

THE LOWDOWN

Sheriff Charles S. Blackwood

Orange County students recently started a new school year, always an exciting time for parents, teachers, and staff. Most are full of hope and eager to improve on the successes of last year. But in every parent's heart, the excitement is likely tinged with worry. Will my children adapt to new teachers and increased academic rigor? Will they avoid harassment from the lunchroom bully? Is their bus driver experienced? And the most important question – are our schools safe?

Your Sheriff's Office has a robust school resource officer (SRO) program to answer this last question. Operating under a Memorandum of Understanding with Orange County Schools, and a separate contract with Eno River Academy, we have an SRO in 14 schools, and two deputies each at Orange and Cedar Ridge high schools. We've grown significantly since the program began in 1994 with only two SROs, one each at Orange High School and C.W. Stanford Middle School!

Some people question why law enforcement officers are in schools. In response, I ask them to think of other large gatherings, such as sporting events, festivals, parades, road races, and concerts. Law enforcement officers are present at these as a matter of routine. These events have three commonalities - crowds, people with differing levels of emotional regulation, and the possibility of chaos or mass casualties if something goes wrong or someone tries to cause harm. An educational setting is likewise possessed of these same factors. In the worst case scenario of a mass shooting, response time is critical. As Tina Sykes, the Major responsible for the SRO program, likes to say, "When it comes to the safety of our students, I'd rather it take 15 seconds for a deputy to respond from somewhere else in the building than to wait seven or more minutes for one to arrive from somewhere else in the county."

The North Carolina General Statutes define a school resource officer as a law enforcement officer assigned to one or more public schools, at least 20 hours per week, to assist with school security, emergency preparedness, emergency response, and any other responsibility assigned by the employing unit. In addition to the mandatory annual in-service requirements for all deputies, an SRO must successfully complete a forty-hour certification course that will, at minimum, contain diversity and equity, tactical, and mental health training.

SROs are not disciplinarians, truant officers, school administrators, or attorneys. They are dedicated to fostering a safe and secure environment, serving as mentors, and assisting with education on law-related topics like forensics or civics. In the course of their duties, they form relationships with students and their families, relationships that

would not exist if deputies served the school only when dispatched in response to 911 calls.

Students frequently confide in an SRO about problems they experience, or share concerns about others, such as suicidal ideation or self-injurious behaviors. With this information, SROs can provide extra support, investigate the situation, and respond in a coordinated manner with school officials. In other words, SROs exist to *address* problems, not *arrest* problems. They understand the difference between misbehavior and true criminal conduct.

In cases where a student commits an actual criminal offense at school, SROs take a measured approach. If the infraction is minor and represents the first time the student has offended, SROs issue a warning to the student and notify the parent. If the student commits a subsequent criminal violation, the SRO might refer the matter to the Youth Deflection Program, the Dispute Settlement Center, or the Volunteers for Youth Teen Court Program. Unless the matter is very serious, or if the student demonstrates escalating criminal behavior despite attempts to employ these alternative resources, SROs make significant efforts to divert the case from the criminal justice system. In the 2018-19 and the 2019-20 school years, SROs diverted 90 and 91 percent of criminal matters, respectively.

SROs perform many other functions. They prevent or intervene in situations of dating violence, assist with disruptions involving intoxicated or impaired parents, navigate custody issues, answer questions about domestic violence protective orders, and facilitate creating safe ways for parents to be involved in their student's education if they are on the sex offender registry. They manage to provide all these benefits while serving their primary purpose to reduce critical response time from minutes to seconds and prevent violence and mass casualties.

I am proud of the positive and long-lasting impact our SROs make every day. Moreover, I am grateful they share my commitment to ensuring our schools are as safe as possible.

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