

Laying off the law?

Tight budgets are forcing some school districts to eliminate their resource officers. Others are finding ways to keep the deputies and police officers whose job it is to build bridges with students.

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THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH



JONATHAN QUILTERDISPATCH

Delaware County Deputy Mark Kern talks to Big Walnut junior Emily Fiasconi. She credits Kern, the school resource officer, for being a positive influence and helping her avoid bad decisions. Big Walnut officials saved Kern's job when they eliminated 42 positions because of cuts.



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"I work for them," Deputy Mark Kern says of Big Walnut's students. Kern, talking to high-school senior Jovan Kemp, sees his role as more than providing school security.

After voters rejected two requests for property tax levies, Big Walnut schools in Delaware County cut \$5.6 million from its budget and eliminated 42 staff positions over two years.

But Deputy Mark Kern, the district's school resource officer, was safe despite his \$44,000 price tag.

"It was discussed to be on the chopping block, no doubt about that," said Superintendent Steve Mazzi. "We just felt that in these times and with what's happening in and around

schools, it was best to keep it as one of our resources, just as we'd keep any other program that's good for kids."

The kids, who high-five Kern in the hallway and stop him to talk about video games and their weekends, are happy to have the deputy. During the three years he's been in the Big Walnut schools, he has prevented fights, addressed situations at home and had students seek help for drug addiction.

"I work for them," Kern said of the district's students. Last year, 14 graduating seniors asked him to present them with their diploma.

"Each district has told us our school resource officers are worth their weight in gold," said Sheriff Walter L. Davis III, who expanded the program three years ago. The office splits the cost of each deputy, roughly \$88,000 in salary and benefits, with the districts.

In Big Walnut, keeping Kern meant cutting something else - not an easy call, Mazzi said.

"When you look at the big board, and you see what's on it ... you have to make tough decisions," he said. "What we got back to was the value that he or she adds to the district. ... We put (the officer) right up there as a staff member."

Since those tough decisions, Big Walnut voters approved a 7.5-mill levy in November, adding \$4.9million a year. But other schools are facing the same tough calls over what's more important to students: a police officer or a teacher.

With three deputies assigned across 21 buildings, Olentangy decided this year that teachers are more necessary. The \$131,000 the district pays for three deputies will be gone unless a 7.9-mill levy passes in May.

"Every single program on this cut list is something we think is important to kids," said Karen Truett, district spokeswoman. "The board directed the administration, when we were creating the list, to protect the classroom."

Kari Parsons, executive director of the Ohio School Resource Officers Association, said most schools have preserved the position, valuing the unique role of law-enforcement officers in schools.

"I think just with everything from the sexting to the bullying ... there just needs to be a police officer," she said. "It seems like between the school district and the police department, they come up with the money."

But negotiations over who pays can be contentious. Just before last school year, Hilliard schools and the police department haggled over who should pay the \$380,000 cost of three officers, including benefits.

The police department initially asked the school district to pay 75 percent but eventually settled for 68 percent of the total cost.

With a 6.9-mill levy on the ballot in May, more than 50 jobs are at stake, but not the three resource officers.

Parsons said about 80 percent of districts nationwide employ an officer dedicated to patrolling schools.

"There's just something about the peace of mind of parents and citizens in general that they think they need to have a police officer in the school," she said. "Not only to protect students from the outside, but to protect them from themselves."

That's true of Big Walnut junior Emily Fiasconi, who said that without Kern's influence, her high-school years would have been more destructive.

"If it weren't because of him, I'd be making totally different decisions," she said, including drinking.

Next year at graduation, Kern will give Fiasconi her diploma.

"He has to stay here," she said. "Don't let him leave."

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