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## **A Day in the Life . . .**

*“A Day in the Life” is an ongoing series that introduces the community to the various jobs performed by Hampton Township School District employees. In this edition, we feature Officer Aaron Zola, the District’s School Resource Officer.*

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Five days a week, one of our most valuable resources, our children, populate the halls of the Hampton Township School District’s five buildings. For the last 17 years, another very important presence also has filled those same halls – a School Resource Officer.

School Resource Officers (SROs) are sworn officers who are assigned to a school or school district on a long-term basis. In the case of Hampton Township School District, the SRO is a trained police officer with the Hampton Township Police Force. Since 2009, the District’s SRO role has been filled by Officer Aaron Zola, who has been a member of the Hampton Township Police Force for 15 years. During his first year as an SRO, he shared the position with Chief Tom Vulakovich, who was an officer on the force at the time.

One of the most frequent questions is what does a SRO do all day long?

Officer Zola said he quietly chuckles to himself every time he is asked that question, because his days are anything but boring.

He starts every day by checking into the police station at 7 a.m., followed by bus duty at Hampton High School. “I try to keep parents out of the bus lane and direct traffic and keep people from causing a traffic jam,” he said. “It’s what I like to call a 15 to 20 minute window of orderly chaos.” From there, he proceeds to Hampton Middle School, where he provides similar services.

Most of Officer Zola’s time is spent at the High School, where he has dedicated office space that allows him to perform duties such as preparing incident reports or data reports for the District, or conducting research for use in presentations for students, parents or District administrators. He also utilizes the office to review security camera footage if there is an incident that requires his involvement.

Due to the age of the children, Officer Zola said his services are rarely needed at the three elementary schools. “They are pretty much able to police themselves,” he said. “More of the issues where I have to get involved are at the Middle School and High School.” Officer Zola deals with less than 1 percent of the students on an annual basis for what he considers to be serious offenses. “Kids are pretty low key here,” he said. “Even on a bad day, they are still relatively low key compared with other places.”

In addition to traffic control and intervening during incidents where his presence is requested, Officer Zola also spends a fair amount of time teaching lessons to students on laws and government, classification of crimes and the five or six common crimes that happen on school campuses. He also will present educational programs on these topics to parent groups within the District upon request.

Among some of the lessons he teaches to students throughout the school year include:

- Bus safety with kindergarten students, usually conducted on the first day of school;

- Charlie Check First classes on “stranger danger” with first graders, held in September each year;
- Supervision/escorting the Wyland Elementary School students during their annual Halloween parade, which extends into the streets and to a local nursing home;
- Friday night football preparation and set-up for parking restrictions;
- Charlie Check First advanced lessons for third graders that includes information on “stranger danger,” as well as information about the difference between drugs and medication and how to identify and deal with bullying;
- Job fair presentation for 8<sup>th</sup> graders at the Middle School on what it’s like to be a police officer;
- Seven-week rotation in 8<sup>th</sup>-grade health classes for lessons on alcohol safety, including how the law deals with minors who use alcohol illegally and how to deal with peer pressure to use alcohol;
- Two semesters of law and justice classes at the High School, where the first 10 Amendments to the Bill of Rights are discussed and students have the opportunity to act out scenarios while playing in the role of a police officer; and
- Survival 101 at the High School, which teaches teens the dangers of distracted driving.

Officer Zola said the law and justice classes he teaches are among his favorite. “The students get to see what it’s like to be a cop and they really enjoy it.”

Officer Zola also is responsible for meeting with District Administration to review and discuss safety and security protocols. He has been an active participant in the ALICE training that staff members are receiving this year. ALICE (Alert, Lockdown, Inform, Counter, Evacuate) training is designed to aid schools with an active shooter response plan. Officer Zola has assisted each building with the creation and execution of an evacuation plan as well this year. While he hopes the schools never need to use the training, he sees the value of having it in place. “Any community’s biggest weakness is being complacent and thinking it can never happen in your town. It’s better to have all of the tools and not need them than to need them and not have them.”

On days when he’s not teaching and there are no incidents to which he needs to attend, Officer Zola said he focuses on being visible in the buildings and also performing tasks like checking student vehicles for parking permits. “The biggest thing for me is presence,” he said. “I want to be visible; I want people to know that I am involved in the schools.”

Officer Zola said he also makes sure he has plenty of positive interaction with students throughout the year to help build trust. These interactions can be as simple as stopping to talk to students during lunch periods, to speaking to them if he sees them out in the community. “I try to have positive contact with students so they don’t always feel like I’m the guy telling them no or who deals with them when they’re in trouble.”

Chief Vulakovich said his police force, which consists of 20 men and two women, has expressed more interest in the community relations aspect of their jobs. That interest is leading the department to emphasize more community events in which officers participate, such as Cops with Kids nights where some of the officers play paintball or engage in other recreational activities with children and families in the community. “We’re going to get back into being involved with those kinds of events,” the chief said. “I think it’s important that this community sees not only Aaron as a resource, but this entire department.”

In addition to Officer Zola's presence in the District, Chief Vulakovich also has made it a requirement for all daylight shift officers to stop by the District's five schools throughout their shift. The department wants the community to know that it is focused on keeping the schools safe and secure with an increased presence on campus. He also wants the students to become familiar with several of the officers on the force to help build rapport.

Chief Vulakovich added the mutual trust between the police force and the District has helped to make the SRO program an ongoing success at Hampton. "If the School District needs to turn to us in our area of expertise, they have the faith and trust in us, and vice versa."

Former Hampton Administrator Jeff Finch was the High School assistant principal when the SRO program first was instituted at Hampton. Mr. Finch said he was able to see the value of the program from day one. "Most people don't realize that the job of the SRO is not to simply be reactive to incidents when they occur," said Mr. Finch. "An effective SRO is protective, reactive and most importantly, proactive in his duties."

Officer Zola agreed, adding that several incidents have been quashed over the years because students and parents trusted him enough to tell him about things that were going to occur so that he could be proactive in preventing them, rather than reactive in dealing with the situation once it occurred. Officer Zola added that it was Mr. Finch who taught him the value in building good relationships with students, parents and school staff.

Chief Vulakovich added that in addition to building trust with students and the school community, the SRO also needs to have a calm and centered personality. "They need to keep in mind that kids make mistakes," he said. "But not every kid who makes a mistake needs to be arrested."

Mr. Finch referred to the SRO program at Hampton as a very personal investment and said he hopes to see the program continue to grow and succeed. "It does everybody good for kids to feel like a police officer is a valuable member of society. Officer Zola is a humanized, recognized resource for the students."