

Hilliard resource officer shares insight abroad

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KEVIN CORVO/THISWEEKNEWS

Hilliard police officer Ron Burkitt wears a Belgium national police hat from his trip abroad.

The success Hilliard City Schools has seen in promoting cultural diversity within the district was shared overseas last month at a conference in Belgium.

Hilliard police officer Ron Burkitt, who serves as Davidson High School's resource officer, was one of four central Ohioans to attend a city-pairing program sponsored by the U.S. State Department and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

Others in the group included Abdi Soofe, a member of Columbus Mayor Michael Coleman's cabinet; Ilhan Dahir, a Bradley High School graduate who attends Ohio State University; and Janet Monseur-Durr, diversity/educational equity coordinator for Hilliard City Schools.

The group visited with multiple city and state officials June 15-21 in Vilvoorde, a city near Brussels.

"We didn't go there with great expectations of making big changes overnight, but to plant some ideas. ... We were very well received," said Burkitt, 49.

The 24-year veteran of the Hilliard Division of Police has been a school resource officer for the past 14 years.

The Hilliard school district has a diverse student population that reflects the diversity of central Ohio's population, yet the Columbus area does not experience as much discord and unrest as other cities with similar diversity, Burkitt said.

Columbus and Minneapolis, Minn., for example, both have a concentration of Muslims but experience less radicalization, Burkitt said. He added that the group traveled to Belgium to share practices believed to contribute to successful diversity.

"Vilvoorde has a proportionately high number of youth who are being radicalized," Burkitt said.

There are instances where Muslim extremists are persuading teenagers and young adults to convert and fight in other countries, he said.

"Sometimes these kids tell their parents they've met someone and are going to a church. The parents think that's great (but) the next thing is the kid sends the parents a text that they are fighting with an army in Syria," Burkitt said.

The central Ohio group was invited to share ideas with Belgian officials on how to curb such activity through more inclusive practices that promote diversity, Burkitt said.

While English is widely known, Dutch is the official language in the northern part of Belgium and French is the official language in the southern part of the country.

"We were in the northern part of the country. Even if someone there knows French, they can't speak it. They will tell someone, in French, that they must speak Dutch in order to communicate," Burkitt said.

Government publications are in Dutch by law, Burkitt said.

There are virtually no public officials or police officers who are not Dutch because language-mandated testing material makes it almost impossible, Burkitt said.

"We shared our policies, but instead of telling them 'Hey, you have to hire more minorities,' we asked them 'What do you think you can do to help make your workforce more diverse,'" Burkitt said.

The four-member team visited a variety of officials, including those at the U.S. Embassy in Belgium, during 12-hour days June 16-20.

"It was an excellent experience. It stretched my mind and made me take a second look at how I treat others. I think it will make me more aware of my surroundings here," Burkitt said.