

The Record

Officers get hands-on tactical training

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Bang! Bang!" shouted Tenafly police Officer Michael deMoncada, ball cap pulled low over his brow, a semiautomatic rifle fit snugly against his shoulder.

Four-man teams of school resource officers fanned out across the hallways of Atlantic City High School, moving toward his voice. Some carried real firearms; others wielded phantom handguns.

"There's smoke and children everywhere. The attackers are here, too," deMoncada shouted to the officers. "How are you going to neutralize the target?"

The job of school resource officer was once considered a humdrum assignment, in some ways akin to being a hallway monitor. But a rash of school-related violence in recent years has changed that.

"The next [school] shooting could happen here at Atlantic City High School, or maybe at your school," said Tenafly Police Chief Michael Bruno, who conducted the demonstration along with two members of his department's Emergency Response Team.

"If you don't believe me, remember the recent Amish shooting," he said, referring to the shooting deaths of five girls by a lone gunman at a school in Pennsylvania in October.

Friday morning's three-hour "active-shooter demonstration" came on the final day of the New Jersey Association of School Resource Officers' training conference. Many found it the most crucial and informative session of a three-day conference that ran the gamut from Internet safety to non-routine disaster planning.

"Never has the need for school resource officer training been more necessary," said NJASRO Executive Director Robert Tessaro.

"The events of the past few weeks have shown us how vulnerable our schools can be."

Bruno, a 22-year police veteran with SWAT team experience, was instrumental two years ago in ensuring that all Bergen County police be trained to respond to active school shooters.

The purpose, he said, is so "any cops being called for mutual aid would be on the same page."

New Jersey schools now have more than 600 school resource officers -- the term for a police officer whose responsibility is ensuring the safety of a school's students and staff.

About three dozen of them listened Friday morning to Bruno's presentation, which began with statistics, photographs and a short, grainy but graphic video of the Columbine High School massacre from 1999.

Then Bruno divided up the group to practice "neutralization" tactics.

In one corner of the school, Tenafly police Lt. Dan Siegel brandished a red, plastic semiautomatic rifle with the heft of the real deal.

He and another officer then approached a classroom and purposefully burst in, half-crouching, moving deliberately with the practiced steps of what police call "the duck walk."

They echoed "all clear" and "cover me" toward each other as they searched inside cabinets and below desks.

Subsequent groups moved with equal efficiency and determination.

The seriousness with which the officers approached the imaginary shooters pleased Bruno.

"Our best, at all times, has to be better than their worst," he said.

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