

# HERALD NEWS

## Officials focus on security policies

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**HERALD NEWS**

Local educators and law enforcement officials say a review of established school security policies is a key first step in making sure children remain safe.

"It's not a question of when it will happen in New Jersey, it's already happening," said Robert Tessaro, executive director of the New Jersey Association of School Resource Officers, who attended a national school security conference hosted by President Bush in Chevy Chase, Md. on Tuesday.

As an example, he noted an incident involving Duane Reeves, a Newark school resource officer who was killed in 2005 after breaking up a fight between students.

Crime statistics show that school violence in the state appears to be decreasing, according to the state Department of Education's 2004-05 Violence, Vandalism and Substance Abuse in New Jersey Public Schools report.

The number of violent incidents reported in New Jersey schools since the 2002-03 school year has declined 21 percent, according to the state Education Department.

And in a joint 2002 study conducted by the National Center on Education Statistics and the Bureau of Justice Statistics, students 12 to 18 years old nationally were more likely to become victims of "non-fatal serious violent crimes" away from school than at school.

Detective Chris Wittig, resource officer for Wayne Hills High School and the Region I director for the New Jersey Association of School Resource Officers, said a decline in violent incidents does not mean teachers and administrators should become complacent about school safety.

"It's still out there," he said. "Violent episodes still occur. Schools are still vulnerable. Just because assaults are decreasing, that's great. But they're still occurring."

Earlier this month, Gov. Jon S. Corzine responded to the violence by announcing the creation of a School Security Task Force to review and evaluate security measures at schools across the state.

Locally, some administrators said they are doing the same thing in assessing school security procedures. Passaic Schools Superintendent Robert H. Holster said he has scheduled a meeting with the Board of Education safety committee today to revisit the district's school safety plan.

Although Holster said \$350,000 was budgeted to install an automatic central locking system for school doors, he acknowledged that there are continual safety concerns.

"There's no 100 percent foolproof system," he said. "I don't feel as comfortable as I should for someone in charge of 13,000 students and 2,000 staff."

Meanwhile, Paterson Schools Superintendent Michael Glascoe said he would be surprised after recent highly publicized violent events if any district wasn't in the process of re-evaluating security measures.

"Even if you think you have great security, you go back and review it," he said.

At the national school security conference, Bush said classrooms should be crucibles for learning enhancement where students should not have to fear for their personal safety.

"All of us in this country want our classrooms to be gentle places of learning -- places where people not only learn the basics -- basic skills necessary to become productive citizens -- but learn to relate to one another," Bush said, sitting with panelists before a school safety banner. "Our parents, I know, want to be able to send their child or children to schools that are safe places."

Safety specialists at the Maryland gathering said that more than metal detectors or security cameras, the key to halting school violence was communication.

Tessaro indicated that law enforcement manpower is central to school safety. School resource officers, who are fully trained law enforcement officers, should be placed in every New Jersey school, Tessaro said, adding that he would ask for more federal money for the state's school resource officer program.

Melvin Casey, president of the Parent Leadership Alliance for the Paterson public schools, said he doesn't want enhancing security to only mean filling schools with uniformed police officers, weapons and metal detectors.

"I'd like the task force to work on alternative methods like conflict resolution and positive peer culture," he said, explaining that means teaching students ways to talk themselves out of so-called dangerous situations.

And Danielle Pelletier, a teacher at School 17 in Clifton, said despite thorough safety procedures at her school, she still has reservations. "The concern is the unknown," she said.

-- The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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