

Lawmakers pitch bills - in response to ACLU - Group criticizes results of officers in schools

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WATERBURY - There's little debate that cops stationed in schools can do a lot of good, but there are those who argue they can also do a lot of damage if not properly used.

Last November, the American Civil Liberties Union put out a cautionary report after studying schools in Hartford, West Hartford and East Hartford. It warns of increasing arrests for infractions that traditionally might have been handled without involving students in criminal courts. The report also notes glaring disparities in the rates at which minorities were arrested when compared to white peers who committed similar offenses.

State lawmakers have proposed two laws concerning school resource officers this year, in part because of concerns raised by the ACLU. One, from the General Assembly's Education Committee, would force schools to report all arrests in a standardized form, which protects students' names, but makes clear their age, race and reason for arrest.

Authors of the ACLU study found it extremely hard to extract arrest data from the state Department of Education and local school districts. The state Department of Education and Waterbury school officials were unable to provide arrest data requested by The Republican-American, though both made attempts.

A second bill, from state Rep. Jason Rojas, D-East Hartford, would require uniform standards and training for in-school officers.

"I think adding officers to a school building can be a positive thing," Rojas said. "My concern is if they are placed there and they are just arresting students, because that can be counterproductive."

Rojas has been working with the **Center for Children's Advocacy, a nonprofit dedicated to providing legal aid to children.**

Once involved in the criminal justice system, children's chances for success plummet, said Carmia Caesar, an attorney with the center. They are less likely to get into college, get student loans or a job. They're much more likely to get involved in crime or drugs.

Connecticut School Resource Officer Association President Caleb Lopez couldn't agree more. He supports the concept behind both bills and has been collaborating with Rojas and the Center for Children's Advocacy. His only concern is that the rules put in place should not tie the hands of officers, or prove costly to towns.

Only a year old, the Connecticut School Resource Officer Association is struggling to establish itself. Lopez said he hopes to develop a free training program. Existing programs offered by out-of-state groups generally take about 40 hours over the course of a week.

Waterbury held a half-day training for its school officers the year they were introduced, but has not followed up with new school resource officers or offered reinforcement training.

Nonetheless, Waterbury school principals interviewed this week had no complaints. A couple complimented Police Superintendent Neil O'Leary on his picks.

"I'm guessing when these positions come available there is a selection process," North End Middle School Principal Michael LoRusso said. "The guys we've had have all been younger and very personable. They like the kids and deal well with them."