

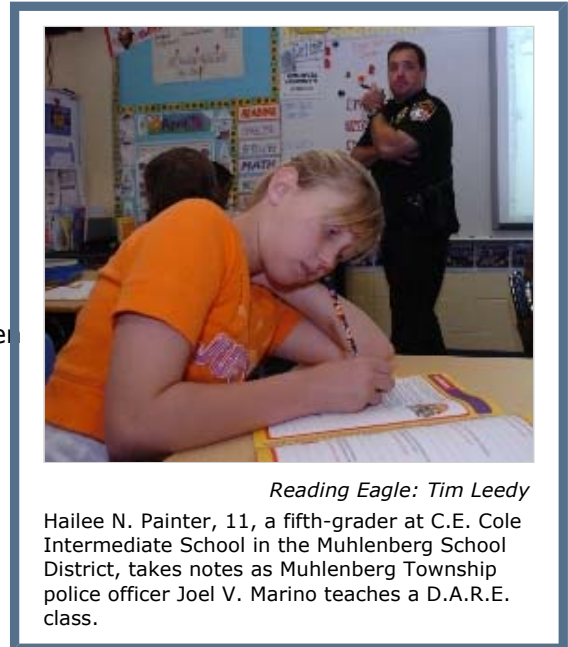
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Proposed cut of drug education program worries Berks County police

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- Joel V. Marino has taught D.A.R.E. classes in Muhlenberg School District for 12 years, and he has no plans to stop, even if the state yanks funding.



Reading Eagle: Tim Leedy

Hailee N. Painter, 11, a fifth-grader at C.E. Cole Intermediate School in the Muhlenberg School District, takes notes as Muhlenberg Township police officer Joel V. Marino teaches a D.A.R.E. class.

What is D.A.R.E.?

Drug Abuse Resistance Education was founded in Los Angeles in 1983 as a partnership between police and schools.

The program introduces children to the dangers of drug and alcohol use through classroom lectures and playing. It also promotes friendship, self-esteem and lessons to combat bullying.

There are D.A.R.E. programs for students from elementary through high school. The core program, however, targets middle school students.

In Pennsylvania, it's estimated that there are about 400 D.A.R.E. programs.

Sources: Berks County D.A.R.E. officers and D.A.R.E. America

The Muhlenberg police officer is confident the anti-drug program has made a difference in the lives of the township's young people.

Drug Abuse Resistance Education, or [D.A.R.E.](#), is more than just saying no to drugs, Marino said. It also gives police a chance to interact with students, which builds trust.

Marino believes that trust led three students to confide to a D.A.R.E. officer about instances of sexual abuse.

"I don't think that would have come out (otherwise)," he said.

But budget cuts in Harrisburg threaten D.A.R.E. across Pennsylvania.

D.A.R.E. is one of 101 programs Gov. Ed Rendell wants to slash to save \$1 billion in the 2009-10 budget.

That would mean no state money to pay for D.A.R.E. instruction or to train new officers to teach it, said Tim Mead, a spokeswoman for the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency.

D.A.R.E. took a hit in 2008-09 state budget, which originally allocated \$1.5 million for the program. By December, that was slashed to \$925,000, a 38 percent cut.

For Muhlenberg, that meant a \$3,000 loss in funding, Marino said, adding that the police department picks up that amount.

Ten of Berks County's 18 public school districts offer the D.A.R.E. program, which involves 10 hours of classroom teaching typically given in middle school.

Without the state money, participating schools and municipalities would have to pay the entire cost.

That doesn't make sense to some D.A.R.E. officers in Berks, who say they're fighting a losing battle against drugs.

"We still have a very bad drug problem in Berks County," said Sgt. Becky J. Slaydon, a county deputy sheriff and D.A.R.E. officer. "Every single day we have people arrested for drugs, and that problem is growing every day."

The Muhlenberg program costs about \$8,000 a year, which pays for two officers to instruct more than 550 students in fifth and eighth grades, Marino said.

If the school district can't afford the program, Muhlenberg Township officials have said they'll try to pay for it using the police department budget.

In the Boyertown district, the annual cost is about \$20,000, which provides for officers to teach 800 sixth-eighth-graders and make visits to the younger grades, said Robert L. Scoboria, assistant superintendent.

Without state funding, it will be difficult for Boyertown to continue the program, he said.

While state lawmakers decide on D.A.R.E. funding, detractors say mounting research shows the program is ineffective.

A 2004 analysis funded by the U.S. Justice Department found that D.A.R.E. had no significant effect on student drug and alcohol use.

An earlier study by the University of Illinois concluded that suburban youths who took D.A.R.E. classes had higher rates of drug use than those who weren't exposed to the program.

"There are many studies out there that say D.A.R.E. makes no difference on teenage drug use," Marino acknowledged. "Whether it works or not, I can't quantify. But I know that from talking to kids and building relationships in school districts, it certainly does have a positive effect.

"Show me something that's better and we'll run with it."

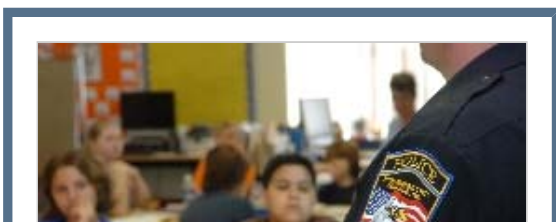
Muhlenberg fifth-grader Hailee N. Painter, 11, said the classes already have had an effect on her.

"I won't do drugs because I know that they're disgusting and they're bad for you," she said.

Classmate Jonathan L. Garcia, 10, agreed.

"I already know the effect on you and the effect on the body and what they (drugs) can do to you," he said.

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Muhlenberg Township police officer Joel V. Marino teaches a D.A.R.E. class at C.E. Cole Intermediate School in Muhlenberg School District.