

## School security worries prompt Pa. report State police uncover common weaknesses in access to buildings

December 15, 2013 11:25 PM

By Eleanor Chute / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

For the first time, Pennsylvania State Police have released a school safety report aimed at helping K-12 public and private schools strengthen security.

The recommendations are built on the experience of the state police's risk and vulnerability assessment team, which has evaluated security at more than 300 schools since 2004.

The report states that "several common vulnerabilities in schools have been identified," but state police spokesman Trooper Adam Reed said exact details won't be released.

"Many schools are vulnerable to violent intruders entering the building with a weapon and causing harm to the occupants. A secondary threat to the school is the introduction of a portable explosive device into the building to cause mass casualties," the report said.

It focused on five areas: roles and responsibilities; school security forces; access controls; lockdown and evacuation procedures; and family reunification, media and communications.

"All schools are unique and present difficult challenges for security professionals based on their location, size, design, year of construction, student population and the availability of police/security professionals," the report states.

"Technology and comprehensive all-hazards plans supported by training and education are vital for an effective response during any emergency situation.

"There may never be perfection, as no security measure is perfect; however, risks can be significantly reduced. The intent of enhancing one's security posture is to prevent and prepare for a possible attack."

The report particularly notes the threat of an active shooter, such as a year ago when 20 children and six staff members were shot to death at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn.

Using FBI data, the report notes that 17 percent of the 154 active shooter incidents in the United States from 2002 to 2012 took place in academic settings.

Donald Smith, emergency planning and response coordinator for the nonprofit Center for Safe Schools in Camp Hill, one of 16 such statewide centers in the nation, said the report is a compilation of best practices promoted by the state police unit.

"The majority of schools are doing some form of what's in this report," he said, noting many schools are upgrading locks from using keys that can be lost or stolen to electronic locks controlled by programmable cards.

He said the number of security staff in schools has increased "exponentially" since Sandy Hook and more are looking into using armed personnel.

The report states that the presence of security forces in schools varies widely across the state.

"Although financial considerations often take forefront, the perception of an armed law enforcement officer is another factor.

"Perceptions aside, all school districts should have some form of a security force," the report states.

The report notes the decision whether to arm security officers depends on the roles and responsibilities.

"An unarmed security officer is less effective in dealing with a more serious security incident, such as a violent intruder," it states.

The report said that using a school resource officer from the local police department "ensures a timely response to criminal activity and deters criminal behavior from taking place."

The report suggests extensive drilling of evacuation procedures.

Mr. Smith said state law requires a monthly fire drill, twice-a-year drills in evacuating a bus or van, and one disaster drill a year.

Some schools now are doing intruder drills, which Mr. Smith thinks should be required.

Some of the recommendations in the report require spending money, such as installing closed-circuit TVs at all entrance doors, common areas, hallways, stairways, parking areas, delivery areas and building perimeters.

But at least one idea for handling lockdowns is no-cost or low-cost: use plain language.

Mr. Smith said some schools use colors or secret codes over the intercom in an emergency.

He favors just saying what is happening so students and staff know what to do, such as "active shooter, second floor, rear hall lockdown."

More broadly, school safety has other components than those in the report, such as improving school climate and anti-bullying efforts.

The Center for Safe Schools does anti-bullying training as well as training to help school security learn how to interact with students and staff.

"School climate and school safety have to go hand in hand," said Michelle Nutter, safe and supportive schools manager at the center.

"Otherwise, we are creating institutions that are more like jails than they are focused on nurturing children and helping them become academically minded and civic-minded and fully functioning adults."

The state police report can be found under "public safety" at [www.psp.state.pa.us](http://www.psp.state.pa.us).

Read more: <http://www.post-gazette.com/news/state/2013/12/16/School-security-worries-prompt-report.print#ixzz2nf4NX1fD>