continued.

Hebert said last month JCPS believes assigning officers to clusters of schools, rather than stationing one on each campus, would fulfill state law because an officer would technically be “assigned” to cover each school.

Both Bratcher and Sen. Max Wise, a Campbellsville Republican who shepherded the 2019 safety law to passage, disagreed with the district’s interpretation of the law. “The goal is not for a drive-by officer to come after an incident, but for a resident certified officer to prevent incidents by helping create a trusting and safe school

climate, especially for kids who live with trauma every night of their lives," Wise told The Courier Journal last month.

Bratcher said Pollio "has a tough job trying to work with a radical far-left board," and his attempts to make schools safe are appreciated. But state law is clear that each campus must have a designated officer stationed on-site, he added.

"It is my intention this coming session to have JCPS adhere to this law," Bratcher said.

What board members want

Duncan wants Pollio to present a plan "he thinks we need in order to follow state law and deter violent acts and threats of violence in our schools and be able to respond immediately to an active shooter situation.

"His first proposal may not win the votes of all those sitting on this board, but it would offer what the majority of those polled in our county think is needed to address violence and threats of violence in our schools," Duncan said.

Short of having an officer on each campus, Duncan wants to see a trained and armed team of officers who could respond to incidents within five minutes.

"That external force could visit assigned schools regularly so kids could become familiar with seeing them and maybe talking with them other than during times of stress," she said. "We need officers, and we need our students to trust officers."

Duncan would also like to see weapons detection systems installed at middle and high schools with the intent of curbing the number of guns brought to campus.

Board member Sarah McIntosh said any proposal around school resource officers needs to be "very explicit in what their roles are and at what point they become involved in student behavior."

McIntosh, a former teacher, pointed to anecdotes of officers being called in to handle minor issues like sarcastic comments and sharpening pencils at the wrong time. Everyone needs to be trained on what the officers' responsibilities are in order for them to be used effectively, she said.

Outside of the proposal specifically, the community needs to understand the district's reality, McIntosh said.

"Having an SRO isn't going to unilaterally prevent all nightmare scenarios," McIntosh

said. "The community as a whole has to have an honest conversation around keeping weapons out of kids' hands in the first place."

Board chairwoman Diane Porter echoed McIntosh's concerns, saying any plan will need to involve outside organizations who can help address students' trauma. Having SROs "can be an effective part of a layered response to increased youth violence," McIntosh said.

But local leaders "need to target communities disproportionately impacted," she continued. State leaders "need to look at the flawed juvenile justice system and advocate for more local resources."

Community groups and families "need to work together to address access to weapons, drug use, inappropriate use of social media, and all the factors outside the schools' purview that are driving these violent and dangerous behaviors in kids," she said.

"Otherwise, JCPS can do our part but we become Sisyphus."

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James Craig, JCPS board member

A group of security officers tries to calm the audience after some members began shouting and disrupted a JCPS school board meeting at Central High School in Louisville, Oct. 5, 2021. SAM UPSHAW JR./COURIER JOURNAL