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## Familiar presence at WRHS is changing his beat

### Sgt. Armstrong leaving after 18 years

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**Sgt. Dave Armstrong**

From a distance looking down one of Wachusett Regional High School's long hallways, you'd think Dave Armstrong was a teacher. Navy blue shirt, khakis, greeting students and teachers with a smile. Everyone knows him, and not just because he's been around for nearly 18 years. He's here, there and everywhere on a given day, participating in criminal justice training programs, helping with "incidents," talking to Lifeskills classes, health providers, principals.

"The amount of people I talk to in a day," he says with a shake of his head. "It's mind boggling."

His job description says School Resource Officer at Wachusett Regional, but Holden Police Sgt. Dave Armstrong has made the job into so much more. After nearly two decades at WRHS, he's leaving to fill an administrative position at the police department.

Armstrong remembers well the day he sat down with then-principal Thomas Pandiscio to talk about having an SRO up at the high school. The position would be a remedy for a problem - a lack of communication between the police department and the school, where, when an incident occurred, any officer on duty would respond, a different officer each time.

It was 1990, before Columbine, before the school had its popular criminal justice program, before there were 200 cars full of students in terraced parking lots. The world and the high school were both different places, Armstrong admits, particularly pre-Columbine.

"I realized that day that we felt kind of naked," he says. "We really needed a partnership."

That partnership between schools and state and local police is only one of the differences between the job as it was envisioned in 1990 and the job it is now.

Armstrong recalls how the job started, with some mock accident training, working with the

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health curriculum, and holding domestic violence programs.

Some years a police officer did little crime investigation - Armstrong remembers years that were crime-free at WRHS.

Not so today. The school is larger, and on any given day the work of educating is likely to be interrupted by "incidents," mostly minor, he says.

Critical incident planning has increased too, as the nation's schools adjusted to lessons learned from school shootings in recent years.

At Wachusett, the job has been made more difficult by constant construction. Armstrong's a bit relieved when he talks about a finished high school.

"We're now on a footprint we can plan for," he says.

**More incidents, fewer arrests**

Armstrong points to the advantages of having the same officer day after day, who knows the school and teachers and students, and deals with issues as they arise.

When a student gets into trouble, the school network goes into high gear.

"Everybody needs to be involved," he says.

That includes not just faculty and staff but parents. Following an incident, a contract is drawn up between the student and the adults around him or her about what's going to happen next. "Everything from homework to bringing out the trash," Armstrong says.

It's vital, he notes, to get to students at the first sign of trouble.

"If you don't get intervention with these kids early enough, you can lose them," he says.

At 16, students can quit school; at 17, they're legally an adult, and can be treated that way by the court system, Armstrong says.

"I think our kids appreciate the fact that our program over the years has been intervention first, not arrest," he says.

"Our kids," is not just a phrase to Armstrong: he knows their faces, he knows many of them personally, and he knows something about teenagers that is vital to doing his job. "I've learned that kids grow up, kids make adjustments," he says.



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Wachusett region students are good kids, Armstrong adds. He has high expectations for them and they've rarely disappointed him.

When those adjustments have to be made, they're made with Armstrong as part of a team that includes the student's teachers, principals and other support staff.

### **In the beginning**

The resource officer's position in 1990 was only a tentative foray by the police department into the schools.

Before that, Police Chief George Sherrill says, the relationship was certainly different, and the police response to events at the high school lacked continuity.

"We had so many different officers responding to all these different calls at Wachusett that there was no consistency," Sherrill says.

Even once the idea had been sold, it was still done by baby steps, Sherrill recalls, beginning with parttime position then increasing hours. It also had to be negotiated carefully with the district, the principal, the teachers and the students.

"We didn't want to be just a police officer walking the hallways," Sherrill says. "They could have hired a security officer for that."

The most important aspect was to build trust with everyone at the school, he says.

"You have to remember that's their turf; we're the outsider coming in. They have a right to be wary," Sherrill notes.

And while there have been clashes over the years, that hasn't prevented the program from not only surviving, but thriving.

"If I had to sum it up, I'd say it's been a huge success," he says.

One of those successes has been something that can't be recorded on any job description or in any history.

"One of the more important things is how many incidents [Armstrong has] prevented," Sherrill says. "We will never know that."

### **Criminal justice classes**

Armstrong's tenure also saw the initiation of the Criminal Justice Program. The program began with six students and now has 50, and a waiting list. It evokes enthusiasm in these students, many of whom are in it to prepare for careers in law, police and probation work, giving them hands-on training in everything from crime scene investigation to courtroom procedures.

At the outset, Sherrill recalls, high school criminal justice programs were so rare that the department had to look to a criminal justice program in Florida for guidance.

Sherrill thinks a lot about the SRO position these days, cognizant of the need for someone with Armstrong's strong people skills to fill his shoes

"Dave's a facilitator, a communicator, a liaison between police agencies, schools, colleges and universities," Sherrill says. "[His replacement] has to be the right personality. You have to almost take off your cop uniform and talk to kids at their level, change very quickly and talk to teachers at their level."

The SRO has to work effectively with the police and school departments.

"It's very difficult, because you're almost reporting to two bosses," Sherrill says.

While Armstrong certainly thinks about who his successor might be, he also looks at the future of the job he's leaving and dreams of a day when the role might be expanded.

"A lot of districts this size have two [officers]," he says.

With 18 years at the high school now coming to a close, Armstrong says he will miss the students, particularly the Lifeskills program students with whom he's forged a bond that wasn't foreseen in his job description.

"If I'm having a bad day, I walk into Lifeskills and there's nothing that happened to me that day that's so bad that these kids can't make me smile," he says.

He began the job, he says, at just the right time for him. He'd been the on-the-road police officer; he'd been the SRO at Mountview; he was ready, but he also had something else.

"You've got to like kids," he says. "You've got to like yourself."

The work has given him something that's actually rare in police work.

"The chief from Shrewsbury told me [when the job began], 'You get wins in this job.'"