



## School officers connect with kids

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It's third period, and police Detective Chris Wittig hears that a high school freshman plans to fight an eighth-grader at a middle school. He sets out to find the freshman - just to give him a little advice.

"I'll tell him, even if your intent is to slap him around, things can go wrong. He can fall down the steps, or hit his head on a locker. Then it goes from simple assault to aggravated assault because there's significant bodily harm," he said. "I'll say: 'What you thought was not a big deal is now a big deal.' "

Later, after a talk with the student, Wittig says he's confident there won't be trouble.

"I said, 'Don't make the wrong choice.' He nodded to me that he agrees," Wittig said. "The kids are smart. Sometimes they get caught up in the heat of the moment."

It's all in the job for Wittig, a school resource officer at Wayne Hills High School. He is part cop, part teacher, part mentor. And he, like thousands of "SROs" nationwide, is changing the relationship police have with schoolchildren.

In New Jersey, as SROs settle into the school scene, lawmakers are taking notice: In February, acting Governor Codey introduced a plan to have SROs assess the safety of their schools, and the Legislature is moving a bill to formalize training on the SRO's role for officers and school staff.

Wayne Hills - cast into the public spotlight by a pair of recent alleged incidents of student violence - experiences about as much trouble as any suburban district its size. The numbers have remained constant in recent years. But Principal Frank Markowick says that since Wittig's arrival 2½ years ago, "The school has a more relaxed, peaceful feel. People are confident that bad things aren't going to happen, and if things do happen, [Wittig] handles things professionally."

But when Wittig first showed up, some students were wary.

"I thought everything was going to be a lot more strict," said Jonathan Simon, Class of '05. "Basically, I thought he'd be here to enforce the rules to the extreme."

In getting to know Wittig, Simon's perception changed. "He's an authority figure, but he's not a disciplinarian," he concluded.

Other students agree. The first reaction was "'Oh, are we that bad?'" said Diego Lopez, a 2004 district graduate. But in time, he said, "Even the kids who got in trouble liked him; he was a nice guy, but he wasn't lenient. He did what he had to do."

Such sentiments now seem the norm: Between classes one recent day, students stopped to say hello or give Wittig a high-five. One told him about having won a scholarship. Seconds later, another buttonholed the officer with: "Detective Wittig, can I talk to you about something in private?"

They went into Wittig's second-floor office for a closed-door talk.

He is not a professional counselor, but Wittig took voluntary training, including courses through the National Association of School Resource Officers. Topics included working with special-education students, and how to spot problems and refer students to professional counselors. SROs typically are certified as substitute teachers.

Wittig also attends after-school events, coaches lacrosse and runs a club on law-enforcement careers.

But winning the trust of teens takes more than training and familiarity, Wittig said, because "kids will watch how you interact with other students. I'm straight-up with the kids; I can't lie to them. I don't schmooze them. They can pick that out right away."

Despite his gun and badge, Wittig also emphasizes he's not out to bust or lecture potential troublemakers. But he asserts himself with strong advice.

"Half the time, they're not malicious kids. They just do things. They don't think," he said.

If he hears a hint of talk about criminal behavior, though, "I'll remind them: 'Hey, I'm an officer. If you crossed the line, I have to take action on that,'" he said.

The idea is to head off problems before they escalate, he said.

SROs also adapt to the grades they serve: Wittig's counterpart at Schuyler Colfax Middle School, Sgt. Mark Dubois, is less lawman and more teacher to the younger, more innocent age group.

Strolling the hall recently, Dubois chatted with a girl being harassed by a classmate. Later, he led a class talk about Internet safety.

If it's done right, SROs walk the line between gaining trust and maintaining authority - a so-called "triad" role as law officer, teacher and informal counselor.

But done wrong, placing cops in schools can backfire, said Cynthia Northington, a developmental psychologist at William Paterson University. She said introducing police can provoke daring behavior and that even officers who try too hard to fit in with students risk losing authority.

"I would suggest, instead, they present themselves as someone who's wise and has answers and is trustworthy," she said. "The officer does not need to portray himself as one of the guys. Teens don't need a buddy. They need answers."

Fort Lee officer Pat Kissane, who is on the board of the National Association of School Resource Officers, sees SROs in the broader role of changing stereotypes about cops and kids. And recent horrors have changed young attitudes, he said. "Kids have become more accepting of police officers in general; 9/11 played a big role in that. Kids lost a certain sense of security."

Conversely, SROs don't regard their mission as having to clean up a bad element, Kissane said. "If you're going to put an SRO in just to be a crime fighter, you're wasting your time."

Schools nationwide have used SROs since Flint, Mich., introduced the idea in the 1950s. As school violence and then fears of terrorism escalated, more districts embraced them.

But when Wayne introduced SROs three years ago, some parents had misgivings, viewing it as a sign of disciplinary problems, said Eileen Albanese, co-president of the Wayne Council of PTOs. Now, she said, parents understand cops are there mainly "to educate. There's a little sense of comfort knowing there's someone kids can talk to if they have a question."

When it comes to trouble, Wayne is typical of suburban districts its size and type. In 2003-04, it recorded 140 incidents, ranging from drug offenses to thefts, a bit higher than the state average of 1.46 per 100 students. Wayne Hills recorded 37 incidents.

Wayne has SROs in its two high schools and middle schools and wants to add the program at a new middle school in September. A \$500,000 federal grant funds the first three years of the SROs, and Capt. John Reardon, the program's overseer, said "the fourth year, which the board and the town are bound to, is a 50-50 split" between district and municipality.

Statewide, besides Codey's safety-assessment plan, Assemblywoman Joan Voss, a former Fort Lee High School teacher, is sponsoring a bill to create an SRO training program in which school administrators would train with officers. The Assembly has passed the bill; it awaits a Senate vote.

When the program started locally, Wittig said, police focused on security-related concerns and school staff dwelt more on education issues. Since then, both sides have joined in the goal of making school safe and secure, he said.

And in the end, Wittig said, school administrators continue to have ultimate authority.

"Even though we're the police, we're visitors in the building," he said. "We have to abide by the rules they have in place."

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#### Fast facts

Throughout the school year, school resource officers such as Wayne police Detective Chris Wittig tackle problems ranging from personal issues to criminal investigations.

Officers talk to students about problems they might be experiencing but only as informal counselors. SROs are not trained therapists, but can refer students to professional counseling if necessary.

If students appear to be abused at home, the officers can help get them help.

SROs may intervene when students express suicidal thoughts, directing them to professionals who can help.

Occasionally officers may visit students' homes when they fail to show up at school and there are concerns about their welfare.

When a dating relationship results in violence, SROs will step in.

Often parents who have concerns about their children's behavior or possible drug use will contact SROs for advice on dealing with them.

Students who are coming to terms with their sexuality, or experiencing harassment because of their orientation, sometimes seek advice from SROs, who can offer informal counseling or refer them to someone who can help.

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