

Hartford Schools, Police Sign Agreement To Curb Student Arrests

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HARTFORD — Police Chief James Rovella and Superintendent Christina Kishimoto have signed a document that promises to reduce the number of city students who are arrested at school and cast into the court system for minor offenses.

City officials and juvenile advocates said they hope the agreement can help curb the incarceration of Hartford's youth. "This has been very important to me," Kishimoto said. "I don't want any of my kids having an experience with the police on a negative level."

Hartford's agreement is based on a model memorandum of understanding that has been distributed by the Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee, a panel under the state Office of Policy and Management that has been among several groups aiming to reform the juvenile justice system in Connecticut.

Federal law requires states to address the disproportionate number of minorities, compared to white youth, who come into contact with the juvenile courts.

The two biggest feeders into the state's juvenile justice system are Hartford and Bridgeport. One analysis in Connecticut found that about 40 percent of juvenile arrests referred to court were rooted in school incidents, officials said, including many cases where punishment might have otherwise been counseling or a sitdown with the principal.

"A lot of them were for fairly minor stuff, like swearing," said William Carbone, executive director of the judicial branch's Court Support Services Division. Other examples include carrying cigarettes in one's pocket, wearing a hat and refusing to remove it, and a scuffle.

"Kids bump into each other, push each other and no one's hurt — there's no need for the courts to get involved in that," Carbone said. "Kids live up to... societal expectations. And what that often means is that the behavior escalates" if they are labeled as criminals.

"It disrupts your family relationships, it disrupts your school," said Martha Stone, executive director of the Center for Children's Advocacy, a nonprofit legal group affiliated with the University of Connecticut School of Law in Hartford.

"Usually, the kids need services," Stone said. "They don't need incarceration unless it's the most serious juvenile offenses."

A year and a half ago, the Center for Children's Advocacy, working with the Center for Children's Law and Policy in Washington, D.C., organized a group that includes leaders from the Hartford school system, the city and police department, the state's judicial branch and the probation department to track the high number of school-based arrests in the city.

From March to June 2011, there were 113 arrests of Hartford public school students that were referred to court, according to Stone. All but one were Latinos and African Americans. Stone said arrests have since declined.

During the last school year, from September 2011 to June 2012, there were 141 court referrals to juvenile court for Hartford residents who were arrested at school, data from the judicial branch show. Among those referrals, 117 of the arrests were at Hartford schools.

Third-degree assault, which is typically a fight, was one of the most common charges, said Cathy Foley Geib, manager of clinical and educational services for the court support services division. Others were second-degree breach of peace, threatening, criminal trespass — or being somewhere in the school where a student wasn't allowed — and disorderly conduct.

Hartford Public High School had 26 court-referred arrests, the highest number among city schools. There were 18 such arrests at Weaver High, 15 at Bulkeley High and 13 at Rawson, a K-8 school.

Hartford's memorandum of agreement outlines a graduated response model in which schools "should involve the police as a last line of defense" after first opting for in-school intervention for misbehavior such as defying school rules, truancy and harassment.

"HPD should only be involved if the misconduct rises to the level of a criminal violation," the agreement states. "Involvement of the police does not necessarily mean arrest and referral to court."

"Whenever possible, students should be taken into custody out of sight and sound of other students" if police officers must make an arrest at school, according to the document.

Court support services, the state Department of Children and Families and the Department of Education are funding a program that trains school staff on behavioral interventions and how to recognize mental health issues instead of resorting to law enforcement, Foley Geib said.

The School-Based Diversion Initiative is at Hartford Public and Weaver this year after being implemented in communities such as Bridgeport, East Hartford and Southington.

Judicial and probation officials have also called on police departments across Connecticut to seek alternatives, such as a town's juvenile review board or social services, before seeking court punishment for minor offenses.

Statewide, more than 300 juvenile cases have been returned to local police over the past year with the message that "this does not rise to the level" of the courts, Carbone said.

In Hartford, there have been only four court referrals for city students during the first six weeks of the current school year, Foley Geib said. "It's too early to say what that means."

Mayor Pedro Segarra said the memorandum between the schools and police "will go a long way to ensure that our kids are held to a certain level of accountability [without] criminalizing the conduct as the first option, because the consequences are far too great."

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