

# Florida now requires schools to have armed protection. Districts and counties must make that a reality.

Despite \$400 million attached to the state's response to the Parkland shooting, districts are having to get creative to stretch the dollars or come up with their own.



ALESSANDRA DA PRA | Times Hernando County Sheriff's deputy Cory Zarcone, 28, talks to Aleigha Dzedzic, 5, right, during breakfast time in the cafeteria of Brooksville Elementary School on Wednesday,

March 7, 2018, in Brooksville, Fla.

In the aftermath of the Parkland shooting and the state's new law that requires armed security on every campus, some superintendents worry districts will now be competing for the same personnel.

For the 2016-2017 school year, Florida's Department of Education counted about 1,500 officers.

But there's more than twice as many public schools — about 3,800.

"The biggest hurdle is not lack of willingness, it's not even issue of funding," said Miami-Dade Superintendent Alberto Carvalho. "It's that everyone across the state...is going to be hiring law enforcement at the same time."

This year, Miami-Dade doubled its usual \$10 million in state funding for school safety measures, but the districts needs to hire about 100 more officers, meaning the county will need to finance \$30 million more on its own. The Miami-Dade Schools Police department currently has about 200 officers.

The *Times/Herald* sent a survey to all 67 school districts in the state this week, and heard from 23 districts or their local sheriff's office, who described their progress seven weeks after Gov. Rick Scott signed the bill.

Nearly every county that responded has a shortfall of funding compared to what it will cost to properly secure the schools compared to how much the state provided — just as sheriffs and superintendents warned before the bill was passed.

This gap has forced districts to get creative. One approach is for some to use the "guardian" program intended to train and arm school staff to instead hire security guards.

At least two counties, Monroe and Hernando, are considering raising their local property taxes to pay for the costs.

"All school leaders want safe schools," said Karen Jordan, spokesperson for Hernando County Schools. "The cost of increasing campus security is incredibly expensive and requires unique and specific upgrades to meet those safety targets. The intention is good, the funding is insufficient."

The Orange County School District went as far as paying \$60,000 to a consulting firm to help them decide how to best secure their schools.

Putnam County has put together a 21-person "task force" of community members to decide what type of armed security the district will choose.

Despite early objections from large districts about arming school staff, some counties including Hillsborough, Polk and Duval have recently considered hiring security guards — some of whom are ex-cops or retired military.

Florida's new law prohibits full-time teachers from being armed, but allows other district employees like coaches to take the required 132 hours of training if the county's district and local law enforcement approve. The law sets aside \$67 million for the guardian program and \$97.5 million for school resource officers as part of the total \$400 million to better secure schools and offer more campus mental health

services.

Pinellas County Sheriff Bob Gualtieri said the pay disparity between school police departments, sheriff's offices and private security guards could make recruiting complicated. Gualtieri is on the board of the Florida Sheriff's Association and chairs the statewide commission in charge of determining how to best prevent future school shootings.

"The schools that have their own police departments, they are not paying what other agencies are paying," he said. "It's \$47,000 starting in our office. My understanding the (Pinellas) school police department is \$30,000, so you're going to be hard-pressed for people to be hired for that kind of money."

Pasco County has already taken significant steps to hire security guards, and assistant superintendent Betsy Kuhn acknowledged it can be difficult to find, train and hire into these positions given the shortage of personnel.

That said, "we've gotten a lot of calls ... both at the school and district level," Kuhn added, often from former cops looking to help schools.

Some districts said they need more help.

Broward County, the location of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, has come under intense scrutiny after reports revealed that deputies with the Broward Sheriff's Office did not rush into the building as shots were fired and victims lay dying.

John Sullivan, the lobbyist for Broward school district, said the district will be hiring more school resource officers from the sheriff's office

and use the local police when possible. But county-wide the sheriff and police departments had about 300 vacancies before the shooting even occurred, he said.

Sharon Michalik, spokeswoman for Bay County Schools which includes Panama City, called the new law a "huge step forward" for addressing school safety.

She added: "However, we can already see that there's not enough funding provided to accomplish all of the tasks and responsibilities outlined in the law."