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Propel Braddock school bans backpacks, to add metal detectors



By Tory N. Parrish
Friday, Jan. 30, 2015, 10:20 p.m.

Guns, threats, lockdowns and children's safety were on the minds of rattled parents who attended a closed-door information session Friday at Propel Braddock Hills High School.

"As long as they can keep my child safe," he can continue to attend, said McKeesport resident Monica Dawkins, 44, whose son, 15, is a sophomore at the charter school in the Braddock Hills Shopping Center.

On Monday afternoon, police arrested two students when two guns were found inside the school, which was put on lockdown for more than two hours. The school was closed Tuesday and Wednesday.

Police and school staff met with parents to discuss safety plans, which Dawkins said included the addition of metal detectors, a ban on backpacks and limits on girls' purses.

"The grandest message that came out of it is that every child went home safe and unharmed," Swissvale resident Jennifer Howison, 42, said. Her daughter, 18, is a senior at the school but was absent Monday.

On Thursday, staff sent students home when someone phoned in a threat. A message on the school's website Thursday said school staff would take professional development days to implement security procedures.

Propel officials did not respond to numerous emails and calls for comment. The school posted its new security procedures on its website. Braddock Hills police Chief Dean Helinski could not be reached for comment.

Backpacks are no longer allowed. Girls' purses will be limited to 8 inches by 8 inches and are not allowed in classrooms. Students must put them in lockers immediately.

Students will return to school next week on a staggered schedule: ninth- and 10th-graders will attend school Tuesday, and 11th- and 12th-graders will attend school Wednesday. All high school students will attend Thursday and Friday.

Parents complained about the lack of communication during the Monday incident, Dawkins said.

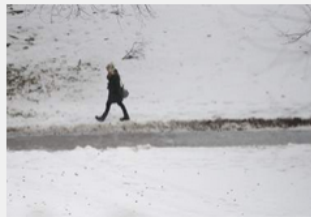
"I just couldn't understand why I didn't get a recorded call saying the school was on lockdown. ... I had to find out from breaking (TV) news," she said.

School officials said the plan to improve communication with parents and students could include installation of an intercom system, Dawkins said. They discussed plans to place metal detectors and police in the school, she said.

Charter schools are self-managed public schools that get tax dollars and are approved by local school districts.

Typically, schools do not install metal detectors unless there is pattern of problems, but sometimes schools install them in reaction to a single incident, said Donald Smith, emergency planning and response management coordinator at the Center for Safe Schools in Camp Hill.

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"The best way to put the metal detectors in is to sit down and have policies and procedures in place so (school staff) know what they are going to do," he said.

Of the 687 students enrolled at Propel Braddock Hills in the 2013-14 school year, which includes a K-8 elementary school next to the high school, 40 were cited for disciplinary problems, according to the Pennsylvania Department of Education. Of the 45 incidents, most, 29, were fights. There were no arrests.

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