

Everything you need to know about our new Safety Department

School districts across the U.S. are now implementing criminal justice system practices in order to achieve a safer school environment, which is what CHISD aims to do. The district's main goal is to protect students and staff. This 19-20 school year, CHISD took a different approach and one that is widely used across our region. Instead of contracting an outside officer or deputy, as the district has done in the past, CHISD created its own safety department. The district's Police Chief, Andrew Whitfield, says that there are very few districts within the region that still contract through an outside department.

"The benefit of a district having its own police department is the district has more control over the officers and they are not limited by outside department policy" says Whitfield.

Many schools are now creating internal security departments for multiple reasons, mainly for crime reduction, teaching and mentorship, and yes, financial costs as well.

"The department was created by utilizing resources the district already had and the same amount of funds" added Whitfield.

Yes, the same amount of funds, meaning the department was created under the same security budget that was used during the 2018-2019 school year.

You may have also noticed the two police vehicles on one of the CHISD campuses.

"Both of those vehicles already belonged to the district and were refurbished for the use of security. The truck belonged to maintenance and the Charger also already belonged to the district" says Whitfield.

Another way the district was able to save funds was by utilizing space in the district that wasn't being used for the department's headquarters.

"The only funds that went into creating the department were the vehicle decals and the officers' uniforms. Again, we were still on the same security budget as the district was on last year, and the safety funding comes from the state" says Whitfield.

So how can having a school safety department reduce crime within the community?

"Having this department in place benefits the community because there's an actual police presence, it provides additional officers to our area, which allows for better prevention" says Whitfield.

In addition to preventing crime at school, both Whitfield, and Officer Maria Figueroa have the authority to make traffic stops, issue tickets, make arrests, and enforce all county laws.

Whitfield adds that having campus officers also improves response times on campus in the event of a crisis, versus waiting for a responding officer.

"Unfortunately in many situations, timing is crucial," says Whitfield.

In addition to saving funds and preventing crime, the department also aims to make a difference in students' lives. By mentoring and creating bonds, the hope is that the authority presence will reduce discipline issues.

“It gives a sense of comfort to staff and students, but not only that, we’re able to build positive relationships with these kids. That way they don’t immediately associate law enforcement with something negative” says Whitfield, “we gain their trust so when something is happening at home or school, they’re more willing to ask for help, and they know that’s what we’re here for.”

Whitfield says in his experience in law enforcement kids will not often talk to a street officer like they would their campus officer, because of that relationship that is built up throughout their years in school.

“Another positive of building that relationship is getting to know your students as people” says Whitfield, “We, as school resource officers, are able to weigh consequences of the actions of students and determine the punishment for what fits the crime. Meaning, there are other ways of disciplining besides arresting them or writing them a ticket, something that could follow them for the rest of their lives.”

Whitfield served 8 years in the military and has been in law enforcement since 1999 and has received national nominations for his role as Tyler ISD Crime stoppers Coordinator from 2005 to 2013. Figueroa came to Chapel Hill ISD from Whitehouse Police Department. Prior to that, she was a deputy for the Smith County Sheriff’s Office. For additional information on the district’s new and improved safety department, you can read more on the district webpage <https://www.chapelhillisd.org/Page/5687>.