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School resource officers offer protection, peace of mind

Zach Tuggle, Reporter Published 10:30 p.m. ET March 8, 2018



(Photo: Jason J. Molyet/News Journal)

MANSFIELD - A group of children smiled as Officer Adam Gongwer approached their table during lunch period Thursday at Ontario Middle School.

They know the man well, in a good way. Gongwer has been the school resource officer in Ontario for 10 years. His position is funded by both the school and the police department. He wears a badge and a gun, but he teaches the children when he can, and counsels them when they're feeling low.

"Rapport," he explained in his office, a bullet-proof vest an arm's length away. "I have students come in here and tell me things."

Not every school, though, has a full-time officer to serve and protect its students. Police in Richland County asked the News Journal to not reveal which school districts have chosen not to employ such an officer, for the security of the children.

Deputies and police officers make regular visits to the schools that do not have a dedicated school resource officer. Richland County Sheriff Steve Sheldon said he's met with police chiefs around the county to see how protection can be enhanced.

"We are planning on getting together again to discuss various aspects of school security and our collective ideas and efforts in response to various types of calls in the schools," Sheldon said.

Gongwer's vest and the combat helmet next to it are recent additions to his office — grim reminders of massacres and rumors of threats springing up across the country. They also remind Gongwer that he's there to protect hundreds of children, no matter the cost.

"I'm not waiting for backup," Gongwer said. "We train for single-officer entry."

Fortunately, he's never found himself in such a situation. But there was a Sunday afternoon several years ago that made the possibility a little more real for Gongwer. He got a call that deputies were about to arrest one of his students.

"The kid claimed he was going to bring a gun to school and shoot this girl's boyfriend," Gongwer remembered. "He wanted to date this girl."



Ontario school resource officer Adam Gongwer enjoys interacting with students and staff early Thursday morning. (Photo: Jason J. Molyet/News Journal)

Even though the boy was arrested, the girl was afraid to come to the school the next day. They decided to increase their patrols to make the children feel safe.

"We ended up having four other officers here at the school," Gongwer said.

Not all of the threats are criminal. There was a student who posted photos containing text with jokes about school shootings. Gongwer found out when another student found the images, then got scared they were real, and local. school administrators made the student delete the photos.

"I had to explain to the kid that if the other kids are scared, then it's inducing panic," Gongwer said. "That's an example of what every school in Ohio is dealing with."

The extent of the training officers are given within the schools cannot be made public, said Chris Stone, a spokesman for both Galion and Bucyrus city school, each of which employs a full-time officer.

"That information could jeopardize the health, safety and well-being of students and staff in both school districts," Stone said.

When a school decides to employ a school resource officer, agreements about funding and duties must be made with the police department. Shelby City Schools went through that process last year when Officer Keith Swisher became a school resource officer after 17 years experience in a cruiser.

"It's a little bit different," Swisher said of spending his entire day in the schools. "A different setting altogether."

He, too, is paid with money from the budgets of both the school district and the police department. They agreed to send him to training to be both a school resource officer, and a DARE officer.

"It was the first time DARE has been in our community in 10 years," Swisher said.

Swisher, like Gongwer, said he spends time in classroom to teach children about the history of some laws and the dangers of drug abuse.

Gongwer thinks every school district should have its own officer: "Encourage your board of education to look into one."

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