HUMPHREY

Police call on habitually absent students.

State law requires that school-aged children up to age 16 attend school.

For that reason, Gothenburg police officer Joe Humphrey said parents are responsible for ensuring their children go to school.

If parents don't call to let school officials know their child will be absent, school officials call parents to see why their child is not in school.

Humphrey said if it's a habitual absence problem or a child's welfare may be in jeopardy, officers are asked to check on the student.

"If someone doesn't answer the door, it's one of our primary responsibilities to ensure the safety and well being of our citizens," he said.

When officers conduct a school welfare check, Humphrey said they go to the house, knock on the door or ring the doorbell.

Sometimes, Humphrey said he opens the door if it's unlocked and announces the police department is calling.

"I try to get a response," he said.

Although officers can check all doors into a home, Humphrey said they are not allowed to enter without a search warrant unless it's an emergency.

Because police do welfare checks on citizens other than students, he gave an example of entering the home of an elderly person who had fallen.

Once law enforcement officers are assured a child is safe, they call the school.

Humphrey said when he was a police officer in Ogallala, a child didn't show up for school. A search was started and the student was found playing in a park.

During particularly frigid mornings, there is always concern if a student doesn't show up for class that parents have sent to school especially if parents can't be reached by telephone.

"All sorts of things go through your head," he said. "You wonder if they're injured or have been kidnapped. You'd like to think they're safe and secure but it creates a whole different set of problems."

In such a case, he said officers would launch a search and rescue operation.

Although it didn't involve a student, Humphrey said local police officers and the fire department conducted such a search in 2006 for an elderly man in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease who left his home.

They finally found the man—who was unharmed—in a vacant house close to his home.

Humphrey said some students found at home refuse to go to school.

“They thumb their nose at their parents’ authority and have other issues,” he said.

Local, county and state officials can then step in. A child can be declared incorrigible, Humphrey said, if he or she acts out in uncontrollable ways and beyond normal rebellion.

The child may then be taken into emergency custody and end up in a foster home and forced to attend school.

Parents, along with health and human services officials, come up with an action plan with a goal for the child to rejoin the family, Humphrey said.

“We all work together to get what we need done,” he said.

Humphrey said he’s encouraged truant students to go to school and has even offered them rides.

“But I don’t have the authority to take them to school if they refuse,” he said.

Police are also authorized to visit a home if the department receives a call about possible child abuse or neglect and the complaint meets certain criteria.

From that visit, Humphrey said they determine whether or not a full-fledged investigation is warranted.

In the more than five years he’s been with the Gothenburg police department, he said he didn’t think the number of truant students he’s checked on has increased.

“I think those numbers fluctuate with school drop-out rates and I don’t believe that number is high here,” Humphrey said.

All police officers get a chance to do student welfare checks, he said, as the officer on duty during school hours gets the calls.

Officers work with school attendance officers.

Gothenburg High School principal Randy Evans, junior high principal Ryan Groene and school secretary Lori Clymer are the attendance officers.

Jim Widdifield and Teresa Messersmith, Dudley Elementary principals, are also attendance officers. Dudley school secretary Lori Kolbo keeps track of student attendance.

Humphrey said school officials don’t usually call them to contact every unaccounted student.

“It’s usually the ones who they have had issues with in the past about not attending school,” he said.

Humphrey said the public needs to know that police don’t go banging on doors or chasing them down at work for every student who doesn’t show up for school.

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