

Bill would require defined police role in schools

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As more school districts explore having police officers stationed in schools after the Dec. 14 Newtown shootings, a children's advocacy group is calling for guidelines to define duties of school-based officers.

The Center for Children's Advocacy has proposed a measure that would require a memorandum of understanding between police and school districts to ensure police don't end up becoming default discipline agents in schools. The Legislature's Judiciary Committee will hold a hearing on the bill Friday.

"This is a bill we've been promoting for quite some time. We proposed it last year, but we feel it's more important now in light of everything that's happened since Newtown," said Marisa Halm, Center for Children's Advocacy director. "We are fearful that without a carefully crafted agreement between police and schools, there will be a negative impact on youth."

About 12 cities and towns in the state, including Hartford, Bridgeport and Stamford, already have a memorandum of agreement in place, and the state has crafted a model document, Halm said.

House Bill 6682 would require that schools with police stationed in them have written agreements with police to govern interactions between law enforcement, staff and students. The bill also would require schools each year to disclose the number of school-based arrests. Halm said the agreements have reduced school-based arrests this year by 58 percent in Hartford and 38 percent in Bridgeport.

Danbury Superintendent Sal Pascarella said he understood the value of the proposed law. His district has school resource officers in the high school and in two middle schools trained to become part of a school culture, not just to serve as security.

"I think being explicit about the response is key," Pascarella said. "If a district has chosen to go to armed security, then all of their policies for discipline that normally would be followed should be followed. It's so kids are protected not only from harm but to protect their individual rights."

State Rep. Robert Godfrey, D-Danbury, a member of the Judiciary Committee, said the bill was early in the process and he wants to hear comments at the public hearing.

"It grows out of some interesting issues, like an overreaction to schoolyard contretemps that normally would be taken care of by staff, but end up with a police officer putting an 8-year-old child in handcuffs," Godfrey said.

"We don't want otherwise minor incidents literally turned into a criminal case," he said. "It makes sense to me to take a closer look at this."

State Rep. Cecilia Buck-Taylor, R, New Milford, said she thought the bill was a good idea. She said she's been impressed with New Milford's use of school resource officers but knows things are different since Newtown.

"I don't want kids to feel they are in a prison environment," Buck-Taylor said, especially since there are so many school districts approving armed guards.