

School district to create emergency plans to prepare for worst

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STAMFORD, CT -- The school district is creating emergency plans that include an assessment of each school's vulnerabilities and evacuation procedures.

The emergency planning began this fall, before neighborhood shootings last month resulted in rumors of violence in city schools. Many high school students stayed home from school Jan. 27 because of rumors there would be retaliation for the death of Flanegaine Joseph, 19, who was shot on the West Side on Jan. 21.

In September, the board awarded a \$116,000 contract to Risk Solutions International, a New York risk-management firm, to conduct the review. Raj Cholleti, who is overseeing the work for the school's facilities department, said schools have emergency plans of varying quality. The new plans would formalize the response in each building and would be updated regularly through an Internet-based emergency management system.

Risk Solutions International is visiting each school and working with police to evaluate potential security issues. The firm is expected to complete the assessments next month and draft the plan by spring, Cholleti said. The procedures will be reviewed by the state Department of Homeland Security, he said, and should be ready for implementation at the start of the next school year.

Schools are required by law to conduct at least 10 fire drills a year, but there is no requirement on drills for school shootings, bomb threats or other such incidents. Cholleti said such legislation has been discussed in meetings he has attended with state legislators.

New York requires schools to practice their emergency plans twice a year.

Brendan Salvatore, a Stamford High senior, said students aren't trained in what to do if a shooting or bomb threat occurs. But he said he was confident that security guards and staff would keep students safe.

Anthony Fidaleo, a Westhill High senior, said students there haven't had much training on emergency procedures. He said, however, that students would be able to get out of the building, and that a structured plan would likely fall apart in the face of a real emergency.

"Even if they did have something, I think kids would just run out," he said.

Stamford High Principal Suzanne Brown Koroshetz declined an e-mail and in-person request to comment on the school's emergency procedures. Administrators at Westhill could not be reached for comment.

One elementary school teacher, who requested anonymity because she didn't want to antagonize her bosses, said teachers in her school received emergency training a couple of years ago. The administration established a code word to be used to signal an emergency, but there has been little talk of it since, the teacher said. She said she would be surprised if new staff were made aware of the code word.

Shari Shapiro, co-president of Stamford High school's parent teacher association, said she was comfortable with the administration's emergency planning. She said Koroshetz discussed the planning at a meeting Monday. Shapiro said her biggest concern was that there is no defined system for disseminating information quickly to parents.

"In a true emergency, when people are going every which way, are we communicating well with everybody?" she said.