

# Controversy in Council Over Offering School Safety Staff to Private Schools

By DAN ROSENBLUM | Posted: Monday, April 20, 2015 5:30 pm

Though an overwhelming number of City Council Members backed a bill that would allocate a School Safety Agent for every non-public school that requests one, several skeptical lawmakers questioned its usefulness, and the NYPD opposed it outright.

Under Intro 65, co-sponsored by Borough Park Councilman David Greenfield, as many as 700 SSAs could be hired to replace private security guards who work in private schools, including those run by religious institutions.

## 'Sitting Ducks'

At a press conference before the hearing, held April 14 by the Education and Public Safety committees, Mr. Greenfield said his proposal would give all children access to safe schools regardless of where they're enrolled. "Unfortunately, right now, for lack of a better term, they're sitting ducks because these children in most of these schools do not have any security right now," he said.

Representatives of several religious schools, some of which have hired private security guards, endorsed the proposition. While the Federal Government does fund security infrastructure, it doesn't pay for personnel costs, they said. Joe Rosenberg of the Catholic Community Relations Council of New York said there were 200 Catholic schools in the city, most of which rely primarily on staff hallway patrols.

Assistant Chief Brian Conroy, the Commanding Officer of the NYPD's School Safety Division, said he agreed with the spirit of the request, but that it would undermine the department's flexibility in assigning officers to locations based on its intelligence and community needs. He added that police often monitor streets and neighborhoods around schools.

"If legislation requires that the Commissioner deploy particular staff to particular locations, and if this type of legislation serves as a model for other similar initiatives, the accountability and



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The City Council's Public Safety Committee Chair, Vanessa Gibson, expressed unhappiness with what she considers misplaced priorities during a hearing considering bills to increase transparency on student-discipline issues in schools and to require the Department of Education to compile the ratios of Guidance Counselors to School Safety Agents.

responsibility that are inherent in the jobs of both the Police Commissioner and the Mayor would be deeply compromised,” he said. A Department of Education official at the hearing declined to take a position on the bill.

### **Crossing a Line?**

In its response to Mayor de Blasio’s preliminary budget, the Council last week asked for more money to supplement those officers in the School Safety Division. Estimates on the cost ranged from \$50 million, by Mr. Greenfield, to a figure five times that cited by Education Committee Chair Daniel Dromm, an opponent of the legislation.

As one of the five of the 51 Council Members who didn’t sign on to the bill, Mr. Dromm challenged the parochial-school advocates. “I’m wondering where it will end,” he said. “If we give School Safety Agents to private schools, and to religious schools, what’s the next thing that you’d want?”

Mr. Rosenberg responded: “This is not a question of asking more than what public-school students have,” he said. “A 10-year-old in a public school has the right to be safe; a 10-year-old in a non-public school has the right to be safe.”

The committee chair also challenged whether the religious schools would accept LGBT SSAs and how effective the unarmed peace officers would be in responding to terrorists. Brooklyn Councilwoman Inez Barron, a former public-school Principal, said the bill was “misguided” and she opposed allotting public funds for private-school students.

### **‘Pay for Their Choice’**

“It’s my opinion that if a parent chooses, for whatever reason, to put their child in a private school, they need to bear the responsibility for the costs of what it takes for that school to operate,” she said.

Councilmembers Chaim Deutsch and Rory Lancman defended the bill, citing attacks on Jewish schools in Europe. “The votes are going to be very clear: you either support a child’s safety or, if you vote against it, you don’t support children’s safety,” Mr. Greenfield said.

Representatives of Teamsters Local 237, which represents 5,000 SSAs, did not testify during the hearing. But its president, Greg Floyd, said he was generally supportive of deploying them to private schools as long as enough were hired to accommodate the new assignments.

“Wherever they are assigned, they will work,” he said. “And we will support our members wherever they are assigned in the schools.”

### **‘What Would They Do?’**

SSAs get training in medical triage and sheltering building personnel, but not in confronting armed assailants. Mr. Floyd scoffed at the suggestion that the peace officers would deter terrorists or gunmen when police were better equipped for that.

“The safety agents are trained, but if something like that were to occur, what would they expect the School Safety Agent to do? Unarmed?” he said.

Some civil-liberties groups and lawmakers have been critical of school leaders’ lack of authority over the SSAs, who can make arrests, operate metal detectors and coordinate with uniformed police officers. Mr. Dromm said the SSAs shouldn’t be under the NYPD because it “created a climate that criminalizes juvenile behaviors.”

“I strongly believe that Principals should have the final say in what happens in their schools and how a student is treated,” he said. “It is my opinion that this transfer of power during a previous administration was a mistake.”

He was referring to the point in 1998 when jurisdiction over the officers was moved from the then-Board of Education to the NYPD under then-Mayor Rudy Giuliani. But Mr. Floyd said the change could usher in a return of the past negligence when schools would “cover up rapes and violent crimes.”

### **‘Rudy Tired of Cover-Ups’**

“Mayor Giuliani was tired of crime being covered up in the schools, and that’s what occurred,” he said. “Because the Principals used to get their evaluations based on how safe their schools were.”

Legislators at the hearing also examined two other bills that would discard punitive ways of handling misbehaving students in favor of “restorative” measures to counsel them. A bill, Intro 730, would make the DOE and NYPD create quarterly reports on the instances of police and EMS personnel responding to schools, as well as removal of students.

The DOE reissued school-climate regulations in February to prioritize accountability and dialogue over detentions, suspensions and police intervention that remove students from schools and could potentially stunt their academic progress. But some of the lawmakers sought to make the changes more permanent.

“It is essential that we strike a delicate balance between education and public safety,” said Vanessa Gibson, the Public Safety Chair and co-sponsor of the bill. “A misguided emphasis on discipline must not derail the educational environment of our students.”

There were 28,994 suspensions so far this school year, a 10-percent drop from the previous year, but which heavily penalized black and Hispanic students at higher rates than their white and Asian counterparts.

### **Arrests Down**

Vincent Schiraldi, the Senior Advisor to the Mayor’s Office of Criminal Justice, said that suspensions dropped by 11 percent from last July to April compared to the same period last year, and that arrests in schools dropped by 19 percent over the same period. Arrests by SSAs or other school-

safety officers declined from 759 in 2012 to 360 last year. Mr. Conroy said many of those decreases were because of better training and conflict-resolution techniques for the officers. (Mr. Floyd has said that crime levels remain high, but that SSAs are pressured to report crimes less frequently.)

The third bill reviewed last week would require the DOE to post each school's ratio of guidance counselors to SSAs. Council Members supporting the bill said the ratio of counselors to officers highlighted the lack of a full commitment to restorative techniques. In contrast to the 5,000-plus safety officers, there are 3,890 Guidance Counselors and Social Workers in city schools, according to Lois Herrera of the DOE's Office of Safety and Youth Development, who said she didn't believe "one role precludes the other role."