Students in Anne Arundel County, Md., schools can now use a smartphone app to report bullying or other problems to police.

In fall 2012, the Anne Arundel County Police Department released the free app designed by the School Resource Unit to provide students with a way to communicate in a secure, private fashion. Students can walk into the office of a school resource officer (SRO) or use a phone tip line to report an issue, but police wanted to ensure students had another option to encourage communication.

“We are trying to put more tools in kids’ hands in an environment they are used to working with,” explains Lt. Doyle Batten, school safety section commander for the department. “We wanted to give kids as much anonymity as possible to let us know what is going on.”

The county’s 125 schools serve approximately 78,000 students. SROs are present in all 12 of the county’s high schools and are authorized for 11 of the county’s 19 middle schools. Batten says with the support of Chief Larry W. Tolliver, the app was developed by Cpl. Bill Davis, an SRO at a county high school, after exploring possible options.

“I wanted more outreach to students through social media and Internet-based applications. I wanted a much more interactive format,” Batten says. “But as we researched, we found all kinds of potential problems, both technical and policywise, so Bill suggested we try an app.”

The result is the AACo PD Speak Out app, which is available through the Internet at http://aacopspeakout.myapp.name or through the Google Playstore for Android products or via iTunes for iPhone users.

“I don’t know of any other school system that has this,” says Cpl. Jon Carrier, a county SRO assigned to Arundel Middle School in Odenton, Md. He is also president of the Maryland Association of School Resource Officers and a board member of the National Association of School Resource Officers. “Since the inception of our SRO program in 2000, we have been discussing methods to provide students with better ways to communicate with us.”

Batten explains that Davis found a website that provides templates and worked with it. After a few tweaks, the department launched the app in October. Although the app is designed for public school students in the county, anyone can use it.

“It’s designed primarily to help public school students in Anne Arundel County, but if you are a parent or a private school student, we won’t turn away anyone,” Batten says. “All the messages come in email format to a shared mailbox that only three people have access to, including myself. We take the content of a message and send it where it needs to go — a specific school or SRO, for example. If you are a fifth grader and you are being bullied, I will paraphrase the email and get it to the right people.”

“They are all minor incidents, which is exactly how we hoped it would go — intervention at an early level,” Batten says. “By way of this app you don’t have to talk to anybody. You can just type it in and hit send and then...
at least you have let someone know there is a problem. It will get the ball in motion. Information is the key to prevention. Someone knows something nearly all the time that a bad act is about to occur or has just occurred. Anything we can do to put the tool in a kid’s hands is a safer thing for everybody.”

For more information, contact Lt. Doyle Batten at dbatten@aacounty.org, (410) 222-0040, or Cpl. Jon Carrier at srojon@hotmail.com, (410) 674-6900. For information on the National Institute of Justice School Safety Program, contact Law Enforcement Program Manager Michael O’Shea at michael.oshea@usdoj.gov.