

# Together, OPELIKA.

## Exploring the Knowledge is Power and Policing and Me Mini Unit Programs

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The city of Opelika, located in east Alabama, is one of the fastest growing cities in the state. It has a population of approximately 32,000 citizens and is the sister city to Auburn in Lee County. Opelika is working to keep up with the demand for more housing; they have acquired several new businesses in the area; and they recently built a new sportsplex and aquatics center, fire station, police department and library. The city has made many improvements to its quality of life over the years with Mayor Gary Fuller at the helm.

Following an extensive career in broadcast radio and real estate, Mayor Fuller began his career in public service in 2000 as an Opelika councilmember before being elected as mayor in 2004, where he is currently in his fifth term. When I sat down with him in July, it was clear why the city is experiencing such growth. He is a visionary that is open to new ideas that can improve his city. One such idea was born in 2020, when he partnered with Dr. Chenavis Evans, CEO and owner of Critical Insights Consulting LLC (CIC), to develop a comprehensive program to help the city achieve a refocused mission of strengthening community relations through a campaign titled, “Together, Opelika.”

CIC is a small, Auburn-based consulting firm that provides unique and innovative insight into team and relationship building, critical thinking, communication, problem-solving and cultivating better leaders. The CIC team has over 60 years of experience working in and with universities, corporate America, the NFL and the public school system. Dr. Evans said their services are industry agnostic, which means it does not matter what industry they work in because they consider themselves as problem solvers and change agents.

Since their partnership began in 2020, CIC has successfully created and implemented seven initiatives in the city that are building trust and relationships within the city at large. This article is going to focus on their most recent work between the Opelika Police Department (OPD) and the Opelika City School System, specifically, within Opelika High School.

### Getting Started

Mayor Fuller and Opelika Police Chief Shane Healey, who at the time was a captain, attended a law enforcement workshop where Dr. Evans was conducting a training on self-management. That initial workshop impressed them so much that they began brainstorming with Dr. Evans about another potential collaboration. With the support of the city council, they received approval to fund two mini unit curriculum programs for their police officers to teach high school students.

CIC spent their first six months, in partnership with the police department, hosting public forums and community events to meet with Opelika’s citizenry. They asked questions about the citizens’ needs and what the police department



*Pictured left to right: OPD Capt. Tony Amerson, Dr. Chenavis Evans, Opelika Mayor Gary Fuller, OPD Chief Shane Healey, OHS Principal Kelli Fischer and OPD Officer Jonathon Glover stand in front of Opelika High School.*



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– OPD Sgt. Jonathan Whaley



could do to make a difference in their community to build better relationships.

Chief Healey has been with OPD for 32 years and has served as chief the last two years. He said they discovered the community was looking for a two-fold education initiative. First, they wanted to make sure police officers were educated properly using some of the latest tactics, such as de-escalation training, and second, they wanted to be educated on what officers do and how they do it.

Dr. Evans said, “What was very profound for me was that we had a group of students ranging from 13 to 18-years-old say that they wanted to be educated on what they needed to do if they were stopped by the police because they were afraid.”

Based on these important conversations, CIC worked with leaders in the police department and high school to build programs that could be directly embedded into classes already being taught. They created the Knowledge is Power mini unit to specifically help high school students navigate traffic citations and the court system. It is tied into the curriculum for the driver’s education class, an elective course, for ninth and tenth graders. The Policing and Me mini unit is taught to eleventh and twelfth graders in their economics class. It focuses on the Bill of Rights and understanding their rights during various situations involving police officers.

### Implementation

The mini units are taught by trained School Resource Officers (SROs) that are officers with OPD. The police department has over 100 officers and roughly 10 are SROs. Before these classes are taught to students, SROs must complete a thorough training provided by CIC. Dr. Evans said the training is customized based on not only national law enforcement standards but also on the standards and expectations set forth by the city and the police department.

Chief Healey said that the concept was initially a challenge for the department because it was something new. The officers were not used to having interactions with the citizens outside of routine policing and emergency calls. He said, “Policing in general across America is at this crossroads of transitioning between what I call traditional policing, a little more old school thinking, into more modern, progressive ideas on how can we police achieving the same goals but using different tactics.”

He continued by saying that incorporating more officers into the program development process has allowed it to catch fire and take off in the department.



*Pictured: OHS Principal Kelli Fischer and Dr. Chenavis Evans, CEO and owner of CIC*



*Pictured left to right: OPD Sgt. Jonathan Whaley, OPD Capt. Tony Amerson and OPD Chief Shane Healey*



*Opelika Mayor Gary Fuller*



*Rebecca Johnson, CIC director of implementation*

During the Knowledge is Power mini unit, students are educated on the do's and don'ts of what to do when pulled over by a police officer as well as when interacting with a court administrator or judge. On the first day of the course, students have discussions in the classroom, and then they get to go outside and role play with the SROs using police cars on the second day. They go over various types of traffic stops and even situations that involve drunk driving. They actually get to play the role of the officer and are exposed to some of the realities that police officers face on a day-to-day basis. This allows the students to not only learn the proper steps to take, but it also helps them to understand the difficult job that police officers have and helps them reevaluate some of the misconceptions shared in the public.

Sgt. Jonathan Whaley is the supervisor of the SRO unit and has been with OPD for 10 years. He helps implement the program in the school, schedules the training for the SROs and helps build relationships with the students.

"These types of programs are great because it allows us to get in front of the students and let them know that we are more than just police officers," Sgt. Whaley said. "It gives them the why about what we do and if they understand the why and buy into the why then hopefully as they get older, we'll have more synced up relationships between the police department and our community."

Examples of some of the top questions the SROs get in this class are: do I have to stop when the police get behind me; can I get to a lighted place; do I have to get out of the car when a police officer gets behind me; and where do I put my hands when pulled over?

Opelika Police Capt. Tony Amerson oversees the public relations and special services division. He has been with the department for 27 years and credits his first 11 years of working in the public housing authority for building his strong belief in the importance of getting out in the community and getting to know the citizens. He used to teach the mini units and is now responsible for helping the CIC team incorporate standards in the curriculum that make police sense.

"The biggest take away for me is passing on that generational knowledge. I think that is what police officers should be doing," Capt. Amerson said. "For a long time, we just stayed focused on being a patrol officer or being on command staff and really just doing the police side. This side of getting out there and giving this knowledge has really helped us see what the community really needs and what they really want, so we can build our program to fit them."



*Officers in the Opelika SRO unit celebrate SRO Day.*



*OHS students participating in the Knowledge is Power class get to role play with SROs using police cars.*



The Policing and Me mini unit is more advanced and is focused on what to do and not to do, based on a citizen's legal rights, during any interactions with law enforcement. It allows the SROs to address misconceptions about police officers and certain populations of citizens. The students get to share their feelings and personal experiences along with the officers for a healthy discussion; this provides cross-sectional learning for both the students and officers. Sgt. Whaley said one of the toughest questions they often receive is about racial profiling. "We explain to them the difference between reasonable suspicion and probable cause and how that can kind of go into profiling and the difference . . .," he said. "Most of the time we already have a great relationship with our students, so they trust us, and they're willing to have that dialogue with us, but we hit it head on. We don't try to shy away from anything; that's why we are there."

Knowledge is Power has been taught over a two-day period for the past two years and is increasing to three days for the 2023-2024 school year. Policing and Me is designed to be taught over six weeks. Dr. Evans estimates the SROs teach well over 100 students a day between several blocks of classes.

CIC has a member of their team attend most classes to grade the officer's presentation, ensure the material is being taught correctly and address any concerns that may arise by students, teachers, CIC or the principal. Rebecca Johnson, director of implementation for CIC, is typically that team member. She has 16 years of experience working with law enforcement and has also gone through the Alabama Peace Officers' Standards and Training Commission (APOSTC) certification process. SROs are provided training on a yearly basis, but more can be given throughout the year to ensure best practices are kept. The CIC team also meets with the police department on a weekly basis, so they can keep up with the progress of the mini units and to stay abreast of any new laws or local issues.

"We are always brainstorming and trying to make it better and not make it cookie-cutter. We don't want it to be one size fits all," Johnson said. "We want to make sure that everyone gets something out of what we are teaching."

**Feedback**

These programs are centered around a great deal of data collection and analysis. Students' feedback is collected anonymously by the school system after parents sign a waiver. Over 700 students completed the mini units in the first two years of the program; 313 completed surveys. According to CIC's survey data from 2021 and 2022, 98% of students that participated in the questionnaire said the classes met their expectations, 90% said they will apply the information covered from the unit on policing and 79% believe the mini units should be mandatory classes.



*OPD SROs teach OHS students about handling traffic stop situations.*



*OPD Capt. Tony Amerson leads a class discussion about the Bill of Rights during a Policing and Me presentation.*

Opelika High School Principal Kelli Fischer said, “It has been received really well. One of the things that has been great is that over the time that we have implemented it, we have gotten feedback from students and teachers, and it has evolved a little bit and become more hands on and practical, so students really feel like they have a purpose in it.”

The top four point of interest results in the 2021 survey data were for the mini units to be more hands on, interactive, include role play and have more representation (all white officers). In 2022, the only recommended change was for more outside interaction.

Students were also asked if the classes changed their perspective on policing and/or police officers; 79% said it did. Here are some examples of the answers students gave: it made me look at things differently from their point of view; it taught me to look for the whole story instead of going off social media; I respect them even more; I thought police officers were abusing their power, but they are just doing their job; it made me more aware that not all police are bad, and it showed me some police are making a difference; it made me more aware of procedures and daily happenings of our officers. It also made me more comfortable in handling different situations I may encounter in life.

Mayor Fuller added, “I have not heard one negative from any parent, any student, teacher, administrator or police officer. I think it makes our police officers feel good and our students, teachers and school administrators feel good, so that is a win-win for the community.”

### What’s Next

Dr. Evans wants to take the two mini units to the next level and have them implemented in high schools across the state, whether that is made possible through state legislation or working with municipalities on an individual basis.

“When [students] say, ‘This needs to be in the school system for everybody.’ ‘This has helped me.’ When they say, ‘I am not afraid anymore, or it has helped me to not be afraid and all police officers are not bad’— that’s huge,” Dr. Evans said. “We are making a difference.”

When it comes to the idea of scaling the mini units program for a larger audience, Dr. Evans recognizes that some smaller and rural municipalities may not be able to afford their services alone and that they may need to merge multiple police departments together to educate them. She envisions offering trainings in the Auburn-Opelika area and being able to travel to different parts of the state to host individual city and regional trainings. Pricing for the mini units is based on various components, like the number of officers being trained, the size of the school, the level of certifications and the level of customization a municipality requests.

“I think that this is a great program and that any school that implemented it would benefit from it. It is very practical,” Principal Fischer said. “I have sat in lessons, and I’ve learned things and been reminded of things that maybe I knew but don’t use that often. I really think that it would be valuable to anybody that decided to implement it.”

Capt. Amerson shared this advice for other police departments: “Step out on a ledge. Take a chance. You are going to have a lot of people on the sideline telling you not to do it, but I think we are in a position now that we don’t have a choice. If you start looking at the Department of Justice on what changes they expect out of police departments, it has changed, and we have to meet those changes. If we don’t meet those changes, we will fall behind.”

Mayor Fuller concluded by saying, “I would encourage municipalities that – maybe have had some issues or maybe recognize the fact that their officers can be better and that the relationships with their community can be better – that they would want to at least explore the possibility of doing something. It may not be for everybody, but I am guessing that it is. I would encourage folks to just explore to see what the opportunities might be for you.” ■



*Participants in Opelika's Citizen's Police Academy investigate a mock crime scene during detective night.*



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