



Security increasing at many schools across Pittsburgh after Newtown shootings

Many schools instituting training, safety measures after shootings



Larry Roberts/Post-Gazette
North Catholic maintenance director John Marucci holds a mock gun during a recent instructional session dealing with armed intruders.



Larry Roberts/Post-Gazette
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Larry Roberts/Post-Gazette
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Larry Roberts/Post-Gazette
John Marucci, right, maintenance director for North Catholic High School, disarms religion teacher Greg Evans, who was holding a mock gun, during a training exercise.

On most weekdays, Greg Evans is a soft-spoken, mild-mannered religion teacher at North Catholic High School.

But one day last week, Mr. Evans was transformed into an aggressive attacker, disarming an intruder pointing a gun in a classroom at the Troy Hill school.

The intruder wasn't real. He was Sam Rosenberg, a personal safety expert brought in to train teachers on how to confront a gunman, keep students safe and have their radar tuned in to the potential for possible disturbances created at the school.

"I wouldn't ever want to be learning how to strike someone, but I think defense is always a good thing," Mr. Evans said. "To learn how to defend is worthwhile."

North Catholic isn't alone in its efforts to prepare for a worst-case scenario.

Since the Dec. 14 shooting of 20 children and six staff at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn., superintendents and school boards in the region have been reviewing and revamping safety procedures.

Some are taking action for the first time to provide security guards or school resource officers at elementary schools. Lockdown drills are being practiced; evacuation plans are being rewritten to include moving students to a safe site; and visitors to schools are being asked to state their reason for entering before a door can be unlocked.

"Sandy Hook changed everyone's sense of security because it happened at an elementary school," said Cara Zanella, director of communications for Gateway School District, where teachers recently were trained by Monroeville police on how to handle an intruder. "Before school districts focused most security measures on secondary schools and so this has forced us to look at whole new directions."

The West Mifflin Area School District recently upgraded the intercom systems in its elementary schools and added a uniformed security guard in each elementary building.

The Steel Valley school board switched its security firm and added guards at its elementary schools.

The Monessen City School District added a police officer to its elementary school and trained all elementary staff on searches and using the metal detector.

Likewise in the Duquesne City School District, which serves students in grades K-6, two additional security guards were hired and students now go through metal detectors,

In Allegheny Valley School District, safety audits have been performed on the two elementary schools, and the district may hold an active shooter drill sometime this year. A similar one was held several years ago.

In the Mt. Lebanon and Quaker Valley school districts, municipal police officers will now make unannounced tours of the schools as part of their routine patrols.

A safety committee of school districts that meets at the Allegheny Intermediate Unit is working on a School Safety Summit to discuss security and provide information and training, said Aaron Skrbín, associate principal of South Fayette High School and head of the committee.

And Pittsburgh City Council, led by Councilman Bill Peduto, recently held a post-agenda discussion with safety experts, including Mr. Rosenberg and school officials, about how the city's emergency responders can coordinate with the 100 public and private schools within the city limits.

The session covered a wide range of topics, including lockdowns and emergency drills; technology that would allow school floor plans to be downloaded by responders on smartphones; and self-defense training for teachers who could find themselves as the last line of defense if a gunman approaches their school or classroom.

North Catholic president Frank Orga said news coverage on the day of the Sandy Hook shootings prompted him to have a vulnerability study done at his school. The teacher training was a result of that study.

Mr. Rosenberg, a former Marine, is the founder of Inpax, a Pittsburgh firm that teaches personal self-defense. He opened the session by advising teachers to lock down their rooms, quiet their students and turn out lights in an effort to avoid attracting an intruder. But if those measures fail and they are faced with a gunman, an attempt to disarm the intruder is the best bet, given the fact that he likely will start to shoot.

The approximately 20 teachers, along with Mr. Orga and principal Michael Pendred, learned how to disarm an intruder with a handgun and a rifle from a close distance and from across the room. Mr. Rosenberg noted that attempts made by the teachers would buy time until police could arrive.

First, Mr. Rosenberg demonstrated the techniques, then the teachers practiced on each other. They all appeared eager to learn, though some acknowledged it was training they had never expected to be part of their professional development.

Christopher Warden, a teacher at Pittsburgh Sunnyside K-8 who attended the city council discussion, said he would like to undergo the same training. "I've never heard of any training for teachers on how to respond in a crisis, especially an active shooter. I feel we are lacking right now with training in emergencies," Mr. Warden said.

Pittsburgh superintendent Linda Lane said the district needs to review its security measures, but she already is hearing from principals and teachers about what is needed.

She declined to detail the changes that have been made so far. "I'm explaining to people it's not wise to set yourself up by telling people these are the things we put in place. But we are making some changes, and it changed some of our planning, frankly, for this year and next."

Who pays for more security?

She also wants to have outside experts assess the district. Ms. Lane, along with other school leaders, is hoping federal and state governments provide some funding for school safety.

In fact, funds for improved security was listed as a top need of the suburban school districts in Allegheny County, according to a survey done by the AIU committee, Mr. Skrbin said.

Gateway's teacher training in February, which was not open to the media, was geared toward "if we are in a bad situation, how do we work to get out of this situation alive," Ms. Zanella said. "Training basically allows you to put time in between whatever is happening in the school and the arrival of police," she said.

In Mt. Lebanon, school district administrators along with police will hold an active shooter drill this summer. That will be followed by training next fall for the staff at each district school.

"We are going to be telling them how to hide and lock themselves down to reduce exposure," said Aaron Lauth, public information officer for the Mt. Lebanon police department.

A January survey of about 11,000 educators nationwide by the School Improvement Network found that while 92 percent of educators said they feel safe in their schools, 31 percent said their schools are not safe from gun violence. In addition, 38 percent of superintendents said their schools are not safe from school violence.

Of the responding schools, 68 percent said they have taken steps to increase safety since the Newtown shootings. Those measures include locking doors, adding security cameras, holding safety drills to prepare for an armed intruder and increasing police presence.

Locally, the Butler Area School District has hired retired state troopers to act as armed guards at its schools.

As of Feb. 1, the Chartiers Valley School District has a police officer at each of its schools, according to a letter from superintendent Brian White. Collier will provide a school resource officer at the high school/middle school campus and the primary school, and Scott will provide an officer at the intermediate school. The district will cover salary and training related to the school resource officer. The townships will cover all police-related training.

In the Avonworth School District, a School Safety Committee was reconstituted and enlarged in January and has planned several new initiatives, including drills, emergency preparedness, continued safety assessments and new safety technology. After its first meeting, the committee established an online portal for anyone from the Avonworth community to report safety issues or offer suggestions.

The North Allegheny school board Wednesday hired Corporate Security and Investigations Inc. at a cost of \$11,500 to perform a "vulnerability analysis" of the district's 15 buildings. The analysis will involve a review of the buildings' physical security, security systems and procedures, and emergency preparedness plans and will offer recommendations for improvement.

Schools also are creating evacuation plans that no longer focus solely on getting students out of a building but delivering them to a safe alternative site.

About a month before the Sandy Hook shooting, the Mt. Lebanon School District staged a drill involving fifth-grade students at Howe Elementary, who were evacuated to a nearby church, where they were reunited with parents who volunteered to participate in the drill.

Mt. Lebanon will designate safe evacuation locations for each of its schools -- generally a place located within several blocks. The Clairton and Duquesne school districts have similar evacuation plans.

Parents are informed of the locations and directed to go there in the event of an emergency at their child's school.

The push to make school buildings more secure has school officials walking a fine line between being prepared and making students anxious by creating a bunker-like atmosphere and focusing on lockdown and escape drills. Where school leaders in the past may have shied away from creating an atmosphere of fear, they might now feel pressure to make safety concerns a top priority.

"This situation made you rethink everything," said Elizabeth Forward superintendent Bart Rocco. "The No. 1 thing you have to do is keep students and faculty safe and to do everything you can to ensure that happens. Our board is looking at everything along these lines."

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