

Vote on armed guards in Hilton due soon

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While guns are already in some Monroe County schools — on the hips of police officers — Hilton Central School District has made a pitch for what it considers an innovative way to protect students and staff.

The Board of Education will have to decide whether former and retired law enforcement, hired as “youth assistants,” should carry a concealed firearm on their shifts.

Arming the youth assistants would be cheaper than hiring school resource officers, who are active law enforcement, according to the district.

Opponents say the move is contentious because after the decision is made it’s not one that can be undone, even if it makes students uncomfortable or scared.

“You’re damned if you do and damned if you don’t, that’s what the board is facing,” said Robert Trowbridge, a Hilton resident and a retired police officer.

Superintendent Casey Kosiorek said the board could vote as early as October and the changes would take effect Sept. 1, 2019.

If the board votes to have armed guards, it wouldn’t be the first local district to do so. The Holley Central School District has used armed security staff on school premises for years.

Many districts, including Rochester, Greece, Gates Chili, Wheatland-Chili and Webster, as well as the Monroe No. 1 Board of Cooperative Educational Services, have SROs.

The proposal’s details

Currently Hilton’s security guards, or youth assistants, are part-time, per diem employees who earn \$22 an hour with no provided benefits. Hilton’s current youth assistants all have more than 20 years in law enforcement.

The proposal would allow them to have a concealed firearm, only to be drawn in the event of a school shooting situation, according to David Inzana, Hilton’s director of safety and security. The district would place one armed youth assistant at each elementary and middle school and three at the high school; potentially 18 total youth assistants, seven on at a time.

Armed youth assistants would undergo a psychological evaluation, obtain shooting qualifications and about 80 initial hours of training. Hilton would cover the cost of the monthly reoccurring training, expected to cost about \$60,000 for the first year and about \$30,000 every year thereafter.

The security team would not be involved in disciplinary action, and could not arrest a student.

Firearms and holsters would be the youth assistant’s personal property, owned by the staff member and approved by Inzana, because the schools can’t purchase them, he said.

That might change.

The U.S. Department of Education is exploring whether federal funding could be used to buy guns for schools, according to reporting by *The New York Times* and The Associated Press.

Emotions vary

“It’s dividing our community, I have a concern over that as the superintendent of schools,” Kosiorek said. “It’s a polarizing topic.”

The administration and teachers associations are on board to pass the proposition that would bring guns into Hilton schools, according to the district.

“I feel strongly it’s going to help protect our students and staff here,” said Inzana.

“I do not believe that firearms belong on campuses. Period. End of story,” said Stephanie Bedenbaugh of Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America. “We need to stop the gunman before he comes to the parking lot and that is done through programs and a focus on social and emotional health.”

“I am surprised to see that the proposal put forth by the district does not specifically address potential pitfalls,” Manuela Groth, a Hilton resident, told the Board of Education, calling the proposal incomplete.

“It’s not an easy decision but its a decision that in this day and age — 2018 — we have to make,” Trowbridge, a former police officer, said. “This is not the Wild Wild West; they’re not going to be coming in with six shooters on their hips. It’s going to be concealed.”

“If it saves one life it’s worth it. God forbid it ever happens here,” Trowbridge said.

Before Parkland

When Kosiorek started as superintendent about three years ago, he began looking into ways to make the schools better. School safety was a concern at Hilton, he said. The district had a safety audit that led to the hiring of Inzana, who previously worked in the Monroe County Sheriff’s Office.

Having guns in Hilton schools to defend against a gunman has been discussed for years in Hilton but after the shooting at a high school in Parkland, Florida, the idea gained momentum.

After 17 were killed in Parkland, 10 were killed and 13 injured at Santa Fe (Texas) High School.

Part of the momentum behind Hilton’s proposal is response time from law enforcement.

Hilton is in a difficult geographic area for police, Inzana explained. Hilton and Parma do not have their own police department. The school is served by Monroe County sheriff’s deputies and Greece police officers who are unfamiliar with the buildings. Youth assistants could potentially respond instantaneously, he said. “MCSO deploys resources according to calls for service and populations based on statistical data to ensure proper coverage, consistent throughout the county. In addition, MCSO runs relief patrol cars to ensure that at no time is a zone without continuous coverage,” said Amy Young, spokeswoman for the Monroe County Sheriff’s Office.

The department recently had all deputies complete a two-day training on single-deputy entry. Training and building relationships with local school districts is paramount to MCSO, she said.

Inzana said Hilton is working with the Sheriff’s Office to provide deputies with some sort of key access to the schools. All district employees have the ability to lock down the schools through a software system called Navigate. The system also allows first responders to bring up floor plans.

Hilton is currently making renovations to harden its schools and is adding more security cameras.

The board could have voted on the proposal in June but deferred action. The board chose to slow down and be reflective. Which led to two public forums, Kosiorek said.

The school hosted community forums in August explaining the proposal and addressing questions. Some participants thanked the district and asked Hilton to do whatever it takes to keep the schools safe. Others expressed fears and asked whether the money could be put to social and emotional health programs.

Hilton spends about \$2.2 million for staffing and benefits related to social and emotional health, according to Adam Geist, the assistant superintendent of business.

Educators in Hilton will continue to be trained in social and emotional health, and the district is working to address implicit bias.

Laura Whitcomb, Hilton's director of special education, said staff members have been trained in therapeutic crisis intervention, risk assessments and different stress models.

This year, safety and security officers in the Rochester City School District will be trained to "spot youth experiencing mental health challenges and direct them to care," according to Delphi Rise and the Finger Lakes Performing Provider system, which have partnered with RCSD.

Mental health education also will be taught in New York state classrooms this school year, mandated by law.

Whether or not the proposal is passed, Hilton will continue to address the social and emotional needs of students through education and physically harden the school.

Arming the youth assistants is just one piece of the puzzle, Kosiorek said.

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Casey Kosiorek, superintendent of Hilton schools, makes introductions during a public meeting on the possibility of Hilton schools potentially getting armed guards, at Merton Williams Middle School.
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