

How well do you know the Winooski schools' faculty and staff? This year, the district newsletter will help you get to know them better. Each month, we'll profile one district employee.

PROFILE: School Resource Officer Ron Jackson

by Cathy Resmer

If you drive by the Winooski Educational Center and see a police cruiser parked out front, don't be alarmed — it belongs to Winooski's School Resource Officer, Ron Jackson.

Why do we need a cop patrolling the Winooski schools? For starters, because he does a lot more than just patrol. "He develops a relationship with the kids," says Winooski High School principal Steve Perkins. "They feel comfortable talking to him."

That's certainly true. As soon he walks through the door on a recent weekday morning, the tall, hawk-nosed officer meets a class of preschoolers. "There's Officer Jackson!" says one. "Hi, Officer Jackson!" chirps another.

As Jackson walks the hallways checking to see that the doors are locked, teachers and parents greet him warmly. Students of varying ages joke with him and chat. Walking with him is almost like tagging along with a celebrity. How often do the police get that kind of reception?

That warm fuzzy feeling is partly why Jackson's here. "The whole School Resource Officer program is designed to help build a better relationship between kids and police," he explains. Kids — and parents — who know and trust him are more likely to approach him with concerns.

Case in point — a teenage girl stops him and asks where she can buy some pepper spray. "My mom told me to get some," she says. She tells him she needs to protect herself from a disgruntled family member. Jackson is familiar with her situation, and gives her the address of a store in Essex.

Jackson observes that these relationships work both ways. When the Winooski police are dealing with juvenile crime, Jackson is able to encourage students to come forward with information.



His presence here also allows him to teach kids about laws that might affect them. He does presentations in middle and high school classes to teach kids what the penalties are for crimes like harassment and assault.

Of course, not all of Jackson's interactions are positive. He's also on hand to respond to any disciplinary incidents that the faculty and staff can't handle. His monthly report to the Winooski School Board notes that he responded to 10 such calls in September. His report also lists one assault — a high school student brought a knife to school.

Like any other officer, Jackson is equipped with a bulletproof vest, Taser stun gun and a revolver, though he's never had to use them. Which of the things in his arsenal does he use most? "Words," he says. "And presence. Often that's enough for a student who's being disruptive."

Jackson adds that sometimes, he can stop fights before they start, just by knowing what's happening outside the school. Most conflicts, he explains, don't start in school, they start somewhere else the night before. Whenever there's

an incident involving juveniles, the other officers let him know. "What happens in the community follows into the school," he says. When students do run afoul of the criminal justice system, Jackson helps facilitate communications between the schools and the state's attorney, or social service agencies.

High School principal Steve Perkins says whatever Jackson's doing, it's working. There have been fewer fights — and no expulsions — in the past few years. Perkins says having an officer around "cuts down on the escalation of events... His presence has definitely made a big difference in our school climate."

Perkins also appreciates having Jackson around to help plan for emergencies such as school lockdowns and evacuations — a growing concern given recent school shootings. He notes that schools in Essex and South Burlington also have in-house police officers. "I think it's probably just a short period of time before every district is required to have some kind of security officer or SRO in charge of security procedures," he says.