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Anniversary of Columbine has area schools reflecting on need for security

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At Brockport High School, one of the first people you meet upon entering the building is a security officer.

Visitors must show identification and state why they're in the building. And before moving on, the officer notifies the person you came to see, or the officer escorts you to the next location. Along the way, you'll probably notice surveillance cameras positioned in the building.

The intent, say school officials, is not to turn a school into a prison, but to acknowledge that these measures are needed to keep students and staff safe so they can focus on learning.

"People think that a school shooter has a certain look to them. Well, it could be anybody," said Gary Rose, director of security for the Brockport district.

Increased security is evident at many schools nationwide, and upstate New York is no exception.

A decade ago today, 12 students and one teacher at Columbine High School in suburban Denver were killed and about two dozen were wounded by students Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, who ultimately killed themselves.

Since then, Monroe County school districts have updated their emergency response plans, implemented more safety procedures and equipment, and more closely scrutinize students considered "at risk."

Building trusting relationships with students is critical in preventing school violence, officials emphasize.

"Everybody has a role to play, from the custodial staff all the way to the superintendent's office," Rose said. "Community members are so important in sharing information about things that just don't seem right."

Building relationships

In addition to the 250 surveillance cameras installed throughout Brockport schools, the district offers Safe School Ambassadors, a national program where students are taught techniques to decrease instances of cruelty — verbal or physical — and be a sounding board for their peers. "These skills are great for making friends, keeping friends and working through everyday problems," said Chelsea DiCicco, 17, an ambassador and Brockport High senior.

Ambassadors and school staff also hold "family group meetings" every other week to discuss school issues large and small, and assess the peer interventions that did — and didn't — work.

There are 380 ambassadors in grades five through 12 within the Brockport district.

"A lot of the violence that occurs doesn't involve weapons at all. (For students), exclusion is the most significant type of cruelty," said Karen Breslawski, who oversees the ambassador program for the Brockport district.

After the Columbine High incident, school staffs really understood the need to find the root of a student's unhappiness in hopes of curbing violence, said Jody Siegle, executive director of the Monroe County School Boards Association.

She said school crisis plans now extend beyond school personnel to include emergency responders, and partnerships between schools and police departments were strengthened.

In the Rochester School District, school resource officers from the Rochester Police Department were installed at secondary and middle schools. The district has 12 resource officers at schools and 138 school safety officers. Metal detectors are present at several sites. Jefferson Middle and East High schools also have scanners that X-ray book bags and other items.

"I think history has shown the district has been safe in reference to weapons," said James Sheppard, the city schools' director of safety and security. "Over the last year, we've also focused on more (staff) training."

In the Fairport school district, voters in 2007 approved \$29.9 million in school improvements, which includes adding more surveillance cameras and constructing a single point of entry at all schools' front offices.

Several Fairport schools were built in the 1970s and need infrastructural upgrades, said Superintendent Jon Hunter.

"We want to know who is in our building," he said. "In some ways, it's too bad we have to do this, but in other ways it is a form of comfort for members of our community."

Both Hunter and Sheppard said their respective districts also take pains to cultivate a culture of safety to ensure students are comfortable talking with school staff.

More work to do

But despite billions of dollars spent nationwide on more security equipment and personnel, school violence hasn't significantly decreased, according to data collected by Community Matters, a California-based nonprofit that administers Safe School Ambassadors.

Thirty-six percent of students report being in a physical fight in the last year, according to 2008 statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention published in Community Matters' recent national report card on school violence prevention. And 28 percent of children ages 12 to 18 reported having been bullied at school in the last six months, according to 2007 data from the National Center for Education Statistics.

This shows there's more work to do, say local school officials, who admit securing schools is an ongoing challenge.

Columbine "heightened the awareness of what can happen when students are isolated and angry, unhappy and neglected," Siegle said.

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