

This Poinciana charter school is paying Osceola County twice as much for a school resource officer

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A Poinciana charter is being forced to pay twice as much money as traditional Osceola County schools for a state mandated school resource officer (SRO). The school must now come up with nearly \$40,000 by January or risk losing its charter, according to officials at the school and general counsel at the Osceola County Sheriff's Office.

New Dimensions is an A-rated charter high school in Poinciana with about 470 students. It's been open for more than 20 years, but administrators said Osceola County's response to a new state SRO mandate makes them worried about the school's future. "We're in shock over this," said New Dimensions Director Jackie Grimm. "It's not fair that the county is forcing charter schools to pay twice as much as traditional public schools to have an SRO on campus and comply with state law."

It began in March, when Gov. Rick Scott signed Senate Bill 7026 requiring every school in Florida – including charter schools – to place an SRO or security officer on campus by August. It came in response to a Feb. 14 school shooting in Parkland, Fla. that left 17 people dead. It seemed like a good idea at first. But local officials statewide were soon scrambling to hire hundreds of new law enforcement positions, train them – and most importantly – find the money to fund them. SRO salaries have always been a joint expense shared by school districts and law enforcement. The new state law allocated over \$90 million to school districts, but didn't appropriate new funds for sheriff's offices or police departments still tasked with paying their share. The oversight left elected officials frustrated. "The state took a bold action and said 'We're going to have a school resource officer in every single school, it's a great thing to do.' Now I wish they would tell us how we're going to pay for it," said Osceola County Commissioner Brandon Arrington at a May 14 board meeting.

When money trickled down from Tallahassee this summer, the Osceola County School District received \$3.4 million. It set aside \$615,000 and divided it between Osceola County's 22 charters based on enrollment size. New Dimensions received a cut of roughly \$22,000 and put an additional \$6,800 in government funding intended for school hardening toward the new SRO salary. New Dimensions was told during a May 18 meeting it would need to pay \$51,500 of the \$90,000 total SRO-related hiring costs, according to Grimm and Co-Director Tina Testani. They were told by the district superintendent during the monthly charter school principals' meeting that the county would pick up the rest. So, the board of directors at New Dimensions crunched the numbers in July, allegedly cutting a paid teaching position to balance the budget. It was stressful, but as the school year neared, Grimm and Testani believed the charter was in the clear.

That is, until an email arrived from the Sheriff's Office Aug. 2, just days before classes resumed. The charter would need to pay \$90,000 now, not the \$51,500 it had budgeted in June, according to the email. Suddenly, funding that was meant to last until May 31 would only pay for an SRO until Jan. 15. According to Robert Holborn, general counsel for the Osceola County Sheriff's Office, initial cost estimates for SROs were too low. The figures include an officer's salary, benefits, gun, vehicle and uniform, but neglected to account for things like substitute officers who fill in when others are sick or absent, or managing sergeants to oversee the more than 30 new SROs now on the Sheriff's Office

payroll. When costs were re-calculated in July, it was closer to \$135,000 per SRO, not \$90,000, Holborn said. The county chose to absorb the difference for traditional public schools, which still pay \$45,000 per SRO, according to District Public Information Officer Dana Schafer. But charters, which county officials claimed are for-profit groups similar to corporations, would need to pay more. Not the full readjusted \$135,000, but still twice as much as traditional public schools and nearly \$40,000 more than what schools like New Dimensions were originally quoted. “This is crippling us,” Testani said during a phone interview with Grimm Monday afternoon. “We’re a small school of less than 500 kids and they want us to somehow come up with another \$40,000? We’re not going to let our school fail, but we’re also not going to allow discrimination.”

When the directors protested the hike, they were told by County Commission Chairman Fred Hawkins Jr. that Osceola didn’t have enough money in its budget to pay the full cost of an SRO at every charter school. New Dimensions set up a conference call with Hawkins and State Rep. John Cortes, D-Kissimmee, earlier this month to plead its case and look for solutions. “He flat out said the county wouldn’t fund them like it had promised,” Cortes said. The state representative voted against the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Act when it was first introduced in February because of the unfunded mandate and the intrusive “copy and paste” effect it would have on local counties. “This is a good school, and they’re not for profit. I’m annoyed by all of this,” Cortes said.

Hawkins did not return News-Gazette calls or emails Monday. Arrington – who was scheduled to speak with New Dimensions board members last week before allegedly canceling 30 minutes prior to the meeting – was also unavailable for comment.

One size does not fit all. A charter school must be organized as, or be operated by, a nonprofit organization, according to the Florida Department of Education website. County officials claim some charter schools – like Four Corners and Renaissance – have large operating budgets that can absorb new costs because they’re managed by major groups like Charter Schools USA. But Grimm and Testani insist that’s not the case at New Dimensions. The school only budgeted \$3,000 of wiggle room for the entire 2018-19 school year, according to its directors – and that’s before they learned about the \$38,500 increase. “This mandate was a knee jerk reaction to a sensitive, but extremely complex issue,” Testani said. “Our students’ safety is our top priority. We just don’t know how we’re going to pay for this.”

What comes next is unclear to everyone involved. The school’s SRO is already in place, and New Dimensions will soon begin making bi-monthly payments of \$3,700 to the Sheriff’s Office to keep him on campus and comply with state law. But there could be major consequences if the charter can’t find enough capital to continue funding his salary. The district could take away New Dimensions’ charter, forcing the school to shut down. Grimm said they intend to keep fighting. Charter schools are public schools, she argued, and therefore deserve the same rights and funding as other district schools. But the county still has a budget to balance, and preliminary hearings reveal a white-knuckle fiscal year ahead. Budgets won’t be finalized until late next month, but time is ticking as officials try to patch financial craters left by an unfunded state mandate borne from good intentions in the wake of a national tragedy.