



Mount Vernon Police Department

Police Officers in Schools

Community conversations are occurring about the role of police in our schools and we would like to be part of it. The question of 'why' is both important and legitimate to ask.

Research and experience has shown that our children bring to school the issues that are affecting their households, neighborhoods and community that surround them. Domestic violence, child abuse, mental illness, substance use, poverty, gang subculture, homelessness, immigration status and the list goes on. Schools are a safe refuge for some, but it can be a place where behavior from these problems surface.

We understand these issues are not all a *police responsibility* and our practice has never been to arrest our way to a solution. This is reinforced by distinguishing our school based police as *resource* officers and expecting them to partner their knowledge and skills with other specializations so we address the root causes of the behaviors we see.

We joined the Mount Vernon High School in 1999 with goals of developing open and cooperative relationships with students, school staff and neighbors, and serving as an immediate resource for these individuals assisting with issues that affect campus safety. Equally important is bridging relationships between the school and residential neighbors who experience impacts living next to each other (parking congestion, traffic safety issues, and high volume pedestrian use in both public and private spaces) and finding ways to effectively manage them.

These same social problems were affecting our middle schools so we took the validations and lessons learned from our high school experience and tailored a Middle School Resource Officer (2003). These 6th, 7th and 8th grade students are reaching adolescence, are often challenged by new forms of independence, and experimentation, while developing their own identity.

School-based police officers do provide security and law enforcement services, but that is only one aspect. As Resource Officers, they are embedded in our schools to build relationships with students, expand learning (student & officer)

by teaching or guest speaking in classes. They strive to learn about an issue in a student's life - hopefully before it becomes a serious problem, mediate conflicts, participate in multi-disciplinary risk assessment teams (School Staff, Counselor, Social Worker, Police) when a student displays high risk behavior, create reward programs that incentivize positive student citizenship or community service projects, and just being present and available to kids at a place and time where they are comfortable.

The value in these modeling and mentoring relationships show up well beyond high school. Several students chose criminal justice careers and are serving in Skagit County police agencies or correctional (adult/youth) settings. Several became teachers, one is a counselor (MV), another works as an FBI Analyst, and several went different paths (Major sports manufacture, municipal government (MV), private industry fraud investigation). Resource officers stayed connected with many of these students sharing advice and experiences along the way.

First preference when behavior violations occur at school is it be handled by the school code of conduct and consequence system. School Resource Officers often participate in meetings with staff, administrators and parents to identify appropriate solutions. When conduct violations are serious, the criminal justice system is an alternative such as diversion, but established relationships with a police officer provide broader understanding to the issues and navigating future steps.

Right now there are many questions surrounding the role, actions, and powers that police have. We believe rather than expanding the gap between law enforcement and our youth, a closer, familiar relationship would provide a greater opportunity for learning, mutual understanding and strengthening of those relationships.

