

Increased police presence coming to county schools

The Harlan County Board of Education, meeting in special session on Tuesday, voted to contract with off-duty officers from the local, county and state police agencies for increased security in the schools.

Pending a potential policy and legislative change in Frankfort, off duty state troopers should join and be visible in all district schools with officers from the Harlan County Sheriff's Department soon.

Logistics for placing the off-duty officers from the agencies in schools are being worked out.

The Harlan County School District could be the first to benefit from a pending change of Kentucky State Police policy to allow school districts to contract with off-duty officers to provide additional security within schools.

That proposed policy change resulted from a meeting locally with school officials and law enforcement agencies last week, during which many initiatives were discussed to increase school safety.



“This is long overdue,” said Board Member Pam Sheffield. “We can’t wait on state and federal intervention. They can’t even get a budget together, let alone wait on them to come up here and help us. We owe it to the children to protect them. The parents, the grandparents, the guardians, they all want it. “

The board approved redirecting funds to increase police presence

Superintendent Brent Roark said, “As you are extremely aware, we’ve had events occur around the state and the nation that have heightened the fears of the students and parents. Even though we are rural and isolated that (fear) has certainly not missed us. We have people in our community who are very afraid. We have parents afraid to send their kids to school.”

Roark told the board of the recent threats and perceived threats that occurred which required notification of parents and postings to the media.

“We’ve had threats in our schools,” said Roark. “We had a threat at Harlan County High School. We had an Issue at Cumberland involving a home school student. We’ve had small issues in other elementary schools. However, parents are really afraid. It is hurting our attendance. Parents don’t want to send their kids to school. Even at the high school with us having two armed county sheriff’s deputies, people are still afraid, and rightfully so.”

Roark said the problem, whether real or not, is there. “There is perceived fear and that is reality,” he said.

What has proven to be a very proactive measure, leading to the board’s actions on increasing security with additional officers, was a meeting last week with the district’s top administrators representatives of

the Kentucky State Police, Harlan County Sheriff Leslie Smith and Chief Deputy Matt Cope, officers from the Harlan, Cumberland and Evarts police departments, and with Harlan Independent Schools administrators.

“We had all the agencies here and met for two and half hours over our plans. We discussed how we can work better with them, what they can do for us to help make our schools safer and try to get everything lined out should an incident occur.”

“Parents are just flat scared,” said Roark. “A ton of stuff came out of our meeting. We asked the state police and the sheriff department if they would be willing to, if we could work it out with you and get your blessing, to put more officers in our schools. They are at the extent of their manpower working their shifts. They have other things they must do. We asked could we contract with them as private contractors to come into our schools on a rotating basis and have a larger police presence, even at the high school. “

The board’s action is to contract with the individual officers, not KSP or the sheriff’s department. They will be paid on an hourly contract.

“We would contract with these individuals who are already KSP officers and sheriff’s deputies,” said Roark.

The officers will be in the schools as soon as possible.

The board voted unanimously for adding the officers as soon as possible.

“It is our responsibility. We don’t have any choice. We have to get this done. We talk academics, but it is safety too,” said Sheffield.

Farmer agreed, noting, “It is all our responsibilities. Everyone is on the same page. Something has to be done.”

Board members stressed that parents and students must be aware they are going to see an increased presence of police cars, especially the Kentucky State Police, on all school campuses.

“While police cars have been at the high school on a regular basis for years, parents need to understand that they will be seeing more police cars at our schools,” said Farmer. “They are kind of use to them at the high school, but not the state police. They will see those now.”

KSP has asked on duty officers to visit schools as often as possible, and to consider using the school’s facilities as a satellite office for doing paperwork and related items.