Expectations, clarity crucial in preventing school violence

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By Mary Niederberger, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

It's been a decade since the bloodshed at Columbine High School opened the nation's eyes to the issues of school security, bullying and disenfranchised students, and in that time progress has been made in preventing violence in Pennsylvania's schools.

But some longstanding issues, such as bullying on the school bus and new issues created by the use of technology still require attention and action.

That was the message delivered during the third annual Conference on Corporate and Homeland Security last week at California University of Pennsylvania, which featured state Education Secretary Gerald Zahorchak.

This year's conference, sponsored by the university's Department of Justice, Law & Society, focused on the history and prevention of school violence and included speakers from the university, along with state officials and police and a representative of the Washington County district attorney's office.

Dr. Zahorchak said that to solve problems of violence in the schools, the various levels of government need to work together, including school districts, municipal police departments and state agencies such as the education, health and homeland security departments.

That effort may become a bit more difficult this year given that the Safe Schools Initiative funding of about $1.6 million was eliminated from the education budget -- a point made by a conference participant and confirmed by the secretary.

The program assisted schools with violence prevention and reduction efforts and provided annual grants to districts to be used for such efforts as establishing school resource officers.

In the past two years, those grants were given out to 57 districts, including Bethel Park, East Allegheny, Highlands, North Hills and Upper St. Clair.

During his presentation, Dr. Zahorchak said that while strides have been made in recent years in securing schools, a number of problems still appears to exist in places that are not closely supervised, such as school buses, cafeterias and restrooms.

"There are still kids who are afraid to spend time in bathrooms and cafeterias. There are still kids afraid because of the language and treatment they receive from some groups," Dr. Zahorchak said.

One way for educators to reduce the potential for violence, he said, is to be clear about their expectations for behavior in school and about the consequences students will face if those expectations are not met.

The secretary also talked about the important role that teachers can play in the lives of students who may feel disenfranchised.
Dr. Zahorchak said it's been found that "good teachers matter a whole bunch" with kids who are underachievers or those who resort readily to the fight-or-flight response and can make a difference in the decisions that those students make about disrupting school or dropping out.

He said research shows that getting youths to think positively helps to reduce problems in schools.

"Negative thinking and beating up on oneself leads to problems," Dr. Zahorchak said.

He referred to the PATHS program -- Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies -- a curriculum that is designed to teach elementary students how to develop self-control, emotional awareness and interpersonal problem-solving skills.

Another speaker at the conference, Steven Fischer, chief of staff for Washington County District Attorney Steven Toprani, also focused on the importance of school districts and local police working in tandem to prevent school violence.

He cited a particular local case in which a female middle school student endured several years of harassment by a male student. That harassment eventually escalated to sexual assault.

The victim's parents hired an attorney, who brought the case to the attention of the district attorney's office. Mr. Fischer said during its investigation, the district attorney's office found that the school district knew of the harassment that had gone on but never reported it to the local police.

Making such a report may have prevented the sexual assault, he said.

In the end, the male student was prosecuted and "sent away to detention," Mr. Fischer said.

On another topic, Mr. Fischer said that while old-fashioned bullying is still an ingredient in school violence, modern technology makes it hard to control.

"We have found numerous incidents of cyber crime and bullying in Washington County," Mr. Fischer said.

"Technology has created problems not even thought of a few years ago. You need to develop policies and plans to prevent and reduce it, including warning students of the dangers of texting and 'sexting,' " the term used for sending sexually explicit text messages.

He discussed a case in which a young woman took nude photos of herself on her cell phone and sent them to a friend. But that friend forwarded the photos, and they eventually were circulated throughout a school district.

"She thought she was just sending it to a friend," he said. "But in the end, the identity of the victim was broadcast through the school district."

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