

Passing the tests: Gwinnett County Schools Police Department earns state certification

By becoming state certified, the Gwinnett County Public Schools Police Department has joined an elite group of law enforcement agencies, the executive director of the Georgia Association of Chiefs of Police said.

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Staff Photos: Jason Braverman
Tony Lockard, school resource officer at Peachtree Ridge High School, monitors the hallway during a class change. The Gwinnett County Schools Police Department recently became certified by the state. It is the third school system police department to earn the certification, which means the agency meets standards in areas such as operations and procedures.

LAWRENCEVILLE — By becoming state certified, the Gwinnett County Public Schools Police Department has joined an elite group of law enforcement agencies, the executive director of the Georgia Association of Chiefs of Police said.

About 700 agencies in the state are available to be certified, but only 95 agencies — including three school districts — are state certified, Executive Director Frank Rotondo said. The GCPS Police Department achieved its certification in November.

“I am very firm in my belief that the most professional agencies in the state are state certified,” Rotondo said. “It really shows they have a driving desire to have very strong policy in that department, and policy equates to doing things right. Policy reduces liabilities.”

Being state certified ensures an agency meets critical standards in law enforcement and noncritical standards in administration, Rotondo said. In all, there are 118 standards. State-certified agencies also agree to keep their policies up to date, so if a law changes, their policies will change.

“They will always be on the cutting edge of law enforcement,” Rotondo said. “(Certification) is not mandatory. That’s why (state-certified agencies are) the best of the best.”

Since Gwinnett County Public Schools established its school resource officer program in 1994, Rotondo said he has felt the district has had a history of hiring experienced law enforcement officers who could interpersonally relate with students and school staff, mediate and take care of things in a positive sense.

The primary objective of the school system’s Office of Safety and Security is to ensure that all of the district’s facilities are safe, secure and orderly, said Jim Taylor, the executive director of academic support.

Wayne Rikard, the school system’s chief of police, said school resource officers focus on a triad model, serving as law enforcement officers, teachers to students and advisers to school staff.

Gwinnett County Board of Education Chairwoman Mary Kay Murphy said she congratulates Rikard and his staff “for wanting to be best in class.”

“We are very proud of them,” Murphy said. “It should give the community members of Gwinnett County ... great assurance that our schools are safe and we are operating at the very highest standard of safety for our students.”

Pursuing state certification was a proactive measure, Murphy said. It’s also an example of the innovation the district shows.

“It continues to round out the picture of our school climate, our school curriculum and our student safety.”