Police Officer John Bates wants to know: “Do you guys have goals?” He’s addressing 26 pre-teen boys huddled around clusters of desks in a crowded ground-floor classroom at West Allegheny Middle School in North Fayette, 15 miles outside Pittsburgh. Ordinarily, this would be a seventh-grade health class, and the twelve-year-olds gathered here on a recent late-winter morning seem a typical mix of freckles, braces, big eyes and baggy clothes. They’re still growing out of their childhoods. But as it happens, they do have goals. There’s an electronic technician here, a couple of independent businessmen, a plumber (“I heard they make good money”), a pro football player—several, actually. “I want to be the CEO of Hewlett-Packard,” one boy announces—and startles everyone by specifying his starting salary requirements. (Let’s just say they’re in the low nine figures.)

John Bates waits for the rumble to die down—he employs an age-old teacher’s trick here, beginning a sentence and then skipping a beat for silence—before continuing. “Believe it or not,” he says casually when the room is quiet, “what you do now can affect those goals.”

That’s the low-key lesson for today. This is the introduction to a ten-session D.A.R.E. instructional program Bates will be conducting with this group, and he guides them to the point without much strain: actions have consequences. People remember things. Reputations happen. The students seem eager to run with it, and Bates gives them plenty of room. He explains a few things about the way the world works—how you have to give references when applying for a job, for instance; how prospective employers rely on written records and background checks to make educated guesses about your character. (Even the Steelers do background checks, he points out, for the benefit of the future first-round draft picks in the room.) He throws out a hypothetical or two, and plants the suggestion that you can’t always count on being able to explain your actions after the fact. “Is it fair?” he asks at one point. “Do people deserve a second chance?”

It’s a question that hangs in the air for a moment, then is batted down succinctly by a boy in the back: “Why give one person a second chance, when you could hire a person who doesn’t need a second chance?”

Exactly.

This is a typical day on the beat for John Bates, School Resource Officer (SRO) for the West Allegheny School District. He will spend part of it teaching, part of it counseling, part of it mentoring, part of it answering questions and giving advice on law and safety issues—and the rest of it “showing a presence,” like any beat cop: roaming corridors, popping into cafeterias, sometimes giving warnings or taking reports. Bates wears a gun and a badge and a smart blue uniform with a stripe down the pant leg—at a glance you can see what he is. You have to follow him around all day to see that he is something more as well: in effect, a new breed of police officer, working the borderland where education, delinquency prevention, school security and law enforcement come together.
Bates' work in the West Allegheny schools—and Pennsylvania's early experiments with school-based policing generally—have been made possible through the support of the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency. This issue of Pennsylvania Progress will explore the promise and possibilities of the SRO approach, and highlight the work that police officers like John Bates do to deter youth crime, promote understanding between juveniles and law enforcement, and make our schools as well as our streets safer for everyone.

WHAT IS AN SRO?

According to the most widely accepted definition, an SRO is a law enforcement officer who is permanently assigned and specially trained to provide coverage to a school or a set of schools. The PCCD is now supporting SRO programs that meet this definition in 18 communities around the Commonwealth. SROs in 4 other Pennsylvania communities have been funded through a joint initiative between the PCCD and the Pennsylvania Department of Education. The PCCD has invested in SRO training and evaluation as well, and will commit a total of nearly $2 million to SRO programs in the next few years. And all this is in addition to substantial federal aid to local SRO programs from the U.S. Department of Justice’s Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) program, which seems likely to expand in the coming years.

A visit to John Bates' West Allegheny School District—50 square miles of what was rural/industrial wilderness not so long ago, but is now a rapidly developing part of exurban Pittsburgh—helps explain where all this enthusiasm for the SRO approach comes from.

Bates’ North Fayette Police Department was one of 6 original grant recipients when the PCCD began its funding for SRO programs in 1998. This is only Bates’ second year as the local SRO, but he is anything but new around here. A life-long resident of the area, he attended both West Allegheny Middle School and West Allegheny High School, was a standout pitcher/infielder for the West Allegheny Indians, and graduated with the class of ‘82. Though now in his mid-thirties, with two kids of his own at home, and maybe a bit thicker than in his playing days (he blames the cafeteria food), Bates still has the easy athletic bearing of a ballplayer, and something of the look and manner of the actor Michael Keaton.

It’s no accident that Bates is West Allegheny’s first SRO. Almost from the moment he joined the North

FUNDING THE SRO APPROACH IN PENNSYLVANIA

The PCCD’s support for Pennsylvania SRO programs began in 1998, when it awarded six communities—North Fayette, Bensalem, and Abington Townships, Oil City, York City, and Reading—a total of $685,763 in 2-year SRO grants. The grants have sustained local SRO programs during the 1998-99 and 1999-2000 school years, and are being paid out of Innovative Local Law Enforcement and Community Policing (ILLEG) funds allocated to the Commonwealth under the federal Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (JJDP) Act. They do not require local communities to put up matching funds.

Since that initial commitment, the PCCD has made a series of 3-year SRO grants under its Drug Control and System Improvement (DCSI) Program, using federal funds made available to Pennsylvania under the Edward Byrne Memorial State and Local Law Enforcement Assistance Formula Grant Program. In October 1998, the PCCD awarded 3-year grants totaling $471,738 to support SRO programs in Allentown, State College, and Haverford, Lower Allen, and Upper Chichester Townships. In June 1999, Wilkes-Barre, Hermitage, and Folks Township were awarded 3-year SRO grants totaling $241,264. In September 1999, Beaver Falls and Bethlehem, Whitehall, Lower Salford, and Bensalem Townships received a total of $429,823 in 3-year SRO grants. In all of these cases, the grants cover 75% of the local community’s costs in the first year of operation, 50% in the second, and 25% in the third.

In addition, in January 2000, through a joint initiative undertaken by the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) and the PCCD, PDE awarded a total of $240,338 in 1-year grants to support SRO programs in four Pennsylvania school districts—Reading, York City, and the Dubois and Indiana Area School Districts. After this initial year of funding from PDE, the PCCD expects to sustain these programs with DCSI funds for an additional 3 years.
STOPPING THE MUSIC

They are, first of all, his students. Bates teaches seventh grade, eighth grade, and tenth grade D.A.R.E. classes as well as special “Street Law,” gun safety, bullying, harassment, and conflict resolution programs. He serves as advisor and mentor to those interested in law enforcement careers in the Law Enforcement Apprenticeship Program (LEAP). He answers questions and offers guidance like any other counselor—and kids seem to accept him in that role. They know where his office is, and catch him there between classes. Or leave post-it notes on his door. Or waylay him in the halls. Often they want to ask about little things—the points on their driver’s licenses, say. But sometimes the subject is more serious. What to do about problems at home. How to handle hassles with fellow students.

This is an orderly school district—remember that 98% rule—and fighting is rare here. But there are 1,600 active kids in these two buildings on any given day, 900-plus in the high school alone. Some friction is inevitable. For instance, Bates says, a girl came to his officer earlier this week to tell him about a dispute with a fellow student, which had culminated in a telephone threat over the weekend. Since she received the threat (“Wait until Monday!”) at her home in a neighboring jurisdiction, Bates explained how to file a report on the matter with her local police department, but also promised to look into it himself.
When he did so, the other party “gave a different story, which is typical.” And nothing happened. No actual trouble—just the overture to the trouble. But Bates probably did something to stop the music himself.

Teachers and administrators often let Bates know about trivial, in-school altercations that could, if left to simmer, boil over into actual out-of-school fights. In such cases, Bates might initiate talks of his own with those involved. If he needs to yank a kid out of class, though, he says he sends someone from the guidance office to do it for him, to avoid spreading the impression that anybody is in trouble.

Bates is well aware of the danger of turning every in-school spat and shoving match into a case of “disorderly conduct”—just because he happens to be on the spot. He generally keeps his citation book out of sight. “We want the kids to be able to come to me,” he says. “But kids also understand, if I see something wrong, I have to act.” But not so much as a cop—“I do what a teacher would do,” he says.

A SECURITY ROLE

In what has come to be called the “post-Columbine” era of American school administration, there is some undeniable appeal to having an armed police officer on the scene—just in case. Even Dr. Jim Hoover, the Principal at nearby McKee Elementary School, where Bates also serves as D.A.R.E. officer, admits that it’s “nice to have a police officer in the building.” He and others know that an SRO’s contribution in this respect is largely symbolic—there are some tragedies, after all, that no amount of armed vigilance can be expected to prevent. And not everyone agrees on the symbolism, for that matter. At least one Pennsylvania school district reportedly turned down SRO program funding out of concern that having a uniformed SRO might make its schools look unsafe. Objections like these, from parents and school board officials, have been the basis of opposition to SRO programs in other states as well.

But West Allegheny High School Principal Rich Moran dismisses these qualms. “People object to the gun and the uniform,” he says. “But I say, that’s life. If [an intruder] came in here, what are you gonna do, blow your whistle at him?”

In any case, Bates’ presence may be making West Allegheny schools safer in lots of ways that don’t involve his gun or his whistle. He conducts security-related in-service training for teachers, for instance. He is part of a Crisis Intervention Team with school administrators, working out effective routines for responding to emergency situations. He attends monthly Safe School Committee meetings—where parents, teachers, administrators, and police come together to confer over district-wide school security measures, like the buzzer system and sign-in procedures for school visitors.

And perhaps most important, Bates participates in West Allegheny’s Student Assistance Program (SAP). SAP is a formal mechanism for identifying students in trouble and getting them help—before they act out or otherwise endanger themselves or others. As an SAP team member, Bates meets each week with counselors, teachers, administrators, and other school professionals, in a confidential effort to pinpoint problems, work with families on solutions, and recommend professional services where they are needed. Bates’ role is as an information resource; he contributes what he knows as a representative of the local police department, about the behavior of students in the larger community outside the school.

KIDS WITH PROBLEMS

Bates can be an information resource for his colleagues in the police department as well. He recalls a time when a West Allegheny student turned up on a security video approaching a local store after hours; the store was later discovered to have been burglarized, and Bates got a call from the detective investigating the case. “I told [him], ‘If he did it, he did it not knowing [the store was closed]. When you meet this kid, you’re gonna see he’s a great kid.’”

In fact the investigation later showed the student was not involved. But you get the sense, listening to Bates, that if this hadn’t turned out to be another one of those great kids, it would instead have been “a kid who’s had some problems....”

“Problems” is the closest thing to a negative in Bates’ vocabulary—an all-purpose term for trouble and trouble-making, including the kind that amounts to youth crime. Its very vagueness probably expresses a half-conscious wish to give a kid an even break, to avoid dredging up old history. Here and there throughout the day Bates points out or refers to kids who have “had problems,” but almost invariably by way of contrast with their current behavior, the way
they’ve turned themselves around. Now she’s on her way to college. Now he’s a D.A.R.E. role model, making speeches at the elementary school.

And what about kids before the turn-around stage—kids who are still in the midst of their problems? “We get along fine,” Bates says cheerfully. “I sit down in the cafeteria with them.”

The job of John Bates and other SROs is obviously a blend of disparate roles. The National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO), a nonprofit organization of school administrators and school-based law enforcement officers through which the PCCD arranges training for Pennsylvania’s SROs, calls it “the Triad”: educator, counselor, law enforcer. Judging from the syllabus for NASRO’s 40-hour “Basic SRO” instruction course, which is designed for any law enforcement officer working in an educational environment, it’s a balancing act as well. SROs need to know as much about “Instructional Techniques,” “Classroom Management,” and “Lesson Plan Development” as they do about criminal law or the use of force. SROs in training study the art of one-to-one problem-solving with adolescents, covering such topics as “Adolescent Emotional Issues,” “Child Abuse,” and “Dysfunctional Families.” Before it’s over, they are tested on “Substance Abuse Issues,” “Emergency Management,” “Crime Prevention through Environmental Design”—it’s a lot to pack into a week. NASRO offers special “Advanced SRO” and “SRO Supervisor” courses as well.

The PCCD has funded NASRO training for a total of 43 Pennsylvania SROs to date. The six SROs hired under the PCCD’s original SRO initiative beginning in 1998 attended a regional NASRO training event in Rochester, New York. In January of 2000, the PCCD paid for 37 more Pennsylvania SROs to attend a NASRO training in Mechanicsburg, PA. Another NASRO training course is scheduled to be held in Mechanicsburg in August, 2000. To register or learn more about training, go online at www.nasro.org, or call 1-888-316-2776.

An SRO’s job, like any other, has its disappointments. One of them is waiting for Bates in the middle of the day on a desk in Dean of Discipline Rick Smith’s cramped front office. It’s a pipe—and not the kind Fred MacMurray used to smoke. Bates turns the home-made article over in his hands: it has a heavy, greasy, faintly sinister look, like a shop project gone bad. A teacher confiscated it earlier this morning from a sophomore Bates knows. (The teacher “got a whiff,” as Smith explains it tersely, and “the kid coughed it up.”) There was nothing in the pipe but residue, and the school has already checked the boy’s locker and backpack and found nothing more.

Still, Bates seems concerned. He likes the boy, first of all. It’s one of those kids he’s been seeing off and on since kindergarten. He suspected something like this, but isn’t pleased to see his suspicions confirmed. Also, the fact that the boy would bring it to school—whether out of carelessness, disorientation, or apathy—is worrisome.

The boy—a solid, sad-eyed kid with a chin beard and long lank hair parted in the middle, in sneakers, baggy black pants and a t-shirt celebrating an LA goth-metal band—is huddled into a black leather jacket in the outer office, waiting for his mother to come and take him home. Bates calls him in for a talk.

There are no threats or harsh words. The boy is respectful, and Bates seems more crestfallen than anything else. In fact, the boy remembers his D.A.R.E. instruction pretty well—it was only a couple of years ago that he was one of those bright-eyed middle schoolers. His current drug use, he says, is a response to grief and stress. But from his answers to various low-key questions from Bates, it sounds like his home life may be a little disorganized, too. He and Bates talk about stress relief—the right kind and the wrong kind—and about his future. Bates explains that he will be making a report about this, but that the police will “let the school handle it.” There is no change in the look of anguish on the boy’s face. He’s still waiting to face his mother.

Afterwards, when the boy is gone, Bates says, “He’ll get more treatment from the school than if he got arrested.” That will include a suspension, followed by mandatory sessions with a drug and alcohol counselor who comes to the school once a week.

“I don’t want to make a mountain out of a molehill,” Bates says.
EVALUATION

The SRO approach is still fairly new, its aims fairly broad. To date there’s not much solid data on its effectiveness. One study focusing on North Carolina SROs, conducted by the Center for the Prevention of School Violence (CPSV) at North Carolina State University in Raleigh, generally found that most school principals and assistant principals rated SRO effectiveness highly, and that large majorities of teachers and substantial numbers of students believed that SROs were making schools more secure, reducing and deterring drug activity and violence, and contributing to a better learning environment. In addition, the CPSV study found a reduction in reported incidents of firearms possession on school property that may have been correlated with increasing numbers of SROs. On the other hand, the CPSV itself admits that bringing SROs into schools has been known to trigger increases in reported criminal activity on school grounds—perhaps for no other reason than that SROs are there to make the reports. In any case, if you discount anecdotal evidence of SRO impacts and surveys measuring such things as student attitudes and perceived school climates, there appear to be no published studies that link SRO programs with quantifiable changes in crime rates or violence, on or off school property.

The PCCD may be able to help here. It is currently funding a two-year evaluation of its six original SRO programs—in Oil City, Reading, York City, Bensalem, and Abington as well as John Bates’ North Fayette Township. The research design and statistical analyses are being supervised by the Center for Schools and Communities in Lemoyne, PA and conducted by Diagnostics Plus, a survey-research organization in State College. In addition to interviewing and job-shadowing SROs and surveying students regarding such matters as their fear of crime in school, their personal experience with school violence, and their interactions with and impressions of local SROs, evaluators are collecting hard data on actual rates of school crime, violence, weapons possession, and local juvenile arrests for SRO and demographically comparable non-SRO school jurisdictions. Final results of the study—expected to be issued by the end of July, 2000—should help give policymakers some idea of the bottom-line impact of this new form of policing.

In addition, the Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) program of the U.S. Department of Justice, which has funded more than 1,500 SROs in 700 jurisdictions nationwide, is in the process of hiring an evaluator to assess the impact of federally funded SRO programs over the next two years.

TRAFFIC DUTY

Inevitably, an SRO’s beat takes in mountains and molehills. Unlimited potential and petty vandalism. Future plumbers and future CEOs, great kids and kids with problems—drinking problems, homework problems, girl problems, shoelace problems. This is all part of the territory that John Bates patrols, the community he’s sworn to protect and serve.

This afternoon takes him down the road to McKee Elementary, where his fifth-graders have skits to practice on the stage in the gym, in preparation for their D.A.R.E. “graduation” assembly tomorrow. In this setting, with these giggling children—exhorting them to raise their voices, to speak into the microphone, to face the front, to remember their parts—Bates seems like any other alternately harried and bemused elementary school teacher. As the Principal here, Dr. Hoover, puts it, “I don’t view him as an outsider in my school. He’s like one of my staff. I think the teachers look at him that way. And the students do. I know I do.”

But in some ways, this is an illusion, too. A telephone call from the high school dispels it, and calls Bates back to being a cop.

There has been an ugly confrontation between two groups of students in the high school cafeteria today—just some brief, interracial pushing and shoving; two burly teachers on cafeteria duty were right on the scene, and no punches are thrown. But a certain amount of murmuring and milling around has apparently followed the incident. The school’s atmosphere seems to be crackling, as before a storm. Now, as a precautionary measure—it’s nearly the end of the school day—school administrators have decided they need a couple of extra police officers to handle after-school traffic. What they want is a show of...not force, exactly, but firmness. Can Bates arrange it?

Bates agrees at once: the move makes sense. Still, West Allegheny has never asked for precautionary “traffic” back-up of this kind before. And there are only fifteen minutes to go before dismissal. This is
just the sort of unexpected, serious but delicate, non-routine but non-emergency request that might easily have occasioned a delayed, uncomprehending, too-tepid or too-aggressive response from local police.

But not with Bates around to translate.

He is in his truck at once, raising the North Fayette police station on his cell phone as he pulls out into the road: “I want you to make a presence in the [traffic] circle,” he says simply to his colleagues there. “I'll explain it to you when I get up there.”

On the way back to the high school, Bates adamantly maintains that this sort of thing is atypical. “I'm telling you, this school isn't like this,” he says, several times.

When he pulls up in front of the high school’s main doors, two uniformed North Fayette police officers are already waiting outside the front office; Bates speaks with them briefly, then sends them out into the parking lot in front, where the buses are idling.

Fortunately, today’s dismissal from West Allegheny turns out to be more or less like every other’s. Loud, exuberant, chaotic—not peaceful, by any stretch, but good-natured. Bates mingles for a time with the shifting, darting crowd in the main hall, greeting students he knows, putting in a word here and there, making eye contact, conspicuous above the shouting and horseplay. And then, as suddenly as it began, the school day is over. Bates heads outdoors to help direct traffic.

“An ounce of prevention,” one teacher says loudly, “is worth ten pounds of cure.”