

Violence, threats create challenges for Lebanon County schools

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Schools locally and across America are facing concerns about violence

A little more than 15 years ago, American schools changed forever.

On April 20, 1999, two students brought guns to Columbine High School in Littleton, Colo., and went on a shooting spree, killing 12 students and one teacher and wounding 21 more before turning the guns on themselves.

Although there had been incidents violence at American schools before, and there have been others that claimed more victims since, Columbine touched a nerve in the American psyche.

SEE ALSO: [List of school shootings in the United States on Wikipedia](#)

[View slide shows of the aftermath of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting.](#)

In the 15 years since Columbine, hardly a year goes by, it seems, when there is not some sort of tragic event at a school in the United States. Virginia Tech, Sandy Hook, Nickel Mines — the names become immediately and horribly familiar.

But the violence isn't just limited to guns. Earlier this month, a student brought two large knives to a high school in Murrysville in Western Pennsylvania and stabbed or slashed 21 students and one adult. Just Friday, a 16-year-old girl was stabbed to death at a school in Milford, Conn.

Although Lebanon County has not seen major incidents of violence, the threat of violence and incidents of students bringing weapons onto school property are becoming more prevalent. Within the last two months there have been several incidents involving weapons or threats of violence at county schools:

- A 15-year-old boy was charged for having a knife at Lebanon High School on April 10.
- Four students brought knives to Palmyra Area High School in March. They were all expelled in April.
- [A 14-year-old eighth-grade boy was charged](#) with making terroristic threats for saying he was going to shoot people at Annville-Cleona secondary school on March 11. He was later expelled.
- [Two 14-year-old boys were arrested](#) March 6 and charged with criminal attempt to commit aggravated assault, criminal conspiracy to commit aggravated assault and terroristic threats for threatening to shoot people at Cedar Crest High School. The boys were later expelled.

Don Smith, emergency planning and response-management coordinator for the Center For Safe Schools in Camp Hill, said violence in schools is an issue, but major incidents like mass shootings remain very rare.

"When you look at the number of students across the country, the odds of one of those major events happening are about one in 2 million, so they're very rare, but when they happen they're catastrophic," he

said.

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Major incidents are, however, happening more frequently — there are an average of 16 "active-shooter" events per year, according to the FBI — Smith said, but he stopped short of calling it a crisis.

"They certainly are happening are more frequently, but I wouldn't consider it a crisis," he said.



Young children wait outside Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn. Dec. 14, 2012 after shooter Adam Lanza fatally shot 20 children and six staff

Reporting violence

By law, school districts are required to submit "School Safety" reports to the state every year. The reports include the number of incidents involving local law enforcement, the number of total arrests and about 50 types of misconduct, including assaults, bomb threats, terroristic threats and possessing weapons such as guns and knives.

Those reports can be found online by going to www.safeschools.state.pa.us and clicking on the "School Safety" tab on the left. They can be

broken down by state, county, district and school.

The purpose of the reports is primarily for public information, said state Department of Education press secretary Tim Eller.

"School safety is a major concern across the state and is a major concern to the governor and the General Assembly," he said. "Without a safe learning environment, students aren't able to learn, and parents send their children to school expecting them to come home safely at night."

Schools that meet certain criteria based on the reports are labeled "persistently dangerous schools." This categorization does not lead to any sort of sanctions but instead identifies "those schools that have a record of school safety problems so that the problems will be addressed and corrected to keep students safe," according to the Department of Education website.

In the last five years, all the schools that have been labeled "persistently dangerous" in Pennsylvania were in the Philadelphia School District.

The Lebanon Daily News analyzed the reports from each of the six public school districts and the Lebanon County Career and Technology Center for the last five years. The good news is that just once in the last five years was a student reported for having a firearm on school property, in Lebanon in the 2011-12 school year.

Lebanon School District has reported more incidents than the other school districts, but that appears to be in line with other poorer, urban school districts across the state.

Lebanon Superintendent Marianne Bartley said she could not recall hearing feedback from the state regarding any of the district's reports.

"If they're out of whack, or if they have a major concern, they would contact us," she said. "They had a label at one point that was 'persistently dangerous,' but we were never classified that way. Frankly, our schools are quite the opposite. They're fairly safe."

Smith, who testified before the state Senate Education Committee at a joint hearing on school emergency plans and security measures in 2013, said he is "unfortunately" familiar with the reports.

"It's one of those things that some districts do a better job than others reporting," said Smith, who served as a police officer before becoming a school teacher and then an administrator. "I think there are some districts out there that handle things administratively that never make it to a report."

At the least, Smith said, the reports help provide more transparency to help parents make decisions about schools, Smith said.

What Can Be Done?

The two most common schools of thought when it comes to preventing violence in schools are increasing physical security at school buildings — stronger doors and locks, metal detectors, cameras, etc. — and hiring guards or police officers to patrol the schools.

Most schools in Lebanon County have controlled access, where visitors have to ring a bell and then get buzzed in by someone inside.

In light of recent events, some districts have taken security even further. Northern Lebanon School District announced in January that it was using a \$60,000 state grant to help pay for a contract the district has with state police to have armed state troopers patrol the district's schools. And in March the Cornwall-Lebanon School Board approved allowing its school police officer to carry a weapon.

In Lebanon, all schools have controlled access, and all schools have either a security guard and/or secretary stationed inside the main entrance, Bartley said.

"Our security people routinely check doors. They're trained to keep their eyes and ears open for anything that's out of the ordinary," she said. "And I think we work well with students; that if we hear there might be a problem, we're able to find it and address it before it is even a problem."

The district also has two school police officers. They don't carry weapons but have the authority to issue summary offenses.

The district also has a very close relationship with the Lebanon Police Department, Bartley said.

"They're part of our safe schools committee," she said. "The chief knows our schools inside and out. The officers know the schools."

There have been no recent discussions of increasing security, Bartley said, but she added that the district always looks at what it is doing.

"We always have a heightened sense of awareness," she said. "We don't get comfortable. We have drills; we work with staff periodically on safety measures; and we review our procedures regularly and make updates as necessary."

Smith said he believes it is better to upgrade doors and security systems or pay a police officer for one year.

"It's good for many districts to have an armed security officer, but districts also need to look at the holistic approach to hardware improvements over a salary," he said. "The problem with that is that money disappears at the end of the year, because it went toward a salary. Money that goes to planning or physical upgrades can last five or 10 years."

In addition to what schools do for security, Smith said, parents need to be aware of what their school has in place.

And, although it is difficult, Smith said, it is important for parents not to rush to schools if they hear of an event at the school. Doing so can impede emergency personnel such as police and paramedics who are responding to the scene, he said.

"Parents need to do their part, too," Smith said. "It's not just a school issue. It's a community issue."