



Central Florida Charter Schools Struggle To Pay For On-Campus Officers Required By New Law

This article may be read at <http://www.orlandosentinel.com/features/education/school-zone/os-police-charter-schools-parkland-20180904-story.html>

Crystal Yoakum, CEO Hope Charter School & Legacy High School talks about the challenges of having to pay for school resource officers mandated by Florida's new school law.

Please click here to view YouTube video of what she has to say <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EDD0idQLMNw&feature=youtu.be>



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Two Winter Garden charter schools planned to buy new computers this year, giving every student on their shared campus one to use.

But when Crystal Yoakum, the CEO of the two affiliated schools, got a look at the numbers, she knew that dream was gone, at least for the current school year.

Like all of Florida's public schools, Hope Charter School and Legacy High School need to meet the demands of the state's

new school safety law, which requires an officer or armed “guardian” assigned to each campus this school year. The law was passed a month after the February mass school shooting in [Parkland](#).

Yoakum found the new law an expensive budget shredder.

The two west [Orange County](#) schools, combined, are getting \$35,413 in “safe schools” money from the state, earmarked as part of the new legislation. But having an officer on campus every school day will cost them \$81,000 for the year.

The schools raided their technology budgets to make up the \$45,587 difference this year, but school leaders aren’t sure how they can manage beyond that.

“We all feel like it’s a great idea to have a school resource officer on campus,” Yoakum said. But, she added, “This is not affordable at all.”

Nobody has enough money to cover all of this.— [Lynn Norman-Teck](#), executive director of the Florida Charter School Alliance, an advocacy group

Charter schools are public schools run by private groups after being granted a charter, or contract, to open by a local school board. Many are small, so with new safe-school money distributed on a per-student basis, some received as little as \$7,000, creating a steep hurdle in their efforts to hire full-time officers.

“You’re saying everyone should have one, but not everyone is getting the same amount of money,” said Ilene Wilkins, president of UCP of Central Florida, the nonprofit dedicated

to helping children with disabilities. It runs charter schools in Orange, Osceola and Seminole counties.

From Palm Beach to Jacksonville, charter schools, particularly the smaller ones, are struggling to comply with the new law, and many are already contacting lawmakers, hoping for changes next year.

“Nobody has enough money to cover all of this,” said Lynn Norman-Teck, executive director of the Florida Charter School Alliance, an advocacy group.

In Seminole County, Galileo School for Gifted Learning did fundraisers to earn \$22,000, the amount it was short if it wanted a sheriff’s deputy on its campus. In Osceola County, New Dimensions Charter High School left open a teaching slot to pay for an officer for the first semester — but isn’t sure what it will do come January.

In Orlando, more than a dozen charter schools, including some UCP campuses, are sharing one officer, who spends time each day on at least two of them. Orange school officials have said the law requires that an officer be assigned to each school but does not mandate that the officer be on each campus every day or all day. Many others, however, said they thought the law meant an officer was on every campus from morning drop off until afternoon dismissal.

The [Florida Legislature](#), with Gov. [Rick Scott](#)’s support, passed the law after 17 students and staff were fatally shot at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. Among other measures, it requires a police officer or guardian — an

armed school employee who has undergone weapons training — assigned to every public school campus.

The state earmarked \$67 million for the guardian program and \$97.5 million for new school-based officers.

Many school boards and local sheriffs were uninterested in arming school employees, however, so \$58 million in the guardian fund remains unused. In recent weeks, Scott has pressed lawmakers to shift that unused money back to the school districts so all public schools would have more money to hire officers. A legislative budget panel could move the money ahead of the 2019 legislative session.

When asked about charter schools, Scott's press secretary, Ashley Cook, again focused on those funds, writing in an email that Scott "will continue to work to ensure this unused money is utilized for school safety."

But spokesmen for House and Senate leaders said school administrators and law enforcement are still figuring out how to comply with the law, and they don't want to take away money when counties may decide later to start guardian programs. Fred Piccolo, a spokesman for House Speaker Richard Corcoran, also said in an email it is up to each school district — and their local police agencies — "to address the security needs of all public schools, including charter schools."

So far, only 24 of 67 counties have chosen to participate in the guardian program, which some charter school leaders said would be the most affordable option for them, as they could tap someone already on staff. That program is not an

option in Orange, Osceola or Seminole counties, though Lake is taking part.

Local leaders, however, say the biggest problem with the new law is that its demands far outpaced their ability to pay for and quickly hire so many new officers. An estimated 1,550 new officers were needed statewide. Though many school districts previously had agreements — and cost-sharing plans — with local police and sheriffs to station officers in middle and high schools, most did not have a full-time officer at every elementary school.

In Orange County, both the Orlando Police Department and the Orange County Sheriff's Office are covering some elementary schools in their jurisdictions with officers who take on those duties as overtime shifts. They are also working to hire more people.

Charter schools mostly didn't have officers previously and most weren't included in previous school resource officer agreements, so now they also are getting officers at the more expensive overtime rate, meaning even steeper costs for those small schools.

Hope and Legacy charter schools, with a combined enrollment of about 670 students, for example, are paying \$50 an hour for Winter Garden officers who sign up for the nine-hour overtime shift, at a cost of \$81,000 for the year.

SunRidge Elementary and SunRidge Middle School — traditional Orange public schools that share a campus and have a combined enrollment of about 2,100 — are paying the Winter Garden Police Department \$45,000 for an officer, according to the agreement the city approved last month.

Yoakum said some parents at Hope and Legacy were upset the technology budget was slashed to pay for the officers and are unsure it makes sense to spend so much for security on the small, safe campus. Others said the officer, with a police car parked out front, makes them feel better. School administrators felt they had little choice but to pay.

“We want to be in compliance with the law,” Yoakum added.

At New Dimensions in Osceola, administrators want to do the same but are upset they are paying so much — and more than traditional public schools — for the same service.

“If really the intent is to protect all public school children, there shouldn’t be an additional cost for some over others,” said Tina Cafiero, one of the school’s directors.

Her school, with about 470 students enrolled, needs to pay \$90,000 to have an Osceola sheriff’s deputy on its campus all year, she said. Its safe schools allotment is \$22,000.

Osceola’s traditional public schools are paying \$45,000 per deputy, according to an email sent to the school from the district superintendent.

The charter is paying more — though not the full cost of a deputy — because more county funds help offset the traditional public schools’ costs, officials said.

The county is not required to use local money to augment an unfunded state mandate and viewed charters as better able to meet the requirements on their own because they are “free to innovate, compared to traditional schools,” said

Andrew Sullivan, a spokesman for the Osceola Board of County Commissioners in an email.

The bigger issue is that the law is stymied by limited state money, he said.

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