

Over the past several months, mischaracterizations and concerns have been raised by members of the public concerning Class III Police Officers in our schools. While we are all entitled to our own opinions, we are not entitled to our own facts. The following information is meant to clarify the record, reassure members of the public, and assuage the fear and apprehension that comes with such a recommendation. Most important, as the sworn public officials who are duty bound to uphold the safety and security of our township and our school district, we wholeheartedly recommend the implementation and utilization of Class III Police Officers in our schools.

What is a Class III Police Officer?

On November 30, 2016, Governor Christie signed bi-partisan legislation that provided for the utilization of SLEO III (Special Law Enforcement Officer). This bill provided a fundamental shift in the consideration of school security, as it established a new category of officer and allowed school districts and municipalities the ability to hire Class III Police Officers. The bill also was fiscally responsible as it allowed the hiring of retired police officers but prohibited the payment of medical insurance or pension. The bill created a cost-effective and viable solution to incorporate sworn law enforcement officers into our schools. Class III Police Officers have full powers and duties similar to those of permanent, regularly appointed full-time police officers.

The Why

We are charged to ensure the health and wellness of your children. We believe that adding Class III Police Officers is a critical step in ensuring the safety of more than 9,700 students and 1,350 district and contracted employees. Additionally, our schools are filled with daily substitutes, parents, and community members who visit our buildings. Today, we cannot adequately state that we are doing all we can to ensure their safety.

The district is considering an array of security measures including implementing a visitor management system, increased security cameras, lockdown alarms, fire alarm upgrades, increased generator power, security vestibules, implementation of classroom telephones, panic buttons, and strobe lights. While hardening our facilities and enhancing technology are important, the ability to hire law enforcement must be considered as a component of a school district's security program.

Furthermore, additional counseling and nursing staff have been hired over the last several school years. In addition, the school district just entered a contract with UBHC (University Behavioral Health Center, Rutgers University) for the full-time employment and staffing of two mental health clinicians at HSS and HSN.

Core Benefits of Hiring Class III Police Officers

There is no doubt that threat identification, response time, and threat assessment is a primary function for police officers. However, we fully acknowledge that this should be a small component of an officer's day to day life. Several community members have asserted that officers are going to be "bored" waiting for a "shooting." This characterization is a gross

misunderstanding of the importance of community policing and shows a lack of awareness to what is occurring in our community today with the efforts of both police departments.

On a daily basis, Class III Police Officers may advise on emergency preparedness and crisis and incident management; provide increased accessibility between students and the police and schools; and work to build relationships with students while serving as a resource to students, teachers, and administrators to help solve problems. Officers will strategically work with building and district administrators to secure our schools and enhance school security measures.

Simply, officers are not armed guards standing sentry at school entrances. Officers will be found throughout the facilities interacting with students, staff, community members, and parents. Community policing is all about relationships. Our officers will be part of the school culture and climate and will become part of the fabric of our school communities. Through that work, Class III Police Officers will participate and educate students in the areas of pedestrian safety, bus safety, stranger safety, bullying, drug and alcohol awareness, bicycle safety, cyber safety, and social media usage. They will partner with counselors and administrators to provide proactive parent programming and student assemblies. Perhaps, most importantly, police officers provide a sense of comfort and safety to staff and students and will work to ensure that our schools remain institutions of learning, enjoyment, exploration, and discovery.

Role of the School Administration vs. Police

During public discussions, some members of the community have asserted that police officers would subvert the responsibility of school administration and be injected within the day-to-day discipline. This is simply untrue. The administration of the school will address student behavioral concerns as they do today. Police will only be inserted in disciplinary matters in scenarios when school administrators would previously have called the police department for support (incidents such as drugs/alcohol, allegations of abuse, fight, possession of a weapon, neglect, safety checks, truancy, etc.). Further, the reasons for such involvement are very clearly spelled out by the Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) between law enforcement and school districts. This document is signed by the attorney general and commissioner of education and mandated for every school district and municipal police department. The relationship and requirements are clearly defined for law enforcement and school districts through the MOA.

Hiring and Training

One of the most important aspects of beginning the utilization of the Class III Police Officers Program will be hiring, onboarding, and training. As a township and as a school district, we will hire officers that reflect our collective values. Hiring will take time and we will not have officers at the beginning of the school year. This process will take months to ensure that the quality of officers meets the expectations of our police departments and our school district. Furthermore, Class III Police Officers are required to complete all training as required by state law. They will have thorough background investigations, undergo a physical and psychological exam, and complete a series of trainings prior to beginning to work within our schools.

There are tremendous benefits to having duly sworn and trained police officers present during the school day. Not only will these officers bring over 25 years of police knowledge and skill to the school district, but they will bring years of training in areas such as first aid and CPR, de-escalation, defibrillators, active shooter, narcans, use of force, bloodborne pathogens, working with special education students/special populations, and School Resource Officer Training (SRO). By law, all Class III Police Officers must attend SRO training during the first 12 months of their employment. SRO training includes bias and cultural sensitivity training, problem solving, handling of critical incidents and crisis management, school safety and threat assessment, de-escalation techniques, working with special needs students and students with mental health concerns, bullying prevention, and drug awareness and substance abuse.

Viewing Class III Officers through their weapons devalues the skills, knowledge, and expertise they will bring to a variety of scenarios in our schools. Our students and staff members will benefit from their presence and our community will benefit from this community policing initiative.

Misconceptions and Public Discourse

Over the last several weeks, some members of the public have engaged in a destructive and divisive rhetoric about the utilization of police officers in our school. Topics have included but are not limited to an anti-gun platform such as “No Guns in School” to assertions of bias of police that would lead to a “school to prison pipeline.” Other individuals have insinuated that officers should just stay outside of our school buildings or only be allowed inside without a “gun.”

Other community members have suggested that the financial expenditure is too great for the district to engage the employment of officers. Let us simply state that one-half of 1 percent of the school district’s budget would be used to employ officers in all schools in WW-P. If budgets are a reflection of values, surely we can place one-half of 1 percent of the school budget to add a component of a comprehensive school security program.

Further, there have been many statements made on social media platforms regarding arrest data or school disciplinary data in an attempt to draw a correlation of bias. The misrepresentation of such data has served to disparage both police departments and the school district and is a disservice to the officers, teachers, and administrators that serve our communities. We recognize the need for constant monitoring, evaluation, and analysis. We recognize the need for professional development and training. We recognize that implicit bias exists and are not blind to that potential. However, we also believe in our systems and our staff. As leaders, we have proven a willingness to build bridges and develop relationships. We have also demonstrated that we are not afraid to confront concerns and acknowledge areas for organizational improvement. Individuals that are using bias to disparage this program do so out of fear and at the cost of the safety and security of our students and staff.

Another misrepresentation that warrants a public response is this public statement: “We have a drug problem in our schools and the administration is trying to use police officers to fix it. This is the wrong approach! Treatment is the correct approach.” Our police departments have a proactive approach to drug use and overdose and work to find treatment programs for

those afflicted with addiction. Our schools work to proactively address students seeking treatment and work with families to ensure counseling through our student assistance counselors. We do not stand for or support the utilization of arrest to address addiction and have proven programs in place to support members of our communities.

What This Program Is Not

Simply, the partnership between school and police is not about increasing arrests, promoting bias, or targeting any individual and/or group of individuals. This program is about ensuring the safety and security of our students, staff, and community. It is about relationships, prevention, threat deterrence, threat response, and education. We can do more and we believe that the utilization of Class III Police Officers is a critical aspect of a total school security and safety program.

Conclusion

As Parkland and Santa Fe move out of the spotlight and Columbine and Sandy Hook fade, we must not overlook our duty to protect our most precious commodity: our students; your children. The escalation of school incidents around the country warrants action. While some members of the community have likened the chances of tragedy to a lightning strike, we are unwilling to compromise safety and know we can do more to protect the students, staff, and community that attend our schools from any multitude of potential incidents that may occur on school grounds. What we know is that while threat deterrence and threat assessment are touted as the key components to the implementation of officers on school grounds, it is the mentoring, the informal relationships, the sharing of information, and the community policing that makes the difference in preventing an incident. Proximity matters and response time cannot be overlooked.

We believe that promoting a positive school climate and ensuring the safety of staff and students is multifaceted. Addressing concerns requires a team of educators, mental health professionals, law enforcement, community members, and parents to work in concert. We all share in this responsibility.

We are proud to serve this community and wholeheartedly stand by our collective recommendations. We implore the West Windsor Council to stand by the WW-P School Board and the Plainsboro Township Committee to ensure the safety of our students, staff, and community.

Chief Robert Garofalo, West Windsor Police Department

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