

## **Keeping Long Island's Schools Safe and Secure Together**

**By Gary Bixhorn and Lars Clemensen**

Events such as the Las Vegas concert and Texas church shootings remind us of the critical role that law enforcement plays in our communities. As school administrators, those events bring back horrific memories of the Newtown tragedy and cause us to reflect on the heightened level of interdependence between our public schools, often the cornerstone of Long Island's communities, and our police.

This relationship has evolved and intensified over the years due to both legislative requirements and the increased complexity of societal and community issues. The incident that first changed the nature of the relationship occurred in Jefferson County, Colorado, in April 1999, when two Columbine High School students massacred their classmates. Prior to Columbine, interactions between schools and police on Long Island, for the most part, centered on matters such as vandalism, graffiti, the assignment of crossing guards, bomb scares and an occasional drug-related arrest. Schools and the local police responded to incidents in these and similar categories on a "case-by-case" basis. Practices varied from district to district and department to department.

Appropriately, that changed with New York State's legislative response to Columbine. The Safe Schools Against Violence in Education Act (SAVE) was passed by the legislature and signed into law on July 24, 2000. The legislation, which has since been amended and supplemented, required schools and school districts to implement a number of measures, but most prominently to develop and maintain safety plans at the building and district levels and to adopt codes of conduct for the maintenance of order in school operations. The intensity and importance of the relationship between the police and schools grew as the stakes were raised, and we worked together to implement SAVE. The unthinkable required school and law enforcement officials to plan for eventualities that seemed impossible just a few months earlier. The problems of the past paled in comparison to the concerns about the future.

Today, the partnership is more important than ever, as both police and schools are called upon to deal with local manifestations of issues of national prominence, the opioid crisis and gang violence. Opioid abuse occurs all around us every day. The epidemic cuts blindly through race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Its consequences impact people of all ages in all communities. In 2016, Long Island suffered 519 opioid-related deaths. Recently, more than 400 educators, mental health professionals, and law enforcement came together at a regional conference sponsored jointly by LI-CAN, the Island's school superintendents' associations and SCOPE to discuss this issue.

Gang violence, while far less pervasive, does exist on Long Island. While schools are not a center of gang activity, they are places where young people gather and information is exchanged. As a result, there is a mutual benefit to the partnership

between schools and law enforcement because we must address this problem together. The introduction of school resource officers (SRO), uniformed police personnel assigned to certain schools, has facilitated this communication and has been a powerful approach in emphasizing the role of police officer as community leader. The SRO plays a crucial role in our schools – not just by responding to incidents, but in building positive relationships with students, staff and parents. We support a well-structured, thoughtful expansion of this important program.

Assuring that our students receive the highest-quality programs and services in a safe, secure environment is the goal of the Suffolk County School Superintendents Association. A recent survey of school superintendents statewide indicates that half of respondents have rising concerns about the needs of our students in non-academic areas, including health, safety and mental health. Members of the association partner with county, town and village police departments, and many other non-law enforcement organizations recognize that these needs cannot be met without robust cooperation. Only this type of cooperation will enable us to fully address these problems.

The key to future success is mutual respect, the availability of adequate resources and exhaustive planning. We've come a long way since 2000 and we have much more to do. Together, with the right school district and law enforcement leadership in place, including the new Suffolk County district attorney, Tim Sini, and soon-to-be-named police commissioner, we can meet today's challenges and achieve our goal of providing a safe, secure environment for all students.

Gary Bixhorn is executive director and Lars Clemensen is president of the Suffolk County School Superintendents Association.