

Subject: Statutory changes regarding use of force by school resource officers and other officers working in school settings.

Principal Issues: Use of force by SROs and other officers who are agents of a school district; limitations on circumstances allowing the use of force toward students; use of prone and compressive restraint toward students.

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Executive summary:

As a result of recent changes to Minnesota law, and an interpretation of these changes by the Minnesota Attorney General:

- School Resource Officers (SROs) and officers contracted to work in a school district (contracted officers) may only use reasonable force toward a student when necessary to prevent bodily harm or death to the student or another.
- SROs and contracted officers are legally permitted to use prone and compressive restraint toward a student, but only when necessary to prevent bodily harm or death to the student or another.

Introduction:

Minnesota Statutes chapter 121A governs student rights, responsibilities, and behavior. In 2023, lawmakers included two provisions in the education bill that amended this chapter to limit the use of force toward students by SROs and contracted officers. PATROL published a Special Update discussing the amendments and their effects on August 9, 2023. On August 22, the Minnesota Attorney General issued an opinion covering some of these same topics and arriving at

different conclusions than the Special Update.¹ Under Minnesota law, opinions of the Attorney General “upon any question arising under the laws relating to public schools... shall be decisive until the question involved shall be decided otherwise by a court of competent jurisdiction.”² The Attorney General’s Opinion has the force of law until a court declares otherwise.³ Accordingly, the August 9 PATROL Special Update is withdrawn. It is replaced with this one, which considers the effects of both the Attorney General’s opinion and the statutory amendments that the opinion did not address.

Who is covered by these new limitations?

The new limitations on the use of force apply to, among others, agents of a school district. The recent changes to section 121A.58 clarify that the term “agent” includes SROs, security personnel, and officers who are “contracted with a district.”

A prudent interpretation of these amendments is that sections 121A.58 and 121A.582 now apply to all peace officers who work as SROs, to those who work under the somewhat related title of school liaison officer, and likely to those who provide police or security services within the school environment under a contract with a school district. Arguably, section 121A.58, subdivision 2a could be read as applying only to

¹ *Laws of Minnesota 2023 ch. 55, art. 2, § 36 and art. 12, § 4 do not limit the types of reasonable force that may be used by school staff and school resource officers to prevent bodily harm or death. Minn. Stat. §§ 121A.58; 121A.582. Op. Att’y Gen. (August 22, 2022) (hereinafter, “AGO Opinion”), https://www.ag.state.mn.us/Office/Communications/2023/docs/Opinion_SchoolDiscipline.pdf.*

² Minn. Stat. § 8.07 (2022); *see also City of Brainerd v. Brainerd Invs. P’ship*, 812 N.W.2d 885, 891 (Minn. Ct. App. 2012), *aff’d sub nom. City of Brainerd v. Brainerd Invs. P’ship*, 827 N.W.2d 752 (Minn. 2013) (“For example, Minn. Stat. § 8.07 (2010) grants attorney general’s opinions the force of law regarding the regulation of certain school matters.”).

³ *Id.*

SROs and contracted officers who would, because of contract language or other factors, meet the legal test for being “agents” of a school district.⁴ But subdivision 2a is written in a way that appears to categorize all SROs and contracted officers as “agents” of a school district—the subdivision governs those who are an “employee or agent of a district, *including* a school resource officer, security personnel, or police officer contracted with a district . . .” (emphasis added.) The word “including,” according to the Minnesota Supreme Court, means “to contain as part of the whole.”⁵ “Consequently, the word is used to suggest that what follows is a partial and not exhaustive list of the content to which it refers.”⁶ Read thusly, SROs, security personnel, and contracted officers are among the class of “agents” to whom the statutory amendments apply. This reading also avoids an unreasonable result. The purpose of these amendments could be virtually nullified if municipalities were able to place SROs beyond the statutory limitations on using force by merely avoiding contract language or circumstances indicating an agency relationship between SROs and school districts.

For law enforcement personnel, this means that officers with different assignments will face different standards for the use of force during interactions with students. SROs are likely to know they are SROs and thus governed by the statutory changes. But what does it mean to be “contracted” with a school district and therefore to be considered an agent? If a school district has contracted with a law enforcement agency or with individual officers to provide extra patrol, general security, or to be on hand for specific events, these officers would likely come under the new restrictions on the use of force.

Next, agencies should have their legal advisors review any agreements with school districts promptly. It is important to clarify that your agency is contracting to provide services through the presence of SROs or other officers on campus, not that your agency is agreeing more generally to

⁴ See *Hogan v. Brass*, 957 N.W.2d 106, 109 (Minn. Ct. App. 2021) (The ordinary legal meaning of “agent” is “one who has the authority to act on another’s behalf.”).
⁵ *In re H.B.*, 986 N.W.2d 158, 168 (Minn. 2022), *reh’g denied* (Dec. 12, 2022) (internal citation omitted).
⁶ *Id.*

have all officers work cooperatively with the school district. Care should be taken to ensure that contracts cannot be construed as making all officers agents of the school district.

Finally, it does not appear that these new limitations apply to SROs and officers working in private (nonpublic) schools. This is because sections 121A.58 and 121A.582 apply to “agent[s] of a district,” which means a “school district.”⁷ That said, there may be situations where it is not immediately clear if a school is private or part of a district. Consult your agency’s legal advisor if there is any doubt about whether these new limitations apply in a particular school setting.

Occasions for using force:

Section 121A.582, subdivision 1(b) regulates the use of force toward students by school employees and agents of a school district. Before the recent amendments, this law permitted the use of reasonable force to “restrain a student or to prevent bodily harm or death to another.”⁸ Notably, the word “or” has been stricken from the operative language. The effect of this change is significant. Following the amendments, subdivision 1(b) permits school employees and agents to use reasonable force only “when it is necessary under the circumstances to restrain a student to prevent bodily harm or death to the student or to another.”⁹

⁷ 2023 Minn. Laws Ch. 55, Art. 2, sec. 36 (codified at Minn. Stat. § 121A.58); Minn. Stat. §§ 121A.582, 120A.05, subd. 8. Moreover, statutes applicable to nonpublic schools generally refer to them specifically. See, e.g., Minn. Stat. §§ 123B.86 (equal treatment in transporting students); 171.321, subd. 4(d) (qualifications for bus drivers, referring to “a school district, nonpublic school, or private contractor shall”); 120A.22, subd. 7 (compulsory instruction, stating “a district, a charter school, or a nonpublic school that receives services”). The provisions of sections 121A.58 and 121A.582 that bring peace officers within their ambit contain no reference to nonpublic schools.

⁸ 2023 Minn. Laws Chap. 55, Art. 12, sec. 4 (codified at Minn. Stat. § 121A.582, subd. 1(b) (emphasis added)).

⁹ *Id.*

In other words, the authority to use force for the sole purpose of restraining a student has been removed from the law. Going forward, reasonable force may only be used in situations where it is necessary to prevent bodily harm or death to the student or another.¹⁰ Thus, force cannot be used where the only justification is to control the behavior of a student who is damaging property, causing a disturbance, or is acting out in a way that does not pose a threat of death or bodily harm.

As a result of the amendments, SROs and contracted officers are not permitted to use force for the purpose of arresting students for nonthreatening offenses. Section 121A.582, as amended, prohibits these officers from using any type or degree of force to *restrain* students except when necessary to prevent death or bodily harm, regardless of the offense level. This should not, however, stop SROs from taking students into custody when the arrest itself is a necessary act of restraint to prevent bodily harm or death. Unlike teachers and principals, SROs and contracted officers are not limited to only using force in situations where the threat of bodily harm or death is imminent.¹¹ The analysis for SROs in school settings should instead be similar to the one required under Rule 6.01 of the Minnesota Rules of Criminal Procedure, which permits officers to take someone into custody for a witnessed misdemeanor when necessary to prevent bodily harm to the accused or another.¹² As in cases involving Rule 6.01, facts showing that a threat of bodily harm is ongoing should suffice to support an arrest. Officers may draw reasonable inferences about the risks of bodily harm based on the totality

¹⁰ The Attorney General did not provide guidance on how the amendments to section 121A.582 apply to SROs and officers contracted to work in schools where the situation does not involve a threat of bodily harm or death. However, the plain language of this law prohibits the use of force except as necessary to prevent death or bodily harm.

¹¹ Compare Minn. Stat. § 121A.582 subd. 1(a), as amended (teachers and principals may use reasonable force “to prevent imminent bodily harm or death. . . .”) with *id.* subd. 1(b) (employees and agents may use reasonable force when necessary “to prevent bodily harm or death. . . .”). Black’s Law Dictionary (11th ed. 2019) defines “imminent” as “threatening to occur immediately; dangerously impending” and “[a]bout to take place.”

¹² Minn. R. Crim. P. 6.01(a)(1).

of the circumstances, including people’s behavior in the immediate past, their present emotional state, and any other factors indicating that the situation is volatile.¹³

Restricted methods of restraint:

Section 121A.58 prohibits SROs and contracted officers from using prone or compressive restraint techniques toward a student. The Attorney General has issued binding guidance to the effect that section 121A.582 creates an exception to this prohibition for situations where the use of reasonable force is necessary to prevent bodily harm or death.¹⁴ Taking that guidance together with the plain language of section 121A.582 results in straightforward guidelines for SROs and contracted officers when responding to pupils:

- Reasonable force may only be used toward students when necessary to prevent bodily harm or death.
- When reasonable force is authorized, prone and compressive restraint may also be used so long as they are reasonable under the circumstances.

The reverse is also true: when the situation does not involve a threat of death or bodily harm, officers may not use prone restraint, compressive restraint, or any other form of force toward a student.

Given that the authority to use reasonable force, prone restraint, and compressive restraint all arise from circumstances involving a threat of bodily harm or death, it is unclear why the Legislature provided detailed definitions of prone and compressive restraint. At the very least, the existence of these definitions may signal an

¹³ See *State v. Mikkalson*, No. A07-2339, 2008 WL 5215866, at *5 (Minn. Ct. App. Dec. 16, 2008) (holding that arrest for a witnessed misdemeanor to prevent bodily harm was authorized under Rule 6.01 because the “[a]ppellant had just been in a fight and appeared to be injured. It would have been reasonable for the officers to have believed that another fight could ensue after they left, making the arrest necessary to prevent bodily harm. . . .”)

¹⁴ AGO Opinion.

increased sensitivity about the use of these techniques toward students. The statutory definition of prone restraint is likely broader than many officers might imagine from their training in defensive tactics. The statutory definition consists of merely “placing a child in a face-down position”—it does not require holding or maintaining the person in that position.¹⁵ Thus, using a takedown technique that culminates with a pupil’s chest against the ground could constitute prone restraint, even if the officer intends for the subject to be “prone” only momentarily.

“Compressive restraint” is shorthand for other methods of restraint covered by section 121A.58, subd. 2a(b), which provides as follows:

An employee or agent of a district, including a school resource officer, security personnel, or police officer contracted with a district, shall not inflict any form of physical holding that restricts or impairs a pupil’s ability to breathe; restricts or impairs a pupil’s ability to communicate distress; places pressure or weight on a pupil’s head, throat, neck, chest, lungs, sternum, diaphragm, back, or abdomen; or results in straddling a pupil’s torso.¹⁶

Application scenarios:

1. Officer Josh is an SRO. A student is causing a disturbance in the lunchroom by screaming and throwing food trays on the floor. Because this behavior does not involve a risk of bodily harm or death, Officer Josh may not use force to control the student’s behavior, or use force to arrest the student for the commission of an offense, even if it appears likely that the offense will continue.
2. Officer Londa is an SRO. A student, Lynn, became extremely upset after an argument with a peer and began attacking windows and glass inside the school building with a metal bar. It reasonably appears to Officer Londa

that the act of breaking glass, and the presence of broken glass, is placing Lynn and others in the building at risk of bodily harm. Officer Londa may use reasonable force if necessary to restrain Lynn to prevent bodily harm.

3. Deputy Fran is assigned to regular patrol duties and is dispatched to the high school. The principal complains that a student, Charlotte, got in a conflict with a teacher and is presently in a hallway kicking locker doors and bending them. Deputy Fran is not an SRO or under a contract to work in the school and is therefore not subject to the new restrictions on the use of force. Accordingly, Deputy Fran may use reasonably necessary force to make an arrest or carry out other duties imposed by law when intervening in the situation.
4. Officer Christy is an SRO. A large adolescent student, Henry, is punching a smaller student, Bailey. Officer Christy may lawfully use reasonable force if necessary to restrain Henry to stop him from harming Bailey. Because Officer Christy is authorized to use force, she is permitted to utilize prone or compressive restraint with Henry if reasonably necessary under the circumstances.

Next, assume that once Henry is separated from Bailey, he screams at Bailey that the fight isn’t over, tries to pull away from the officer and go toward Bailey, and continues to display a high level of emotional agitation. Officer Christy would be authorized to take Henry into custody. This is because Officer Christy has witnessed what is at least a misdemeanor-level assault and the circumstances demonstrate that custody is necessary to prevent bodily harm.

5. Deputy Jamie is providing extra security at a football game under a contract with the school district. A 911 caller reports that a person with a gun is threatening others in the parking lot of the school where the game is occurring. Deputy Jamie responds and conducts a high-risk stop of the person who was reported to have a gun, ordering the

¹⁵ 2023 Minn. Laws Ch. 55, Art. 2, sec. 36.

¹⁶ *Id.*

person to lie face-down on the ground. It does not matter if this person is a student or not. This is because the use of prone restraint would likely be deemed reasonably necessary in the situation, as a means of safely gaining control over someone reportedly threatening others with a gun.

for off-duty employment arrangements with school districts, since these may very well result in conclusions that the officers are serving as agents of the district.

6. Student Quinn returned to the school building after being expelled for disciplinary reasons. The principal orders Quinn to leave and not return until the expulsion is over. Quinn refuses to depart. The principal calls SRO Madison and, with Madison present, repeats the order to leave. SRO Madison emphasizes to Quinn that he will be arrested for trespassing unless he leaves at once. Quinn still refuses to depart. Technically, SRO Madison may place Quinn under arrest for trespassing. But legally, SRO Madison is only permitted to use force toward students in situations where it is necessary to prevent bodily harm or death. It follows that Madison may not use force to overcome any non-dangerous resistance to the arrest. Because handcuffing is a form of restraint, Madison may not handcuff Quinn to effect the arrest. In other words, unless Quinn voluntarily complies, Madison would need to call another officer, who is not an SRO, to handle the arrest.

Training and deployment issues:

These new limitations are apt to require some substantial rethinking of how SROs and other officers who would be deemed agents of a school district will intervene in situations involving students. Using force in circumstances that do not present a threat of death or bodily harm is no longer an option. Persuasion and de-escalation skills will be at a premium. Agencies and officers may wish to consult with other professionals, such as special education and mental health personnel, who are trained in nonforceful intervention. Officers may also wish to consult with school staff on how they will work together to manage disruptive but non-dangerous behaviors without force.

Agencies and officers should also consider what kinds of safeguards and training to have in place