

Parents: How safe is Wachusett?

BY JIM KEOGH EDITOR@THELANDMARK.COM



District Attorney Joe Early, flanked by Holden Police Chief George Sherrill (l.) and Sgt. Dave Armstrong, addresses the audience. Steve King photo

REGION - "Is Wachusett Regional a safe place for my child?"

It was the most persistent question posed to school administration and law enforcement officials by the audience of about 100 parents who attended an April 17 informational session in the Wachusett Regional High School auditorium.

The meeting was called to present updates and quell fears following last week's after-school vicious assault of a Wachusett student by four teenagers on nearby Sunnyside Avenue. The attack, which has resulted in assault and battery charges, was captured on cell-phone video by a student and earned repeated play on news stations as well as on You- Tube.

Parents came to the meeting expressing concerns not only about the incident, but also about their children's reports of habitual fights and drug activity at the school.

Principal William Beando opened the meeting recounting April 14's events, when a 16-year-old Sterling student arrived at the railroad tracks near Sunnyside Avenue after school, believing he would be fighting another student one-on-one, but found himself beaten by four teens, including one armed with a lead pipe. A second student who

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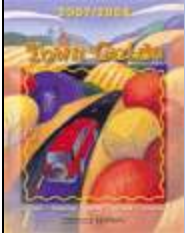
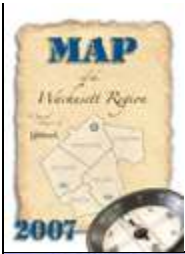
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tried to step in wound up with a broken nose. Neither victim was seriously injured.

"I was



Wachusett Regional Principal William Beando addresses the audience at last week's information session. Steve King photo

appalled and utterly disgusted by the behavior we witnessed," Beando said.

Two days later, a rumor that students from Worcester's Doherty High School would retaliate at WRHS with guns, raced through the student body via text messaging, with some parents messaged from their children that there were guns in the school.

The school sent out emergency messages to parents saying officials were investigating the alleged threats. No credible threat was found, but 300 students were dismissed to their parents. Some remained out of school for several days.

Beando said that on April 16, a letter bearing a "veiled threat to the school community" was delivered to the office. By mid-morning, the letter was proved a hoax; it had been written by a Wachusett student.



Beando has



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Parent Susan Duval of Sterling makes a point to officials during the meeting. Steve King photo urged

Superintendent Thomas Pandiscio to inquire of the school committee about expelling the two Wachusett students involved in the attack. The other two students do not attend WRHS.

Holden Police Chief George Sherrill said his officers were "outraged and embarrassed this had happened in our community, one block from the high school and two blocks from the police station. They took it personally." Some students volunteered information after the fact, but no one reported the assault to police while it was occurring, he noted.

One father, who knew people involved in the Columbine High School shooting, asked if there was an "established, documented procedure" for handling the fallout of such violent events, and for communicating protocols to students and parents.

Beando said the school has a plan in place for a crisis that occurs in the building that would result in a lockdown, but not for an event off-campus. There was no lockdown situation last week because there were no "substantiated threats," he said.

Post-Columbine, the police and schools have invested in safety training and equipment, but the best preventive measure against a serious event has been the presence of a police officer, Sgt. David Armstrong, at the school for the past 15 years, Sherrill said.

Pandiscio said it's important to remember that the district had never contemplated "a protocol against rumor." But the age of instant communications is relatively new ground for everyone, he said, and the days are gone when a rumor can be debunked by 2:30 dismissal and information sent home to parents.

"It's a different world," he said. Pandiscio reiterated that the rumored "threats" originated from within the school, and that while some

students were legitimately frightened, others seized on the situation as an excuse to leave school early. "Word got around - 'Just tell them you're scared and you can go home,'" he said.

Some parents questioned whether there is enough police presence in the 1,900- student school, with one mother asking if there were plans for a "security force" similar to those in Long Island schools.

The officials at the podium said there are no plans for increasing the number of officers at the school, citing the lack of funding for such additional manpower. Holden Selectman Ken O'Brien said the school district is trying to pass a budget that will keep teachers in place, which means hiring police for schools is not a priority. He urged parents to attend budget hearings and press for the things they believe are essential for schools.

The school's new physical design gives the school "better flow" for patrolling, Armstrong said. He said every day he consults with the security guard in the parking lot, assistance principals and guidance counselors to exchange information to "find out what we're facing today."

Several parents in the audience said their children have told them of drug deals being made in classrooms and hallways, and of multiple fights in the building. One mother maintained that the school has shown a "laissez-faire" response to her concerns and that she was told that the names of students involved with drugs have to be supplied before action can be taken.

"I've never heard as much about these things as I've heard in the last few months," she said.

Other parents in the audience supported her comments, saying their kids also have reported frequent fighting and drug activity.

Armstrong said there has been drug activity as far back the early 1970s, when he was a student at Wachusett. There have been several expulsions

and suspensions for drugs this year, he said. Among the steps taken has been the use of drug-sniffing dogs, brought into school sporadically at the end of the day.

Drug activity rises and falls and seems to have spiked recently, Armstrong said.

"Why is there no zero-tolerance in school," asked a father. "If you get caught with drugs or fighting, you're gone. No ifs, ands or buts."

Armstrong said any information given to him about drugs in the school is acted on immediately by him and the vice principals.

"Do we have drugs at Wachusett? There are kids at Wachusett, and kids do drugs," Assistant Principal Jim Pedone said. "When we hear of it, we go. We search the person, search their belongings, search their locker."

Regarding rumors and text messaging, Armstrong said he's seen the "perfect storm" coming in recent years. Pedone said the rumor mill was cranked so high last week that in some cases the rumor of a threat morphed into the "news" that there had been a shooting at the high school.

"If you have to go into a lockdown situation, what do you do with parents coming to the school," Armstrong asked. He related the incident six years ago when a WRHS student was found to have a gun, and he surrendered the weapon and was quietly taken into custody. "There was no school disruption, no texting, no cell phones," he said. "That was an actual threat. What if that happened now?"

Deputy Superintendent John Locke said the district is in the process of developing a protocol to handle such incidents.

Another parent said the school needs consistent leadership, noting there have been several principals at the helm in recent years.

Beando, who was hired last summer, said there have been 10 fights this school year, four of them

in the past two weeks. He said that in his experience, spring, especially just before the April break, is the worst time for fighting in schools.

"We rely heavily on kids to give us information," he said about combating drugs and violence. "It's all about building relationships and trying to build trust with them."

The issue of school choice was also raised. One of the students arrested in the attack was a Worcester teen who had once attended Doherty and was now attending WRHS under the state school choice program.

Pandiscio said he'd met with the 13 district principals earlier that day and asked them their thoughts about school choice. To a person, they said it works for the district, he said.

"Local kids [at the fight scene] did not do the right thing when they didn't dial 911," Pandiscio said. "I guess the question is what did the school do wrong to make kids think that was the right thing to do."


District Attorney Joseph Early told the audience the teens involved in the assault would be prosecuted "to the fullest extent of the law."

Early said law enforcement is battling crime and bullying in a high-tech world, and he impressed on parents the need to know what their children are doing on MySpace and other Internet outlets. He said his office is working on creating a phone line for anonymous tips.

One mother said not all students were "hysterical" about threat rumors. "My daughter's biggest fear was getting her English paper in on time," she said.

"I keep hearing what is the school going to do," said another audience member. "What are the parents going to do?"

At a parent's suggestion, Beando said he would hold assemblies with the students when they returned from vacation to talk about the incident,



the response, and the expectations for students in the future. A new plan is in place to keep front doors locked the few minutes between shifts at the lobby sign-in table, he said.

Armstrong invited parents to call him to tour the school and see how he operates in the course of a day.