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# School Safety: As Court Case On Arming Teachers Continues, Pa. Schools Use Other Ways To Stay Safe

By ANNE DANAHY (/PEOPLE/ANNE-DANAHY) • MAR 20, 2019

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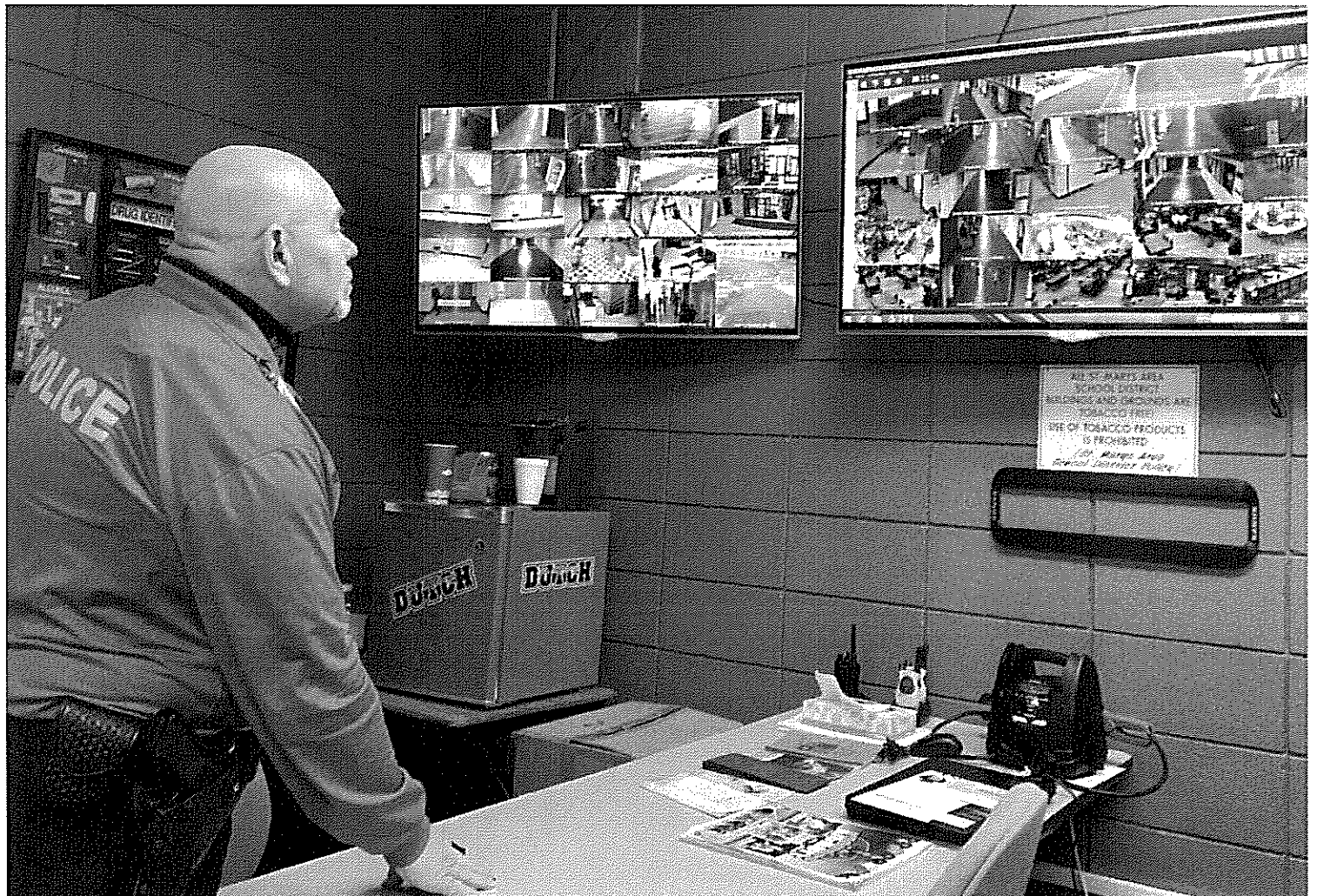
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*John Lovett, a retired police officer and the Saint Marys School District's school safety and security coordinator, reviews the school security cameras. They're one of the measures the school district has in place.*

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## Listen

5:28

John Lovett is a retired police officer and the school safety and security coordinator at the Saint Marys Area School District.

It's a typical day at the high school in Elk County, Pennsylvania, and students stream down the halls during a break.

Lovett's job is helping keep the students safe. As part of that, he carries a taser and a gun. And he helps train the schools on what to do in an emergency, including a possible intruder.

"We have a lockdown procedure called ALICE: Alert, lockdown, inform, counter and evacuate," Lovett said. "Back in the old days, when we had a security alert, an intruder drill, we went into lockdown, which means everybody barricaded in place and locked the doors."

Now, some barricade in place and others evacuate, depending on the situation.

"We're not here to create a fortress. We're here to do our best to keep kids safe. I don't think a teacher with a gun on them is going to make it any safer than what we have now." — Superintendent Brian Toth

While at least one Pennsylvania school district wants to allow teachers and staff to be armed, other districts, including Saint Marys, are taking different approaches to school safety. Armed school officers, practice lockdowns and tip lines to raise red flags are some of the measures districts are taking to keep schools safe.

Superintendent Brian Toth said you may never be truly ready for an emergency. But, he added: "I think that having the practice experience of doing something prepares you a bit better. And, in the past too, John has on an in-service day, brought in a gun and shot blanks, so that teachers know what it sounds like to hear a gun shot in the school."

And know what gun powder smells like.

Like many school districts, Saint Marys has stepped up its safety measures in recent years. That includes improving communications with parents, increasing mental health services for students. And a check-in for school visitors, who first get buzzed in, then wait in a secured area while staff run their drivers licenses against national criminal databases.

One thing Saint Marys is not looking at doing is allowing teachers and staff to carry guns.



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*Brian Toth is superintendent of the Saint Marys Area School District. Toth says the district, which has armed security officers, is not looking at arming teachers.*

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"We're not here to create a fortress. We're here to do our best to keep kids safe," Toth said. "I don't think a teacher with a gun on them is going to make it any safer than what we have now. Teachers are here for the purpose of instructing students, guiding students and connecting with students, so they have a positive learning experience. I don't see how any of them carrying a gun is going to enhance any one of those things."

Toth said the district's five school police officers, including three part-time, have many years of experience with state and local police.

Technology teacher Angie Catalone agreed. She said while school safety is a growing concern, she likes what the district has in place, including the training.

"It was very much made known that it was practice, and they explained it thoroughly," she said. "So, it just gave us a good idea of what could happen, what would be happening, what it would sound like and what we would need to do."

In the Tamaqua Area School District in Schuylkill County, the board approved a policy allowing teachers and other employees who get special training to carry firearms in school.

But, the board suspended that policy after the teachers association and a parent group sued the district, saying the policy violates state law. The cases are making their way through the court system.

Adam Skaggs, chief counsel at Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, said that organization does not think what the Pennsylvania district did is legal or a good idea.

"So you're talking about putting someone with significantly less training, significantly less experience in that situation," Skaggs said. "The idea that they are going to be able to save the day, I think, is just simply not something that's going to be effective."

⋮ "Our responsibility starts when they step on the bus until they step off and walk in the front door  
⋮ of their house." — Superintendent Jeff Miles

The Bald Eagle Area School District in Centre County recently hired its first school police officer. The decision came after the state police closed the barracks that were literally next door to the district administration and across the street from an elementary and the middle and high school.



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*A "For Sale or For Rent" sign sits outside the Pennsylvania State Police barracks next to the Bald Eagle Area School District administration building and across the street from the High School and Middle School. The state closed that police barracks, moving to Benner Township in 2018.*

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"Our responsibility starts when they step on the bus until they step off and walk in the front door of their house," said Jeff Miles, superintendent.

He said having the presence of the security officer in the schools every day has turned out to be a great addition.

Miles has heard mixed feelings on whether people other than officers should be allowed to carry a firearm.

"As long as someone has that background and has had the training, I am not opposed to it," he said.

Miles said the district isn't ready to go that route now, but he expects other districts will down the road.

"It's hard to say what someone's going to do or how someone's going to react to a situation," Miles said. "I think that's the biggest concern – having that background and having that training, you're sure this is how that person is going to react."

Lacey Wallace, an assistant professor of criminal justice at Penn State Altoona, said another challenge is a lack of research about which policies work.

One big reason is a lack of federal funding.

In the mid-1990s, Congress passed what's known as the Dickey Amendment saying no money to the Centers for Disease Control could be used for research to promote gun control. The result was the CDC stopped funding gun research. That restriction was lifted last year, but Wallace says there's still not much money there.

"So we're basically passing, in various states, policies and laws and other things that sound good and sound like they might work, but we don't actually know if they will," Wallace said.

Wallace said while a lot of school crime has gone down in the past couple of decades, the incidents tend to be more severe.

"What we are seeing, though, unfortunately are these incidents where a lot of people are killed at one time," she said. "And that is unusual compared to years past where a school shooting might result in two or three deaths. Now, we're seeing incidents where a lot of kids are injured or killed all at one time."

Wallace said one thing some schools have done that can help is reaching out to local law enforcement. Police can go through their buildings and find out what would make them more secure.

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