

The Star-Ledger

Police study ways to keep schools safe

Wednesday, October 11, 2006

BY JOHN MOONEY

Star-Ledger Staff

The message on the screen was chilling, even to a cop:

"Shots fired, students down, gunman in the building ... are you prepared?"

The Saddle River police detective read it aloud to 20 other officers in a Bergen County classroom -- all of them assigned to schools and training for worst-case scenarios at a time the nation had become acutely aware of the possibilities.

"Are you prepared? That's the crux of all this," said Detective Tim Gerity, leading the class for new school resource officers from around the region yesterday at the Bergen Police and Fire Academies. "That's what we are trying to do, get you prepared."

Outside Washington, safety experts invited by the White House were grappling with a month of unprecedented school violence that erupted across the country. But here, in the Mahwah classroom, sat the men and women charged with being the first line of defense.

And just as national experts at the White House summit reviewed the recent killings, there were no easy answers for these officers. Trained to pursue their law-enforcement instincts aggressively, they must adapt to the culture of a neighborhood school.

"It's a nontraditional police role for them," said Gerity, vice president of the state's school resource officers association, which organized the classes.

"You've been trained to work in essentially a paramilitary organization," he said. "And now you're in a school environment. You have to strike a balance."

New Jersey schools currently have more than 600 resource officers, the benign term for police who working on school assignment. That's a huge increase from even a few years ago, although well short of a presence in all 2,300 public schools.

And with deadly shootings becoming more commonplace, the assignment is no longer considered mundane. Since last year, the state has required a training course like the weeklong program Gerity was running, and communities have increasingly moved toward placing seasoned officers in their schools.

Detective Vincent Martin, one of the attendees, volunteered to be Lodi's first school resource officer after 18 years in its police department. Working at the middle and high schools, he said the biggest adjustment was learning to gain student trust.

"When they come to me, it is because I am a cop," he said. "And although there are certain things I will keep confidential, there are others that I obviously can't ... First and foremost, I am a police officer."

A Lodi native and also a Little League and wrestling coach in town, Martin said he likes to think he has rapport with many students, which help diffuse tensions and gives him insight into what may be happening on

the outside.

Martin noted the gunman who shot up a Colorado high school last month was seen outside the building the day before. Now, the Lodi officer said, he has a few young friends who keep an eye out for suspicious cars or individuals.

"They might mark down a license plate number for me," he said. "Hey, 100 sets of eyes are better than one."

The vital role of resource officers was a key topic at the summit in Chevy Chase, Md., where President Bush bemoaned the tragedies as "incredibly sad." Experts said the best weapon against school violence isn't so much video cameras and metal detectors as the "intelligence" gathered from students, parents and staff.

"The communication link is very important," said George Sugai, a University of Connecticut education professor. "Parents are not going to engage the schools if they have to walk through a metal detector, if they have to go through steps to access the teachers."

But a few attendees said federal money for school officers and other safety measures has dwindled as the Bush administration focused on terrorism.

"Funding didn't even come up," said Robert Tessaro, director of the state's officers association who attended the summit. "I would hope there will be some follow-through, and he'll come up with the funding that's needed."

There are other obstacles as well. Those in the Bergen County class said there are turf wars with school administrators, teachers and community members, who sometimes question whether a police presence is needed.

There was no question, however, the nationwide wave of violence got people's attention. Gerity said three or four officers scheduled to attend the class backed out due to jitters in their districts.

"But when all the news fades to the back pages," he said, "we'll still be there in the buildings."

John Mooney covers education. He may be reached at (973) 392-1548 or jmooney@starledger.com.