

Keeping Plymouth students and staff safe

By Rich Harbert
rharbert@wickedlocal.com

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In wake of Connecticut shootings, officials address school safety plans. Would local schools be safer if an administrator in every building had access to a gun?

At least one local resident thinks so, but don't look for armed school officials any time soon.

Police Chief Michael Botieri thinks the addition of a weapon in any school building would only cause more problems. State law, meanwhile, would have to change drastically before anyone but a police officer could have access to a gun in school.

But there are several other initiatives police, firefighters and school officials are working on to make schools safer for students and staff. And the planning will likely never stop, Superintendent of Schools Gary Maestas told residents attending a public safety forum last week at Plymouth North High School.

School officials convened the special meeting Thursday night in response to concerns about last month's school shootings in Newtown, Conn.

A 15-member panel, including administrators, students and public safety personnel, discussed safety measures already in the works in local schools, such as lockdown drills that have become as common as fire drills for students and staff.

Local schools actually began developing a safety plan for local schools five years ago, putting together a committee of school and public safety officials similar to the forum's panelists to look at the broad range of safety issues.

The resulting safety plan incorporates procedures for everything from a radiological release at the nuclear plant to an armed intruder in a school, but also addresses Internet security and bullying.

Residents, for example, may notice that schools in town now sport letters on their facades to help emergency responders not necessarily familiar with the buildings coordinate responses.

Schools in town have also secured all doors and installed cameras to allow security receptionists in each building to check a visitor's appearance before allowing them into a school.

Every school in town also practices lockdown drills at least twice a year.

The drills range from scheduled events designed to get students comfortable with the concept of going into hiding in their classrooms to unannounced intruder scenarios in which police send a plain-clothes detective into a building and wait until someone notices a stranger in the school.

Frank Schulze, a senior at Plymouth North High School, said the drills started after the Virginia Tech massacre and have evolved from something students used to joke about to a protection plan that makes everyone feel safe and comfortable.

Conor Disher, a senior at Plymouth South High School, recalled how confused everyone was during the first lockdown drill he went through as a freshman. Nowadays, everyone respects the drills and views them as serious matters, he said.

For safety reasons, school officials did not go into detail about how they plan to handle emergencies in the schools, but handbooks detailing responses to all sorts of possible emergencies are available for teachers and substitute teachers alike.

The work to date seemed to comfort many.

Selectman Belinda Brewster said she was grateful to learn the town is so far ahead of the curve in school safety planning.

In response to one parent's question, Maestas said the committee would look into improving school bus safety as well.

Another parent proposed giving a principal or assistant principal in each school access to a gun. She said the gun could be kept locked away and only used in emergencies to save lives.

State law currently prohibits anyone but police officers from carrying weapons in school. Botieri said he does not favor arming administrators, noting that introducing a gun could just as easily exasperate a situation.

"You might introduce a gun to someone who is otherwise not violent," Botieri said.

The town currently has three school resource officers who spend their entire day in the middle and high schools. The officers wear uniforms, carry guns and leave their cruisers parked in front of the school.

Maestas said school officials will look for funding opportunities to expand the program to the elementary schools.

Parents and guardians will also notice changes as the law enforcement community comes to grips with what happened in Newtown, just like improvements were made after school shootings in Colorado and Virginia.

“You will see change this year, and more and more every year as we make protocols more tight,” Maestas said.

Fifteen people participated in the forum as panelists, including Arthur Montrond, director of facilities for the local schools; Kathleen McSweeney, principal of Plymouth North High School; Adam Blaisdell, principal of Hedge Elementary School; Sean Halpin, director of student support services for local schools; Patty Fry, principal of Plymouth South High School; John Siever, principal of Plymouth South Middle School; Timothy Cruz, Plymouth County district attorney; Gary Maestas, superintendent of local schools; Michael Rothberg, moderator; Debra Betz, school committee and school safety committee member; Michael Botieri, police chief; Ed Bradley, fire chief; Aaron Wallace, director of emergency operations; Conor Disher, Plymouth South High School student; and Frank Schulze, Plymouth North High School student.