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Local law enforcement and the school district: a key community partnership

By Patrick Oliver, Chief of Police,
Grandview Heights, Ohio

Americans, barring financial or other severe restrictions, are able to make a choice about which community they want to reside in. This choice is based on what I believe are the two most important services in any community. They are safety and education.

When a single person or family decides to move into any community, probably the two most important factors are the safety of that particular community and the quality of education for school age children. Both of these services affect quality of life and property value. People are going to seek communities where safety and education are high priorities. Those of us who work in either law enforcement or education are providing these critical public services.

Some of the major cities across the United States have lost residents during the last twenty years. People decide to move for various reasons; however, the quality of the school district and the safeness of the community are primary factors for deciding to leave the city for suburban and rural areas. Safety and education: two key components of a community with a high quality of life.

Safety and education - - a natural interface

If the quality of education in a community is not good, then residents decide to leave; therefore, erosion of the tax base occurs. If residents do not feel safe, they decide to leave; therefore, erosion of the tax base occurs. One of the primary issues in schools today is the safety of the students. One of the

primary issues in law enforcement today is the increase in criminal involvement by young people. If the local law enforcement agency and school district officials each made a list of school-age children causing problems in the community, those lists would probably be a close match.

At an increasing rate, law enforcement is being requested to perform both security and education functions within their local school districts. Is there a natural interface between safety and education? I believe the answer is a resounding yes! Why should local law enforcement become involved with the school district? To what degree should law enforcement become involved with the schools? How should local law enforcement develop and implement their initiatives with the school district?

A safe school plan - - the ideal environment

The previously asked questions are all valid ones and the law enforcement chief executive officer should facilitate the resolution of each of these questions. Today many law enforcement agencies are developing and implementing community oriented policing plans. My favorite definition of community oriented policing is when the police and their community identify and resolve quality of life issues. The primary focus of community oriented policing is on prevention. Prevention works best when you and your customers identify the problems and work together toward solutions.

I mention all of this to indicate that one of law enforcement's primary customers is the school district. Local law enforcement must collaborate with school administrators, parents and students to identify safety and education issues and implement plans to resolve them. Therefore, the type of law enforcement services provided to a school district depends on the type requested. How does law enforcement develop and implement crime prevention initiatives?

I believe the ideal way is to begin with a safe-school audit. The Franklin County Education Council has developed a safe-school audit working document. This audit is a diagnostic tool for people to use in school communities for their own self assessment. It is a set of questions designed to raise awareness about the components of a safe school.

These components provide a framework which connects issues for a comprehensive approach to healthy learning environments. It is a multi-layered approach to safe schools which includes prevention programs, student and staff support services, crisis management needs, building/grounds security, and home and community interest. It is recommended that the audit be completed by a team of school and community representatives including administrators, teachers, classified personnel, students, parents, law enforcement, and community representatives.

This self assessment of all the schools within the school district creates an awareness of current

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Community Partners...(continued)

conditions, thus laying the foundation to develop and implement a safe school plan. This is both a comprehensive and time-consuming approach. However, I believe this is the ideal scenario.

There must be a consensus reached by the key stakeholders involved to conduct this audit. You are probably thinking, what if our school district does not choose to do a safe-school audit? What then? I suggest that key law enforcement administrators meet with key school administrators and parents to determine the important crime prevention issues involving the school district, then together develop a few crime prevention initiatives which are do-able and which have a great impact.

Some examples of these might be: the Drug Awareness Resistance Education program; the Gang Resistance Education and Training program; Student Resource Officers, School Liaison Officers; specific safety education programs, such as Eddie Eagle (gun safety), and Third Grade Safety Belt program (seat belt safety). These and other programs can have a great impact in crime prevention.

I think it is just as important that young people have early contact with law enforcement which is positive. This is a critical point because I believe young people should grow into adults who see law enforcement as their partner in crime prevention. They should not see crime as the problem for law enforcement, but

rather as a societal problem in which they too play a key role.

I believe law enforcement should take the lead in facilitating a good partnership with the school district on issues of safety. This partnership, when working well, increases the efficiency and effectiveness of both entities. Safety and education: the two key components of a desirable community. **OPC**

To obtain a copy of the Safe-School Audit, contact:

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