


Our View: School resource officers are not just cops

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By The Editorial Board

October 8, 2019

The bipartisan response to school shootings over the last two decades has been to pump money into school resource officer programs, which promise to put a “good guy with a gun” on the scene of the next massacre.

While the evidence is scanty that a single armed officer is an effective deterrent or response to a random act of violence, school districts and police departments have found the program to be helpful in other, less attention-getting ways. School resource officers are also called upon to mediate conflicts or informally counsel students. The day-to-day reality of a police officer being part of a school community goes far beyond the law enforcement training that officers have received, or what they may have picked up even after years on the job.

A recent study of school resource officers in Maine by researchers at the University of Southern Maine’s Cutler Institute for Health and Social Policy found that the program is popular with school administrators and police departments. But the researchers found that the state needs to do more to provide oversight of these programs, which vary widely between school districts.

Among their recommendations are standardizing the contracts between police department and school districts that clearly state what the officer’s duties and responsibilities should be, and minimum training standards for officers, both before they come to work and on an ongoing basis, to make sure that are prepared work with kids.

The researchers also recommended standardized data collection, making sure there is a record of things like the number of times a student has been handcuffed, restrained, arrested or referred to the court system by an officer assigned to the school.

And the report cautions schools not to think of police officers who do a little counseling as a suitable replacement for other professionals who play an important role in a school environment, such as guidance counselors, social workers and psychologists.

All these recommendations reflect the way in which the school resource officer’s role has evolved

over the years. Standard police training is enough if the job is limited to emergency threat planning and response, but not for all the other things an officer may be called upon to do as a member of the school administration.

For instance, Officer Jeff Upton has been assigned to Marshwood High School in South Berwick for 18 years and told Press Herald Staff Writer Kevin Miller how much the job has changed.

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In addition to providing security and emergency planning, Upton said he has taught classes, conducted technology programs for elementary school parents and even serves lunch to students. Handing out sandwiches to kids, Upton said, is an important part of having "positive interactions rather than having a police officer being that punitive figure in the school."

As positive as that sounds, it's easy to see how such an ever-expanding role could get out of hand in some circumstances.

School resource officer programs have proven to be popular and beneficial in a number of school districts. But before it expands further, Maine needs to make sure that there are safeguards in place.
