

investigation

BY ELLA NAPACK

STAFF WRITER

A police officer in Wolcott used a racial slur and a “Full Nelson hold” on a 15-year-old girl, police body camera footage and an investigative report show. He retired weeks later.

In Bridgeport, an officer left the police department in the months after an internal investigation found he failed to report a high-speed chase that left two dead.

Two state troopers, later found to have created hundreds of falsified traffic tickets, retired during the internal investigations into their conduct, records show.

These officers were hired after they left their departments to work in schools as armed school officers, a position designated in state statute only for officers that retire in “good standing.”

At least 10 school districts across the state have hired either officers not allowed to work as cops again or officers with track records of sustained misconduct for an armed school officer job in recent years, according to a CT Insider review of police misconduct records and armed security training logs.

CT Insider identified officers that were hired by districts after they retired during investigations into their conduct, a move that prohibited them from being hired by other police departments under state law. While barred from policing, the officers went to work as armed school officers, records show.

The armed school officers that were prohibited from working as law enforcement were named on a list maintained by the state police academy and obtained by CT Insider. Department investigations into all four officers for misconduct that occurred prior to their retirement were sustained.

The prior misconduct and eligibility issues identified by CT Insider have revealed a pattern of inconsistent vetting practices and hiring standards for armed school officers across school districts.

In some cases, officers have been hired with limited vetting or knowledge of their prior status as police officers, according to interviews with individuals involved in school and town hiring processes. In other cases, districts knew of the officers' prior misconduct or status before hiring them.

State statute mandates that officers who resign or retire from their position while under investigation for misconduct cannot be hired by other law enforcement units in the state as police officers. While that law doesn't explicitly prohibit schools from hiring these ex-officers, a different statute on armed school officers, requires that all armed school officers are former police officers that retired in "good standing."

Good standing, however, is not a term defined in any Connecticut statute and the police academy told CT Insider that they do not have a definition of good standing.

"This is potentially a hole in the law," said Ken Barone, a University of Connecticut policy director who works alongside the state's law enforcement agencies. Although 'good standing' is not a term specified in statute, he said police chiefs often consider retiring during investigation not to qualify as good standing.

The duties of the armed school officer role vary from district to district, but the officers often carry a police radio, investigate incidents and disputes and work to secure the school perimeter. Although the armed officers are not police officers, they take on law enforcement responsibilities in most districts and are often employed by town police departments, school officials explained.

The police internal affairs records reviewed by CT Insider represent a snapshot of the larger landscape of police misconduct in Connecticut. The police academy only began maintaining the list of officers who retired during investigation in 2021, according to the academy. It is up to date as of June 2025. Additionally, just 10 cities and towns have provided CT Insider with records of misconduct in response to Freedom of Information requests placed earlier this year

Wolcott police officer Jeffrey Bender became a supernumerary — or part-time — officer after the department investigated his conduct while breaking up a fight between two students in the Wolcott High School bathroom.

Two of the girls involved in the fight, sisters, were agitated and yelling, body-camera footage shows. Bender used a racial slur to one of the sisters, who is Black, the footage shows. He then pulled a student out of the bathroom and into “Full Nelson hold,” according to the investigation.

After the police department opened another investigation into his conduct weeks later, he retired from the department and was hired as an armed school officer in Wallingford. “I’m concerned and frustrated that he could be in another school,” said Ija Callender, the mother of two of the girls involved in the incident with Bender. “There is the fear that this would happen to someone else’s kid.”

Wallingford’s Chief of Police John Ventura told CT Insider that an officer who retired during an investigation would not be eligible for the armed officer role. He said Bender was not on the ineligible list at the time he was hired or that the misconduct accusations disqualified him under the “good standing” standard.

“We vetted that out,” said Ventura. “It was not something we felt was going to disqualify him for the role.”

Ventura said that the department conducted a background check that included speaking with a lieutenant from Bender’s command staff. He noted that Bender was not found to have violated Wolcott’s harassment or intolerance policies. Bender did, however, face a verbal reprimand for violating the department’s respect policy and a one-day suspension held in abeyance for failing to activate his body camera, the internal affairs investigation shows.

“Whether or not they would take someone where this occurred or not, I don’t know,” said Edward Stephens, Bender’s former chief. “He knew he shouldn’t have engaged like that with a 15-year-old.”

All of the officers involved in the cases reviewed by CT Insider either declined to comment or could not be reached by phone or email.

State records show that among those hired by schools are two troopers who retired during widely publicized investigations into their involvement in the state’s monumental fake ticket scandal.

Former trooper Noah Gouveia, hired by Montville public schools as an armed school officer in 2022, submitted nearly 100 falsified tickets and was found to have intentionally deceived his department for years by an internal affairs

investigation. Montville declined to comment on Gouveia's employment by the district.

The state trooper with the most unreconciled ticket records in the scandal, Robert Hart, deceived his supervisors by submitting 1,475 tickets that could not be accounted for, according to an internal affairs investigation.

Hart was working as a constable when he resigned before the investigation was completed in February of 2024 and was hired by North Branford as an armed school officer the same year.

Although a criminal investigation into the state troopers' misconduct was opened in 2022, the state did not decide to press charges.

North Branford's superintendent Scott Schoonmaker, who hires for the role alongside the district's director of security, told CT Insider that he had no knowledge of Hart's publicized misconduct as a state trooper.

In towns where the school districts do the hiring for the armed officer role rather than the police departments, knowledge of an officer's prior status and track record is more limited, explained multiple superintendents, as districts do not have access to police personnel files.

"If a district doesn't know about misconduct, this tells me that we are likely not vetting this with the seriousness of putting someone with a gun in a school," said Barone. "The absence of full vetting is a dereliction of duty."

The records revealed that officers with track records of sustained misconduct during their time as police officers, not only those that retired during investigations that were later sustained, have been hired for the armed officer role.

Former Bridgeport police officer Manuel Santos was hired by Wallingford in 2023, the same year the district hired Bender. An internal affairs investigation by the Bridgeport Police Department determined Santos conducted a high-speed chase in 2022 of a wrongly identified vehicle that resulted in the death of two people in a crash off Route 8.

Santos failed to properly document the chase with an incident report or a pursuit tracking form until two days later when the bodies of Jose Rosario and Raul Calderon were discovered, according to an internal affairs investigation reviewed by CT Insider.

"Bridgeport barely slapped him on the wrist," said Kenneth Kraveske, the lawyer representing the deceased in a pending lawsuit against Santos, his

supervisor and the Bridgeport police department.

“The professional standards division of the Wallingford Police Department conducted background checks on both Jeffrey Bender and Manuel Santos,” said Ventura, Wallingford’s police chief, who said that both Bender and Santos were highly regarded as armed school officers in Wallingford.

Santos reported at the time that he checked the exit ramp, where the crash occurred, and did not see anything unusual, according to the Bridgeport internal affairs investigation. Santos lost two vacation days as the disciplinary consequence of the investigation and was hired in Wallingford for the following school year.

“I’m still angry and I’m still hurt. I drive past the exit ... and have to deal with it,” said Wanda Rivera, administrator of the estate of Jose Rosario. “Honestly, the officer shouldn’t be allowed to work in a school system.”

Weeks after CT Insider first spoke to the Wallingford police department in July about Bender and his position, Wallingford superintendent Danielle Bellizzi informed CT Insider in August that he was no longer employed in Wallingford schools.

Oxford Public Schools hired former Woodbridge officer Matthew Lima for the 2024 school year, a year after a Woodbridge internal affairs investigation found Lima violated department rules when he refused to provide help to an elderly man who escaped a nursing home.

“I’m not getting freaking jammed up,” Lima said to an EMS professional during the incident, according to the internal affairs investigation. “I’m a white cop, he’s a Black senior citizen, a freaking veteran.”

Lima told the EMS professional that he did not want to end up in the news for using a Taser on or shooting a Black senior citizen if the man hit him with his cane.

“Go tackle him then,” Lima told a different paramedic when asked to intervene.

Despite nursing home staff members and EMS asking Lima to stay and help the elderly man, who they alleged had been walking through traffic and was nearly hit by a car, the investigation determined Lima abandoned the scene.

“Did his prejudice, the fact that [redacted] was Black, keep him from acting?” asked Woodbridge Deputy Chief Ronald Smith in the investigation’s

report. While he does not answer that question, the probe was closed with a finding of 'sustained.'

A prior Woodbridge internal affairs investigation also found that Lima falsified 13 timesheets in 2021. Lima logged over 88 falsified hours, according to the investigation, and was suspended for conduct unbecoming of an officer and neglect of duty.

When Lima resigned from Woodbridge in 2023, he was marked with the designation that he resigned in lieu of discipline and was prohibited from being hired by other police departments as an officer. During that time period, he was hired in Oxford as an armed school officer.

Woodbridge sent the police academy a request for decertification upon Lima's resignation, but the academy decided in 2024 that there was no cause to revoke his certification.

Smith recalled that he was contacted by other police departments looking to hire Lima in the months after he left Woodbridge. After the state's Community College Police Department requested in August that Lima's certification, which has since lapsed, be reactivated, the police academy said it provisionally removed Lima from the list of barred officers.

Oxford, where Lima was hired as an armed officer while he was prohibited from working as a police officer, never contacted him about Lima, Smith said. Oxford declined to comment on Lima's employment by the district.

State Sen. Gary Winfield, D-New Haven said that individuals not allowed to work as police officers again should not be hired in schools where their law enforcement experience is the hiring standard.

"If I don't trust that you can be around adults, I don't trust that you can be around kids (as an armed security officer) in schools," said Winfield.

Defining Good Standing

The law allowing for retired law enforcement to serve as armed school officers was passed in 2013 shortly after the Sandy Hook tragedy in December of 2012 with bipartisan approval.

Six districts had hired armed school officers for the 2014 school year, and by the 2024 school year, at least 47 districts of the just more than 200 had hired armed officers, according to police academy training logs and publicly available district materials.

The hiring process for the armed officer role is uniquely discretionary, explained Barone. Schools and police departments often decide for themselves what complies with the state's armed school security statute and constitutes retiring in good standing.

"It's not like there is some master list of officers that are not in good standing," said Barone. "Good standing is subjective in the absence of a decertification."

The list of decertified officers in Connecticut is published online. But the list obtained by CT Insider of officers barred from working in law enforcement again is only available upon request, making it less accessible to school districts and the public.

Multiple police chiefs told CT Insider that by their standards, being dismissed or retiring during a misconduct investigation does not constitute good standing.

"Retiring in good standing means that someone did not leave under the cloud of a pending internal affairs investigation," said Enfield Chief of Police Alaric Fox. "We want that for the good of the students and the buy-in of the community."

This definition of good standing, though echoed by police chiefs across the state, may not be the case in all towns, said Barone, who explained that it is up to each police chief or district to decide that an officer who retired with a trail of misconduct is eligible for the armed school officer role.

"This is clearly an area of law that the legislature should clarify," said Barone.

In Wallingford, Ventura said that retiring during an investigation would not constitute retiring in good standing and would make a candidate ineligible. Ventura said Bender was fired when Wallingford learned he was barred from policing. Bender's termination date was about two years after he was hired and CT Insider had inquired about his status.

Joe Piacentini, the principal of the Wallingford middle school where Bender worked, said he used to work at Wolcott High School and knew Bender from his time there.

"I knew the incident existed and happened," said Piacentini, who said Bender had become an asset to the middle school. "It's not a concern to me because it's not something at my level, once he was hired and given to me, I assumed it was all good."

In other districts, like North Branford where Hart was hired, school officials were not aware of prior misconduct before hiring officers that retired during investigations.

When districts rather than police departments hire for the role, the scope of the background check is more limited. Districts often do not have access to police misconduct records or personnel files, explained Ellington Superintendent Scott Nicol.

“I would be very concerned if there was a lack of ability to be measured, a history of poor temperament or not being able to deescalate scenarios,” said Nicol. “We have to rely on letters of recommendation and references.”

Fox explained that his police department in Enfield has become a model for the vetting and training of armed school officers, requiring a weeks-long background check process and a psychological examination.

“I need you high-fiving students in the parking lot,” Fox said of the officers. “But I also need you de-escalating scenarios with students and calming parents in crisis.”

Callender, who says her daughters were traumatized from the incident with Bender, said she feels confused why the incident did not disqualify him from working in another school.

“You’re putting kids at risk,” she said.

A gray area

As the cost of hiring an armed school officer is less than the cost of stationing a police officer as a school resource officer, more districts have opted for an armed officer, explained superintendents and state lawmakers.

In many districts, armed school officers take on the law enforcement responsibilities of patrolling the school grounds, investigating criminal activities and detaining individuals that pose a threat.

In other districts, officers are prohibited to take on the same duties as police officers unless it is a school safety emergency, despite that the officer may work for the police department.

Newtown first hired armed school officers for the 2013 school year, explained Newtown Superintendent Anne Uberti.

“Given our history in Newtown, both the general community and students and staff feel very comfortable with it,” said Uberti. “No one piece of the

plan can keep you safe, but they are an integral part of it.”

The lack of consistent job requirements has raised concerns from advocates about the potential impact of the school officers on students. Advocates and lawmakers pushed for more training and guidance for the role this past legislative session, but the bill never reached the floor.

“We need a way to sanction armed security guards that improves both school safety and school climate,” said Robert Goodrich, executive director of RACCE, an organization that advocates for equity in schools.

Fox of Enfield called the armed officer role a foot in two worlds, one of law enforcement and one of education. Goodrich, concerned about districts that allow the officers to refer students for arrest, called the role a “gray area.”

“There are distinctions on what an ASO can do,” said Barone. “But you can imagine the waters get muddier when you talk about a retired law enforcement officer who is used to having that type of authority.”

Matthew Funchion, a Burlington police officer who leads a team of armed school security, worked with lawmakers to put forward the bill to require more armed security training.

Funchion said that an officer with a questionable background would impact community buy-in to the program, even if the prior misconduct was about truthfulness or falsified reports.

“It’s a position of great trust,” said Funchion, who explained that the officers are willing to put their lives on the line for the students. “I want parents to know there are people at school who are vigilant when they put their kids on the bus.”

In 2023, after Darien hired former Danbury police officer Leonard LaBonia despite the fact that a jury in a 2005 civil trial found he used excessive force in an arrest, some Darien parents voiced concern about the hiring process and the role.

CT Insider also found that LaBonia failed to properly complete his re-certification training in 2021, two years before he was hired in Darien, according to an internal affairs investigation not previously reported on.

The Darien superintendent at the time LaBonia was hired, Alan Addley, defended the decision and said the hiring process for the role was comprehensive. The district conducts public safety psychological evaluation,

reference checks and a background investigation, the current superintendent Eric Byrne told CT Insider.

For Winfield, hiring practices need to be standardized in policy and the legislature needs to have a public hearing about how to proceed.

“I don’t want to be overly prescriptive but there are things that are the basics,” he said.