

## Schools take steps to tighten security

Posted by [jsova](#) August 31, 2008 08:00AM



By Erik Holladay / Citizen

Patriot Vandercook Lake Jr./Sr. High School this summer installed a digital security cameras system and a buzzer system.

Sitting atop the main office counter inside Paragon Charter Academy is a virtual security guard that grants or denies people access to the building based on whether they are registered sex offenders.

Visitors, volunteers and maintenance workers stand in front of the machine, called LobbyGuard. An embedded camera snaps their photo and a computer scans their driver's license, checking names and birthdays against a national sex offender database.

Paragon parent Christina Esser's first thought: "What the heck is this about?"

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Now after using the device a few times herself, Esser, who has two students in the school, said she realizes the kiosk's importance in monitoring who comes in and out of the building.

"Schools should up their security because of the times we live in," she said.

Nearly a decade after the mass murder at Columbine High School in Colorado, school leaders say that situation is still the driving force behind school safety measures and disaster planning and preparation. From cameras to security doors to mandated identification badges, schools continue to modify security measures each year.

Between 2002-03 and 2006-07, there were an average of 947 reported physical assaults per school year in Jackson County public schools, according to data submitted by the districts to the state. In 2006-07, that was a rate of about 3 assaults per 100 students.

There also were an average of 33 annual reports of criminal sexual conduct, roughly 40 incidents involving weapons and about nine bomb threats per year during the same time period. In 2006-07, that was a rate of less than one weapons reports per 100 students.

Last year, officials said, three publicized reports of violence at Jackson area schools showed the importance of those precautions.

### School coverage

Most Jackson-area students return to school Tuesday. The Citizen Patriot is planning extensive back-to-school coverage this week.

### TUESDAY

- For Lumen Christi student Kelcie Wilson, returning to classes marks another step in her recovery from a bout with viral meningitis.
- This school year, students in some districts won't be able to rely on school bus transportation as much as they have in the past due to budget cuts.

### WEDNESDAY

- Grandpa will be driving the bus when one area kindergartner goes to school.
- The Northwest school district will show off high-tech SMART Boards that will be purchased if voters there approve a bond issue.

A student at Leslie High School was attacked in January by a classmate while walking to school. She was beaten nearly to death. Later that month, a male student slashed a female student's face with scissors in a Michigan Center Junior High School lunch room. And in April, a man was reported to have shown a gun while asking where to find a da Vinci Institute student while on the campus of Jackson Community College. (Police later questioned a suspect and could not substantiate that anyone showed a gun.)

After years of drills and meetings and working with local law enforcement, school leaders said their staffs responded quickly and properly to those emergencies by making sure other students were safe or in "lockdown" mode and informing families as soon as possible of what happened.

Ten years ago, they said, they might not have been as prepared.

"The adults in this building knew what to do. They knew to not panic," said Michigan Center Superintendent David Tebo. "Any time you have large groups together congregated for long periods of time, there are going to be things that happen.

"But the key is how you respond to those incidents."

### Amped-up safety

Many districts have taken steps to tighten control over their buildings by installing cameras in hallways and telephones in all classrooms and locking most doors during the school day.

Others schools, such as Jackson High, require all students and staff to wear identification badges at all times so that any visitor, welcome or unwelcome, can be easily spotted. No Jackson County public schools have metal detectors.

Amy Firth Middle School in Jackson, which had a rate of 6 assaults per 100 students in 2006-07, is one of the few schools to ban book bags as well because there are no lockers.

Its rate of reported assaults and weapons was lower than four of Jackson's nine elementary schools.

A'Lynne Robinson, Jackson's spokeswoman, said the district does find the data useful in tweaking policies, however, officials are cautious about using it to compare schools' environments.

"I don't know that it's a true reflection of safe or not safe schools," she said. "It really does depend on a case-by-case basis."

For example, Robinson said, some elementary schools have higher rates of assaults than the high school but there is not an alternative school at the elementary level. So once students get to the secondary level some of those assaults are pulled out into another school, she said.

Jackson High reported 178 physical assaults in 2006-07, or about 9 per 100 students and Tomlinson alternative high school had 7 per 100 students.

Paragon Principal Kathy Watson said the installation of the LobbyGuard system is not the result of any specific incidents at her school, which reported one trespasser to law enforcement between 2002-03 and 2006-07.

"Given the climate of today's society, it's better to be safe and proactive than reactive," she said.

Vandercook Lake Jr./Sr. High School this summer installed a digital security cameras system and an entryway buzzer system that signals to office staff when people enter the building. The school had six reported trespassers between 2002-03 and 2006-07.

Critics say some of these physical safety barriers are actually giving students and parents a false sense of security. Some argue that all the extras keep students from opening up to faculty and staff about what might be going on in schools.

"So often in this society we overlook the obvious in solutions to problems and go for a more extreme measure," said Leslie Harrington, executive director of the Student Advocacy Center of Michigan. "The best measure is that students feel comfortable reporting the crimes.

"Let's face it, students always know first."

Harrington added that the data reported to the state might not show the whole picture. Some school officials agree that there is often confusion about the definitions and what one school labels a physical assault might be considered simple child's play by another.

"It's in everybody's best interest that we really put a definition on who we need to remove from the school community," she said. "When you have these broad interpretations it could impact your kid tomorrow."

### **Paying for security**

Vandercook's security upgrades are being funded by a portion of a \$4.4 million bond issue voters passed in November.

"General budget dollars are hard to come by," Superintendent Tony Hollow said.

With many districts struggling to maintain operations with limited state funding, school leaders say it is getting more difficult to install all safety measures they would like to have.

Many agree that school safety measures should be one of the last things to go.

There were about 28 to 34 homicides per year in schools nationwide between 1992 and 1999 but that number dropped to 13 the year after Columbine, according to a 2007 report by the National Center for Education Statistics.

Still, between 11 and 21 homicides a year have occurred since that time even as schools beefed up security measures. Schools using cameras increased from 19 percent in 1999 to 43 percent in 2005, the most recent year the report studied.

About 5 percent of schools had metal detectors in 2005 and 6 percent required students to wear ID badges.

All Michigan schools are now required by law to perform at least two lockdown-type drills each year where they practice taking cover, usually from a hypothetical gunman. Michigan was the first state to require lockdown drills, said Mary Anderson, a member of Michigan Safe Schools Initiative and an academic specialist for Michigan State University's School of Criminal Justice.

Schools are also collaborating with several local health, fire and police agencies on ways to respond to disasters that might happen just outside their buildings, such as train derailments, explosions or chemical spills, Anderson said.

"That's really been helping open those doors of communication," she said. "The last thing you want is, during an emergency, to say, 'Who are you and what's your role.'"

But, Anderson added, the dearth of school funding could put some prevention initiatives such as Safe Schools and police liaison programs in jeopardy.

### **Keeping all informed**

A few months after the shootings at Columbine, a student in Grand Ledge near Lansing was found with a hit list that included the name of his teacher. The teacher told the school board that she had not been told by administrators of the threat until a few days later.

That incident and other accounts from teachers and administrators led state Rep. Rick Jones, R-Grand Ledge, to introduce a bill this month that would require teachers and law enforcement be notified of threats made against teachers by students or others.

"I'm very concerned that we're not taking every precaution," said Jones, a former county sheriff who spent 33 years in law enforcement. "We can't allow threats to go uninvestigated."

Jones said he fears school administrators in districts across the state might be covering up incidents to protect their images.

Jackson County Undersheriff Tom Finco said he does not have any reason to believe local schools are not reporting crimes.

"If there are crimes that aren't being reported, it's because of a public relations issue, especially now with the school of choice," Finco said. "People have an option as to where to send their children."

Local law enforcement agencies have collaborated more with schools in recent years and both sides say that bond is stronger than ever.

Part of the reason incidents are reported so frequently, Finco said, is the face-to-face relationship that school officials have with their police liaison officers, who are contracted to spend several days per week in school buildings.

"Our relationship has really blossomed with the sheriff's department," Hollow said of Vandercook Lake. "Despite economic times, our board has been diligent and understanding in realizing the value of (having an officer in the schools)."

Police agencies now have floor plans of all school buildings and train frequently inside their hallways. Sometimes they put on demonstrations for faculty members to show exactly how they would respond.

And written plans for how faculty should respond to different scenarios are much more detailed than in the past, school leaders and law enforcement say.

Some say the group that can be more involved in the discussion is parents. They are often informed of school policies through a student handbook or parent meetings

"They're in the handbook and we ask that every parent sign off that they read it," Tebo said of Michigan Center's safety plans. "Other than that I can't force them to read it."

Officials say they understand, though, that those policies might get lost in the heat of the moment.

"As a parent myself, your first reaction is to go to the school and visibly see if your child is OK," Jackson Police Lt. Chris Simpson said. "The school and the law enforcement knows that."

And there is even a plan for how to deal with parents during an emergency, Simpson said.

Craig Raehtz, director of curriculum and operations at Western School District, said the best safeguard is to make sure everyone is aware of what is going on in the buildings.

"When parents ask me about safety, I tell them, 'Your child is safer here than when you take them out to McDonald's,'" he said.

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## Comments

### flopwedgie says...

Beautiful timing - discussing mass murder at Columbine, student hit lists, and questioning school safety just a couple days before apprehensive parents of kindergartners are sending kids to school for the very first time. Many kids are nervous enough about moving from elementary to middle school and middle school to high school.

Yes, it's a valid story, but couldn't it have waited a couple weeks until all the other first-day-of-school anxieties have settled down? Apparently not.

I'm sure your intent was to quell those anxieties, but for many it will have the opposite effect. Once again, the Cit Pat knows best, eh?

Posted on 08/31/08 at 1:01PM

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