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Paying for cops in schools still a hurdle

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About a quarter of the county's 39 towns already have cops in their schools.

And when school starts next week, Hanover Park and Whippany Park high schools and Mount Olive middle and high school will have school resource officers on staff for the first time.

The same could be true for the two high schools that make up the Morris Hills Regional School District.

The board is scheduled to vote on placing an officer at Morris Knolls in Denville tomorrow night, while continuing to discuss a similar arrangement for Morris Hills with Rockaway Borough officials.

"At this point, the issue still remains funding," Superintendent Ernest Palestis said last week.

That is the issue in many Morris County municipalities.

While police departments and school officials almost universally like the idea of having an officer in the schools -- to stem teen drug use and access a culture that is closed off to adults -- districts and municipal councils can't always agree about how to pay for the additional position, particularly when the department only has a few officers.

"We were very interested in getting a resource officer," said Lt. John Schwartz of the Kinnelon police. But with just 16 officers in the department, it's not a possibility, he said.

"We cover 19 square miles, we have 10,000 residents, (Route) 287 and Route 23," he said. "My guys are often spread very, very thin."

The price of a resource officer varies from town to town and by experience. In most cases, patrol officers fill that role and their starting salary in Morris County is approximately \$35,000.

But it's the more experienced officers who are usually tapped for the school resource jobs. Parsippany High School's resource officer, for example, makes about \$88,000 annually.

In Parsippany, the town picks up that tab, which is how it has traditionally worked, said Robert Tessaro, executive director of the New Jersey Association of School Resource Officers. But in recent years, he added, it has become more and more common for school districts to pitch in.

In some cases, he said, regional school districts have divided up the work by making agreements with towns that make up the district even if school is not in that town.

For Hanover Park regional schools the idea of a school resource officer took on added urgency after a handful of drug-related incidents over the last year.

In June police seized \$3,200 in drugs on prom weekend from the car of a Hanover Park senior. Last month, more than 50 teenagers and young adults -- including a host of alumni -- were charged in a painkiller drug bust.

"This whole thing has been an eye-opener for a lot of people," said East Hanover Police Chief Stanley Hansen, whose department will be providing a school resource officer to Hanover Park High School this year. Florham Park will also be assisting. "We want to try to work with the schools and with the town and do whatever we can to make the environment safe for them."

In Mount Olive, the department wanted to reach out to teenagers who often "keep to themselves," said Patrolman Mike Cordileone.

"It gives us a chance to reach out and get in touch with them, let them know we aren't a bunch of Robocops driving around, writing tickets. We are there to help," Cordileone said.

That's the idea behind the school resource officer, Tessaro said. "The officer is a teacher, a counselor and a law enforcement agent," he said.

The organization's records show at least 250 municipalities statewide currently have resource officers, he said, adding that more districts plan to hire one.

Morris Hills Regional wants an officer for each of its high schools because of the size of the schools and because the officers have worked well in other districts.

"One of my goals is to have a police officer in the building who can talk to kids, go into classrooms, present lessons, develop a rapport with students," Palestis said.

The Denville governing body has already approved the arrangement for Morris Knolls High School, which would split the cost between the district and the township. In the first year, the district would pay the township \$42,000.

A similar agreement is proposed for the district's other high school, Morris Hills High School, and Rockaway Borough, local and school officials said.

"The police department is behind this program," said Rockaway Borough Police Sgt. Doug Scheer. "I would certainly like to have one up there."

Districts and departments who already have resource officers tout them as success stories.

Dover started their program in January, when Patrolman Keith Smith returned to his high school alma mater as the department's first school resource officer. Smith talks to kids about gangs, motor vehicle safety and brings in state prison inmates to talk about life in jail.

On at least two occasions, Smith said he has prevented fights after students told him about clashing classmates.

"Having contact with the students and gaining their trust is important. But that takes time. Nobody wants to be known as a snitch," he said.

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