

Dogs rule in school



Full-time K-9 units at Field Local Schools and Pickaway-Ross Career & Technology Center set a trend in school safety and security others are watching

By Jeff Phillips

The lid of a plastic container holding an illegal narcotic is removed and placed in an empty metal locker at Pickaway-Ross Career & Technology Center. The locker door is closed and the brightly lit hallway is cleared. Ross County Sheriff's Deputy Brad Parrett enters and unclips a lead from the collar of his partner, a German Shepherd named Bak. He utters a command in Czech to let the dog know it's time to get to work. This is only a test.

Bak's nose dances over each metal locker in rhythmic, side-to-side movements, starting from one end of the hallway, his tail wagging a counter-beat. Parrett encourages the dog, still speaking in Czech. Suddenly, Bak freezes, his nose now pointing at one locker. In English, Parrett encourages him, "Do you want your toy?"

Visibly more excited now, Bak paws at a particular locker and barks; it's the locker with the plastic container inside. Parrett approaches pulling a tubular, cloth toy from under his belt, and begins playing tug-a-war with the dog, who at this point looks more like a family pet at play than a purpose-trained animal. Bak pulls Parrett from the hallway, his jaw gripping the toy, his tail still wagging.

When they are gone and the hallway is empty, the container is retrieved and the cap tightly replaced. The contraband is locked in a school safe, but will be returned later that day to an evidence locker at the Ross County Sheriff's Department.

This ends the test, but it's one that could have been seen any day last year in one of five buildings that make up the Field Local (Portage) School District in Magadore and Kent in northeast Ohio.

You see, Parrett and Bak, and Brimfield Township Police Sgt. David Knarr and his partner, Havoc, were the only K-9 unit resource officers working "full-time" for Ohio school districts during the 2011-12 school year. Both are preparing to begin their second year of full-time service to their respective districts. Parrett is contracted to serve Pickaway-Ross through the Pickaway County Education Service Center (PCESC) in Circleville, while Knarr is paid through a grant received by the Brimfield Township Police Department to serve Field Local.

Seeing K-9 units in schools is not unique, as nearly all Ohio school districts engage K-9 units from local police and sheriff's departments to conduct periodic sweeps to sniff out illegal substances. For the most part, those sweeps occur only a couple times a year, and are usually conducted under "lock down" circumstances, so students and school staff rarely interact with the dogs when they are at the schools.

What is unique about Parrett and Bak and Knarr and Havoc is that they are part of the school communities at their districts. For the most part, Knarr keeps Havoc in a caged area of his police cruiser when he's not working in a building; the area is heated or air-conditioned depending on the weather. Parrett has an office at Pickaway-Ross. When he is not policing or performing special duties, Bak rests in a crate next to Parrett's desk. A sign on the office door alerts unsuspecting visitors that Bak may be in his crate and to use caution entering the office.

Pickaway-Ross Principal Shara Cochenour said the Pickaway-Ross Joint Vocational School Board of Education had a few concerns when it decided to hire a K-9 unit when reinstating a full-time resource officer at the 600-student career center before the start of the 2011-12 school year. So far, the experience has been positive and the unit is praised for its work in thwarting and/or preventing incidents where disciplinary action is needed. District records show that Pickaway-Ross had 247 reports of disciplinary actions (called "due process/suspension cases") during the 2011-12 school year. That compares with 314 cases reported for the 2010-11 school year, 371 for 2009-10, 574 for 2008-09, and 414 for 2007-08, respectively.



Bak sniff's lockers during a search drill at Pickaway-Ross CTC. Bak has become part of the school community, and having him in the building has helped the school resource officers build a rapport with students.

It is important to note that the district had its first full-time resource officer during the 2008-09 school year, and the dramatic increase in reported incidents from previous years is due, in part, to a “zero tolerance” policy regarding off-task behavior by students, and more proactive approach in policing such issues, Cochenour said. The district did not have a full-time resource officer last year, although Cochenour said she believes the district sent a strong message that carried over. Having Parrett and Bak in the building only reinforces that standard, she said.

“(Parrett) is an all-around student advocate,” said Cochenour. “A lot of students will come to him first before they come to (district administrators) when issues arise. It seems that having the dog in the building has helped (Parrett) build a rapport and sense of trust with the students.”

Field Local Superintendent Beth Coleman said her district has also seen a decrease in incidents of fighting, bullying and other off-task, violent or illegal activities. Knarr and Havoc keep tabs on the 2,000 students that attend the district’s two elementary schools, middle school, high school, and Falcon Academy of Creative Arts.

“We’ve been happy with the results,” Coleman said. “It’s like getting two police officers for the price of one.”

Special Purpose K-9s

Bak is a 5-year-old male German Shepherd. He was imported from the Czech Republic by Parrett, who paid \$10,500 out of pocket for him when he was 8-months-old. They are one of two K-9 units that work out of the Ross County Sheriff’s Department. Bak is Parrett’s first K-9 partner.

Bak is trained for evidence, building and area searches, obedience and handler protection, and criminal apprehension. Bak’s well-trained nose can detect a variety of illegal narcotics, including meth-amphetamines, marijuana, cocaine, and heroin. The dog is trained and responds only to commands in Czech, so that Parrett is assured that Bak listens only to him.



A sign on the door of the Pickaway-Ross CTC school resource office cautions visitor that a K-9 dog could be in his crate inside the office.

Before being assigned to Pickaway-Ross, Parrett and Bak worked third-shift patrol for several years. Parrett readily credits Bak for saving his life on at least two occasions. One of those was an incident that occurred during what Parrett believed was a routine traffic stop that occurred on a deserted section of U.S. Route 50 near Bourneville one night in 2009. When he arrived, Parrett found an intoxicated man covered in blood, standing in the middle of the highway, waving a knife, and threatening to kill anyone who came close. The deputy sheriff learned from the dispatcher that the suspect had been in a bar fight and had stabbed a patron, who was rushed to the hospital with life-threatening injuries. Parrett also learned from the dispatcher that his closest back up was at least 15 minutes away in another part of the county.

When Parrett exited the car with Bak, the dog immediately placed himself between the suspect and his partner as he is trained. The man threatened the dog, telling Parrett that if Bak got any closer or tried to bite he would, “Kill him.” Parrett completes the story:

“Fortunately, the man decided to give himself up after I explained that if he kills the dog, it’s the same as killing a police officer, and that I would have no choice but to shoot him,” he said. “The man put the knife down and laid face-down on the pavement with his hands stretched above his head. I cuffed him and Bak kept a close eye on him until our backup arrived.”

Havoc is a 3-year-old, American-bred German Shepherd that Knarr purchased from Whited K-9 Services of BrimfieldTownship. Havoc understands and responds to commands spoken in German. Like Bak, Havoc is trained

for evidence, building and area searches, obedience and handler protection, and criminal apprehension. He can also detect an array of illegal narcotics.

Havoc is Knarr's second K-9 partner, and one of four K-9 units operated by the Brimfield Township Police Department. Both Bak and Havoc are state certified and nationally certified through the North American Police Work Dog Association.

Since Knarr also works as a trainer of K-9 units, it's not uncommon to see up to 20 police dogs and their partners training on school properties, said Coleman. While the 2011-12 school year was their first working full-time for Field Local, Knarr has performed drug sweeps at the district since the 2009-10 school year.

"We requested (Knarr and Havoc) because of the positive experience we had with them before," said Coleman. "I make a point of seeing (Knarr and Havoc) once a day. We very much enjoy having them in the district."

Dog Therapy

All school officials interviewed said that one of the most striking changes they've noticed is the calming affect the dogs have on students, especially those who may be having trouble at home, or with peers or teachers. The dogs also have had a positive effect on students with developmental disabilities at both districts.

"It's been extremely positive," said Knarr. "I notice the temperature and mood of a school completely changes when I walk through the building with Havoc. We're noticing violent tendencies going down having a dog in school."

"The kids have learned to ask me if Bak is working before they approach him," said Parrett. "If he is working, they respect the job he has to do and give him space. But if he's not working, it's not uncommon for kids to come up and pet him or give him hugs. He doesn't understand what they are saying, but he loves the attention."

While Parrett said he doesn't worry about Bak leading a double life of police dog and pseudo therapy dog, Knarr said he prefers to maintain some separation so that Havoc and the students respect the reason he's working for the district.



Havoc serves as half of a full-time school resource officer K-9 unit at Field Local (Portage). He and his partner, Brimfield Twp PD Sgt. David Knarr, oversee 2,000 students in the district's schools.

Parrett said he and Bak especially love to visit students in a licensed pre-school the district operates, giving students in its Early Childhood Education program real-life experience.

"Since I have an office in the school, the kids see us every day," said Parrett. "I am confident that Bak can do his job and interact with the students. I think it's positive. I am always there when Bak interacts with students," said Parrett. "I trust him, but he is still an animal and must be supervised."

Knarr quips about the dual role his dog plays sometimes. "Here I've trained this big bad police dog and sometimes I think he's more therapy dog."

Both officers said they have students who open up to them about problems or challenges they are having while interacting with the dogs, and both said it helps them keep a finger on the pulse of what's going on in the district. Parrett said he set the tone of why he and Bak were at school the first week, when he had Bak "sniff" a vehicle owned by his son, Devin, who was a senior from Circleville High School in the career center's Heavy Equipment Technologies program.

"It was important for the kids to know that we have a job to do, and that everyone was subject to being searched, including my son," he said. "It is our job to maintain a safe and secure learning environment."

Parrett said it did not surprise him that Bak did not detect illegal substances in his son's car, but that he was relieved nonetheless. Asked what he'd do if Bak detected something, Parrett responded without hesitation or emotion, "My job."



Pickaway-Ross CTC school resource officer Brad Parrett and his partner Bak stand outside the school.

Evolution of an Industry

While resource officers have worked in schools since the early 1970s – the first in the nation serving in Cincinnati – the practice has risen since the Columbine High School shootings in April 1999, said Kari Parsons, executive director of the 750-member Ohio Resource Officers Association (OSROA). Dublin-based OSROA has seen interest in Ohio escalate since October 2007, when a 14-year-old Asa H. Coon shot and injured two students and two teachers at SuccessTech Academy in Cleveland before he shot and killed himself, Parsons said.

“There was once a stigma attached to employing a resource officer, but that has changed,” she said. “Many schools consider it a necessity. Having a full-time K-9 unit may be an evolution of changing attitudes about school safety.” To the best of her knowledge, Parsons said that Parrett and Bak and Knarr and Havoc were the only two full-time K-9 units working in school districts last year. She said the feedback she’s received is encouraging. “We’ve heard about the benefits of having a dog in the schools,” she said.

If there were any concerns about having a K-9 unit at Pickaway-Ross, those concerns faded quickly, said Principal Cochenour. In addition to his patrol, law enforcement and safety duties, Parrett regularly speaks to classes about the dangers of illegal drugs, fighting and bullying. He assists with truancy issues, and works closely with the district’s Student Crime Stoppers group.

Are Parrett and Bak accepted by the students and staff? Decide for yourself. When students in teacher Ed Ryan’s Criminal Investigation and Police Science program learned that Parrett pays all of Bak’s expenses out of pocket, they started an impromptu “Bucks For Bak” campaign, soliciting donations during lunch periods last winter and spring.

Parrett said he was touched and humbled by the gesture, but took the \$200 raised and donated it to the Humane Societies in Ross and Pickaway counties. The students had hoped to raise \$4,000, which is what it cost Parrett each year to care and feed for his partner. “It’s nice but it’s not right,” he said. “The Humane Societies need it more than I do.”

So goes the price of fame and being considered family.

An award-winning journalist and author, Phillips serves as communications and community relations coordinator at Pickaway-Ross Career & Technology Center.

This article first appeared in the August 2012 issue of the OSBA Journal. Copyright 2012 Ohio School Boards Association. All rights reserved. Reprinted with permission.