



Detroit PAL Presents

Critical Conversations

Fall 2025 Program
Impact Summary Report

125



Overview

Since 2020, the Critical Conversations program has empowered youth to engage directly with law enforcement, fostering positive police–community relationships and stronger, safer neighborhoods. Through facilitated classroom discussions on topics such as the role of police, encounters, and media influence, the program creates space for honest dialogue and mutual understanding. Over the past five years, it has been refined and expanded to reach more communities and more youth. In 2025, Detroit PAL included high school students for the first time—continuing to create change, one conversation at a time.

Participation

In Fall 2025, Detroit PAL implemented the Critical Conversations program in two Detroit-area schools:

- **John J. Bagley School of Journalism and Technology**
- **Vista Meadows High School**

A total of 48 middle and high school students, ages 12 to 19 years old, participated in the Critical Conversations program in these schools from October to November 2025. Attendance at each session ranged from 14 to 27 students.

Program Structure

Once per week, over six weeks, program sessions were delivered in person during the regular school day by

- **5 Detroit Police Department Officers**
- **3 Detroit PAL Staff**
- **4 School Staff**

Each session was 60–90 minutes in duration. Sessions included information sharing, small-group discussions, and role-playing scenarios. Week 6 encompassed a program session for each school and a combined group field trip. The program concluded with a celebration in week 7. Each week focused on a different topic, as follows:

DATE	LESSON TOPIC
Week 1	Program Introduction
Week 2	Roles of Law Enforcement
Week 3	The Influence of Media on Law Enforcement
Week 4	Positive Interactions with Police Officers
Week 5	Live-Action Scenarios
Week 6	State Your Case and Field Trip to Detroit Police Training Center
Week 7	Program Celebration

Key Findings

To assess the impact of this program, students took pre and post surveys. The data contained in this report reflects only those students who submitted both pre and post surveys, totaling 35 students. The program data collected demonstrated changes that occurred in students' attitudes and opinions as a result of their participation. Additionally, a post survey was completed by Detroit PAL staff (3), law enforcement officers (3), and school staff (5) for a total of 11 completed surveys. The purpose of the survey was to collect their thoughts on program outcomes and implementation. These findings are described below.



TRUST

Trust Builds from Direct Engagement

The program began with fewer than one-third (29%) of students expressing trust in their local police department. Small group discussions in the classroom, active listening and engagement, and live-action scenarios contributed to the growth of trust between these students and the officers facilitating the program. Post survey results showed an increase of 23% in the number of students who stated they trust their local police department. As one of the students explained, **"I trust certain people in the department now that I know some officers, good ones. I feel more trustful of my police department."** Another expressed feeling trustful **"because they are one call away."**

I trust my local police department.



Percentage of students who agreed or strongly agreed.



RESPECT

Respect Grows through Honest Conversations

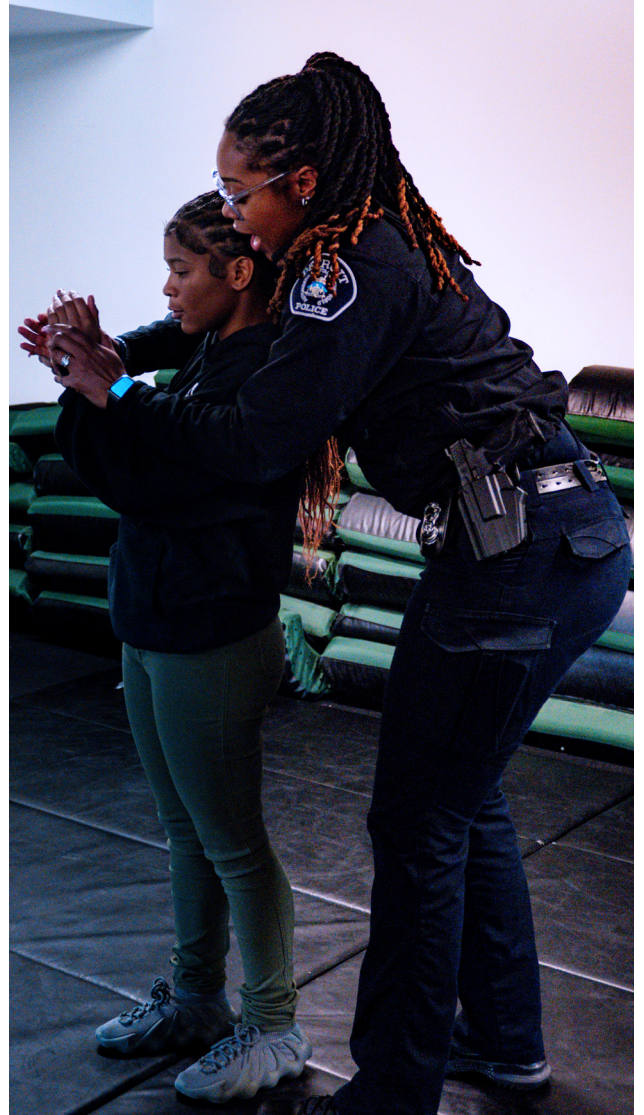
A primary aspect of the Critical Conversations program is providing a safe space for students to talk directly to officers about their opinions on policing in their community. These conversations allow students and officers to get to know one another and learn about each other's views. **"I have more respect knowing the officers I've met,"** described a student. Through these honest conversations, increasing respect developed as shown in the greater number of students from the beginning of the program (55%) to the end (75%) who stated they have respect for police officers. Many students commented in the post survey on the importance of the mutual respect they felt; for example, one student shared, **"I respect them when they have the same respect for me, too."**

I have respect for police officers.

PRE
55%

POST
75%

Percentage of students who agreed or strongly agreed.



SAFETY

Feelings of Safety Emerge through Learning

Many of the Critical Conversations program topics center around educating students on the roles and responsibilities of the police officers who work in their community. Survey results yielded a 20% increase in the number of students who felt safe with police officers around. Pre survey comments showed that students were largely hesitant in feeling safe around officers. Post survey comments revealed that learning more about law enforcement changed many of their opinions. One of the students explained, **"Police officers are here to help us, and they go through more training to make sure they do their job well, and that makes me feel safe."** Another called out the value of the field trip: **"When I went to the DPD, it changed how bad I thought police was."**

I feel safe with police officers around.

PRE
43%

POST
63%

Percentage of students who agreed or strongly agreed.



EXPERIENCES WITH POLICE OFFICERS

Knowledge and Connection Foster Positive Experiences

This program gave students the opportunity to interact directly with police officers and get to know them. For many, these encounters presented the first time they had any personal contact with law enforcement. Students learned about the roles and responsibilities of police directly from the officers themselves while creating personal connections. Although the number of students reporting a positive experience with a police officer increased only 9%, the number of comments reporting a positive experience shifted dramatically with nearly all students at the program's conclusion expressing improved feelings of safety and understanding that police were there for them as a helpful resource. Students explained, "I have [had] a positive experience because I learned that most police are safe," and "They have helped me understand what they do for us."

I have had a positive experience with a police officer.



Percentage of students who agreed or strongly agreed.



STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF LAW ENFORCEMENT

Personal Interaction Improves Perceptions

By the end of the Critical Conversations program, 78% of the student participants stated that as a result of the program, their view of police officers was better or much better. Students noted that the lessons, small-group conversations, role-playing, and field trip to headquarters contributed to this shift. Some highlights of student insights include: "I've learned they are more than disrespectful and harsh. They have bad days, have to make hard decisions, and can be very helpful," and "We see what they do and how they protect."

STUDENT CAREER INTEREST

Understanding Sparks Interest

Learning about roles and responsibilities of those who work in law enforcement inspired a great deal of career interest in this group of students. The percentage of students who stated yes they would consider a career in law enforcement grew from 6% to 23%. As one student explained, **“I know what officers go through to keep us safe, and it’s a job I would like to do.”** The jobs most appealing to these students were police officer (53%), FBI agent (41%), detective (35%), and lawyer (35%). Not only were students inspired to consider these career options, but many indicated in their survey comments that they would have liked even more information about how to pursue a career in law enforcement and specifics about the various job opportunities.

Would you consider a career in law enforcement?



Percentage of students who agreed or strongly agreed.

PROGRAM STAFF REFLECTIONS

Those who facilitated and supported the Fall 2025 program agreed that it was both a positive and enjoyable experience for students. The majority (91%) rated the program as successful or very successful in making progress toward the goal of improving relationships between youth and law enforcement. A staff member shared this observation: **“Critical Conversations showed me how powerful it is when students feel heard. It reinforced the importance of listening first, guiding second, and letting real conversation drive growth.”**

Most impactful for program staff was hearing directly from youth to learn about and understand their perspectives. **“The program gave me a deeper understanding of how our students think, process, and respond. It helped me to grow in communication, perspective-taking, and relationship-building, right alongside them,”** explained one of the staff.

STAFF SURVEY RESULTS

91% Students’ feelings of safety around law enforcement have improved or improved a lot.

91% Students’ respect for law enforcement has improved or improved a lot.

82% Students’ trust in law enforcement has improved or improved a lot.

Conclusion

Evaluation results for the Fall 2025 program demonstrated positive shifts in student attitudes and opinions across all targeted outcomes. The number of students who felt safe around police, expressed trust in them, and respected law enforcement increased from the beginning of the program to its conclusion. Overall, youth perceptions of law enforcement improved over time and more students reported positive encounters with officers. The program expansion into high school was well received as reflected by most students sharing that they learned a lot, really enjoyed the program, and expressed a desire for more sessions and a return visit from the officers.

The results of Critical Conversations are essential for program planning and preparation. Staff and youth surveys are thoroughly reviewed by the program staff to identify areas of strength in the program and areas for improvement. By understanding participant outcomes, Critical Conversations can be tailored to the students, ensuring that the information distributed is relevant and educational. Evaluation of these data allows Detroit PAL staff to make informed, strategic decisions that align with our mission of helping youth find their GREATness.

“I think this program created a direct line of communication and transparency between law enforcement and youth. Typically, youth are afraid or skeptical of law enforcement, and this program helps remove that obstacle.”

– Program Staff

“I’m gonna miss you all so much. Thanks for helping me learn and improve!”

– Student

Questions?

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