

Classroom Beat

Reading, Writing And Miranda Rights: Cops Patrol Schools

Houston District Has a Force Of Its Own, Including 'Special Response Team' Police Chief With Doctorate

By JUNE KRONHOLZ

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

HOUSTON — Armed, trained in assault tactics, equipped with bulletproof vests and bomb-sniffing dogs, supported by 24-hour emergency dispatchers, Chief Bruce P. Marquis and his 177-member police department walk the country's highest-profile beat this fall.

They patrol public schools.

Schools are safer than they have been in years, the U.S. Department of Education reports.

Crimes against kids while they're in school are down by 20% in three years; one-third fewer children were suspended for bringing a gun to school in 1998 than the year before. Education Secretary Richard Riley calls schools the safest place for a child to be.

But the gun rampage in Littleton, Colo., the deadliest in a three-year string of school shootings, is the flip side of that good news, and has sent school districts rushing to upgrade their security. Kids returned to school to find metal detectors, fences, dress codes, security cameras. And, in the Houston schools, one thing more: a police department.

Forget the days when the football coach doubled as security chief, checking the boys' room for idlers and cigarette smoke. The Houston Independent School District Police Department stations armed officers in the 58 middle schools and high schools and many of the 35 magnet and other alternative schools in its 312-square-mile jurisdiction. It patrols school neighborhoods with bicycles and a fleet of squad cars, fields gang and drug task forces and operates a crime-scene communications van.

Over and over on a recent, stifling-hot afternoon, a new Special Response Team practices skulking down an alley below window level, crouching behind a bulletproof shield and then, with guns drawn, rushing a stairwell to overwhelm an imaginary gunman.

Chain of Command

There is a horse-mounted unit for traffic control. An investigations division handles crimes short of rape and murder. Dispatchers fielded 14,000 calls last year. And heading it all is a 47-year-old former FBI agent who holds a doctorate in education, earns \$84,000 a year and has shaped his department down to the smallest details, including designing the uniforms and the department flag himself. Chief Marquis—so mindful of chain-of-command protocol that he and his longtime deputy address each other by their titles—offers this description of his job: "We exist for teaching and learning to take place."

Education is a local function in the U.S., so districts handle security in lots of different ways, and no one collects nationwide information. Most districts, if they use any security at all, use armed local police, reasoning that because schools are part of the community, they should be protected by community police. But some districts use police just to patrol the halls, while others ask them to run safety and counseling programs as well. Some pay local police with school funds; others depend on the police force to pay the costs and handle the administration.

In Texas and Florida, state laws allow school districts to create their own police forces, and 82 of the 1,042 school districts in Texas have done just that. With a budget of about \$12 million, the HISD police department is the largest in the state. But beyond that, Houston shows how the job of protecting school kids has expanded and become professionalized since the days when coaches patrolled the halls.

The starting salary for an HISD police officer is \$28,000, only about \$1,000 less than for Houston Police Department rookies. New hires must be graduates of a police-academy program, hold a police license and have 60 hours toward a college degree. By state law, officers receive at least 20 hours of training a year. Bike patrols and drug and gang specialists receive training beyond that. And the Special Response Team practices hostage rescues and school evacuations two days a month, including training with the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Shaping Up

That's a far cry from the department that Chief Marquis inherited in 1994—a "ragtag bunch" in mismatched uniforms, he says, who applied the decals to their squad cars themselves. Because Houston's schools use site-based management, giving principals control over some of the day-to-day details of running their schools, HISD policemen carried guns and wore uniforms in schools where principals favored them but didn't elsewhere.

Houston's superintendent, Rod Paige, says the school board decided to upgrade its policing when focus groups told it that middle-class parents, and particularly whites, were leaving the district because they viewed the schools as unsafe.

Of Houston's 211,000 students, more than half are Hispanic, a third are African-American and three-quarters are poor. Big-city superintendents worry, says Dr. Paige, "that school districts so at odds demographically with the rest of the community" risk losing community support, especially financial support. And operating unsafe schools is one certain step on that path.

In the 1993-94 school year, HISD police reported 89 aggravated assaults, two murders, seven rapes and 244 cases of children carrying weapons to school. Hired mid-year, Chief Marquis already had been a U.S. Air Force officer, chief of police at the Los Angeles Air Force Station, security manager for the 1984 Olympic Games and a 10-year member of the FBI. The son of a San Francisco bus driver, he graduated from the University of Portland, earned a business degree from Pepperdine University in Los Angeles and got his doctorate from Texas Southern University in Houston. He expects to earn a second master's degree, in criminal-justice management, this spring, and after that is eyeing a program at Harvard.

Two years into his HISD job, Chief Marquis, a Democrat, ran for sheriff of heavily Republican Harris County and took a drubbing. But he moves easily in Houston's civic circles, from the YMCA to the rodeo, and entertains a steady stream of TV reporters who ask about the schools.

A typical Marquis day begins at 4 a.m. with a workout and allows for one cup of coffee, weekdays only. He does the cooking for his wife, a former Justice Department lawyer, and two small children, and sews a missing button on his daughter's dress before she leaves for preschool.

Still, the screen saver on his office computer declares "Always Forward." Vince

Lombardi quotations hang framed on the wall ("What It Takes to Be No. 1"). And Chief Marquis delights in pushing the boundaries of his job description: He recently extended his department's jurisdiction to include a shelter for battered women, on whose board he sits, by reasoning that the children of the abused mothers probably attend Houston schools. "I'm not a status-quo kind of guy," he says.

Bearing Arms

Indeed. Among his first changes, Chief Marquis helped persuade the Texas Legislature to put school police officers under the direction of school-police chiefs, taking them out of the orbit of principals. With that, HISD officers began wearing uniforms and badges—and carrying guns. Without guns, "they're not police officers," the chief says.

Where HISD police formerly backed up Houston police on calls in schools, now it's the other way around, with school police making the arrests and keeping the records, (although still using Houston police substations for bookings). Emergency dispatchers, who once routed 911 calls through the Houston police, now relay them directly to HISD. And four years ago, HISD police received the authority to issue citations: Disrupting school can bring a Class C citation that carries a \$100 municipal-court fine. Violating a 9:30 a.m.-to-2:30 p.m. curfew—imposed by the city to keep kids off the street when they should be in school—can bring a \$250 fine. And citations for fighting can start at \$250 and soar to \$1,300.

At age 17, moreover, a youngster can be sent to jail for not paying his fines. "That gets their attention," says HISD Capt. Al Barnes. More important, he adds, it helps keep fights off the school grounds and out of the classrooms.

With site-based management, Houston's schools can decide to use their budgets to buy walk-through metal detectors



Bruce P. Marquis

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and security cameras, and they can opt for school uniforms and bans on trench coats. Milby High School is banning denim this year, and because of thefts and fires in the lockers, Austin High has bolted them shut, which means students all carry around their days' books and supplies.

Random Searches

But to add to the schools' precautions, Chief Marquis also issues hand-held metal detectors to his officers and, next year, will add computers to link them with headquarters—a converted telephone-company building—and into the records bureau. Prompted by the Littleton shootings, HISD will begin twice-monthly drug and weapons searches this year, randomly picking out a school and then two classes in that school for searches. More typically, though, his officers linger at front doors as school begins each morning, picking up on tensions or bad moods. They wander hallways, shooing stragglers into class. They direct traffic at dismissal, breaking up knots of loiterers who might, out of idleness, start trouble. And they listen for word of gang fights, drug deals and weapons.

That word usually gets out, Officer Marvin Lee says with reassuring certainty, because "the good kids outweigh the bad kids." Officer Lee has patrolled Lamar High, a middle-class school with 3,000 students, for 15 years, and he has a clear sense of his job: "It's stepping out little fires before they become big fires."

Across town, a little fire appears to be smoldering at Yates High as a skinny sophomore is brought into the tiny police office, accused of kicking an assistant principal who has reprimanded him for not wearing the regulation khaki pants. The parents have been called, and the teenager, clearly fearful of his stepfather, sits worried and resentful as Officer Ernest Lang outlines his strategy.

Officer Lang, who scored 33 touchdowns in his senior year at Yates in 1951 and is still known in Central Houston as "The Legend," plans to get the boy into the school ROTC program, and assigns a

sleepy-looking senior nicknamed Wolf to serve as his mentor. An officer who knows the stepfather will look in at home from time to time, and a Baptist preacher who was tossed out of Yates 20 years ago but has returned as a counselor will work on the youngster's attitude. "We can reach him if we take the time," Officer Lang says easily. Then, as the parents arrive for a conference, he leans toward the youngster and warns: "Don't you act ugly now."

Juvenile crime has fallen nationwide in the past five years: In Houston's schools, aggravated assaults are down by three-quarters, and weapons' violations are down by two-thirds since Chief Marquis took his job. Dewey Cornell, a psychologist who studies youth violence at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, credits better policing for part of the decline. But he also credits a strong economy, the calming of the cocaine wars, success in arresting gang leaders, a federal law that mandates expulsion for bringing guns to school, and the spread of character-education and conflict-mediation programs.

Character Education

Ten years ago, worried about what they saw as declining social and moral values, local business leaders raised \$2 million to fund one of the country's early character-education programs in Houston's schools. The idea is to teach values such as honesty and self-discipline as part of every class, says Dot Woodson, who was a University of Houston basketball coach before coming to HISD to head the program. So, in a class on the Boston Tea Party, she tells teachers to ask kids, "What would make you so angry that you would want to rebel, and what are the appropriate ways to rebel?"

In a decade, Houston has trained 16,000 of its teachers in character education and bought or written character-education curricula for all its schools. Ten state legislatures (although not Texas's) now mandate that schools teach character education, and six others encourage it. "This is the place to spend money," Virginia's Dr. Cornell insists.

Certainly, compared with hiring policemen, character education is cheap. Security is barely a blip on the \$1.2 billion budget of the Houston schools, but even so, the district sets aside \$9 million. Chief Marquis says his spending, which comes from several budget pots, actually is at least a third more, and even that doesn't include what the schools individually spend on security hardware. Meanwhile, Houston's character-education program is still operating, in part, off its original \$2 million grant.

With schools under huge pressure to raise standards and test scores, special-response teams and communications vans can seem like an extravagance—until they're needed, of course. Herbert Karpicke, principal of the 700-student High School for the Performing and Visual Arts, offers a tour while Chief Marquis is giving

an interview in the school's video lab. Doors open onto a choir practice, a jazz band, a corps of ballerinas, dramatic soliloquies. Dr. Karpicke has persuaded the district to contribute \$15 million toward a new, larger school, but he has to raise the other \$15 million himself in the next five years, and he is wondering how.

Even this school—its hallways lined with cellos, its students hand-picked—has an armed HISD police officer at the front door, though. Chief Marquis concedes the benefits of violence-prevention programs: They're "a spoke in the wheel," he says. "But as long as problems from the community come onto the campuses, the police are necessary," he says, and that means armed, trained and equipped officers. He is lobbying to hire 40 more.

BARBARA BOXER
CALIFORNIA

Crime - COPS in schools

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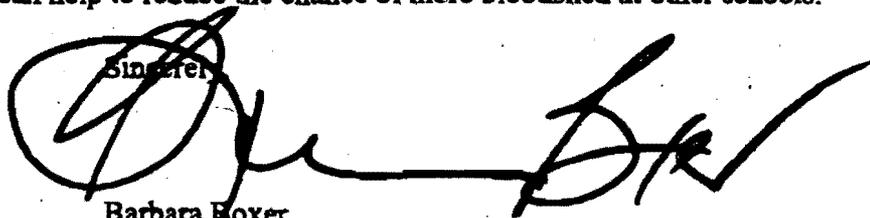
Dear Madame Attorney General:

Last summer, I asked you to waive the local matching requirement for COPS grants which would place law enforcement officers in the public schools. I am writing to urge you again to implement such a policy - and to do so today.

Under section 1701(i) of the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act of 1968, as added by the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, the Attorney General has the authority to waive the local matching requirement for a COPS grant to local communities. When a local community wants to use the COPS program to place a police officer in a school, the local matching requirement should be waived.

I have been told that the Department has waived the local match in some cases and evaluates the requests on a case-by-case basis. With all due respect, that is not good enough. The Department needs to make it a matter of policy - and needs to let local communities know of the policy - that the local match will always and routinely be waived for putting law enforcement officers in schools. I am introducing legislation that would require a waiver, but you have the authority to do it today, without further legislation. I urge you to do so.

Children in public schools have a right to be safe, and it is our obligation to ensure their safety. It is as fundamental as the right to a free public education. Let's not wait for yet another tragedy to get adequate protection for America's schoolchildren. This small step is not the only step we need to take. But, it can help to reduce the chance of more bloodshed at other schools.

Sincerely,


Barbara Boxer
United States Senator

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