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TOP STORIES

FIGHTING MS-13

Officials focus on how students can resist gang threat

BY CRAIG SCHNEIDER
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President Donald Trump is unwavering on his law-and-order approach to bringing down MS-13. He talked tough again last week when he came to Long Island for a gang forum.

But a growing number of Long Island educators and officials are pushing back on a singular focus, saying police presence in the schools isn't enough.

Instead, they are working to build trust between teachers and their students who are vulnerable to gangs.

Sandra Castro is one of the strong advocates of changing the way young people see themselves and their connection to school. She talks about self-perception a lot in the sociology and criminal justice classes she teaches at Adelphi University.

For Castro, it's about making kids feel comfortable about speaking up about being bullied to join a gang. And it's about sharing things they know without feeling like they're ratting out a friend.

"There has to be trust," she said. "It has to be much more than crime prevention."

Too often, students think the police officer is only looking to catch them doing something wrong. And, she said, many students living here without proper documents don't see a difference between the police and immigration officials.

In Central Brookhaven Town, the Longwood Central School District is at the forefront of moving the trust needle.

Using an \$8 million multi-year grant, the district is teaching its students — even kindergartners — to "advocate for themselves in difficult situations," said Superintendent Michael Lonergan.

Lonergan said there aren't gangs in his schools but there



GANG TERROR ON LONG ISLAND

are kids in the surrounding community who are at risk of gangs, alcohol and drugs.

'No one solution'

During his visit to Bethpage last Wednesday, the president drew a chilling picture of MS-13 and left no doubt about where he stands.

"These are not people — these are animals, and we have to be very, very, very tough," Trump told those at the forum, including the Suffolk and Nassau police commissioners and the parents of slain Brentwood teens Kayla Cuevas and Nisa Mickens.

Trump has pointed to the killings as well as four brutal deaths in Central Islip as the work of MS-13.

Assemb. Phil Ramos, a Demo-

crat who represents both Brentwood and Central Islip, doesn't want to rely just on the police to combat MS-13.

"There's no one cause, and there's no one solution," he said. "We can't arrest our way out of this."

State Sen. Phil Boyle, a Republican who represents Bay Shore, has been fighting alongside Ramos to secure funding in the budget to curb gang violence.

In April, Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo credited both Boyle and Ramos with shepherding \$18.5 million in anti-gang money for Long Island through the statehouse.

Boyle, too, wants schools to teach kids about the dangers of gangs.

"I believe with these programs," he said, "and the focus on law enforcement like President Trump is doing, we're starting to turn the corner."

Moreover, the state allocated \$300,000 for gang prevention to the nonprofit Strong Youth Inc.

The group went into Brentwood's West Middle School late last year and has worked in schools in Roosevelt, Uniondale, South Country and Wyandanch as well, said executive director Rahsmia Zatar.

"We have a counselor in the building," Zatar said of the group's strategy. "The schools give us a list of kids they would like to focus on."

The counselor, she said, sometimes acts as a buffer between the student, and teachers and administrators.

But police officers in schools can play a role in fighting gangs, she said.

"Obviously the safety of the kids is foremost," Zatar said. "Not that it's a wrong response. It's one prong. It doesn't address what's going on with the factors that are societal; mental health and lack of opportunity."

Security aside, Zatar echoes the concerns about police presence that Castro has. Lots of at-risk kids, she said, see officers as a threat: They don't want the

WITH TRUST



President Donald Trump with Elizabeth Alvarado and Robert Mickens, parents of Nisa Mickens, an MS-13 victim.

police to tag them if they're seen talking to a gang member or happen to be wearing clothing with gang colors.

"Some of these kids have stopped going to school, because they don't want to be identified," Zatar said.

Despite the presidential visits and the violence, Zatar and Castro think many schools are in denial about gangs.

"A number of school principals do not want to admit there is a problem," Castro said. "There's stigma with being a gang-affiliated school."

Bridge-building

Brentwood schools chief Richard Loeschner said he recognizes students are being recruited by gangs.

The district, he said, is trying to cut off the membership



Sandra Castro is an adjunct professor at Adelphi University.

pipeline by bringing on more guidance counselors to work with students new to the United States and unaccompanied immigrant children, who are particularly vulnerable to gangs.

"We've put a great deal of effort into making sure that the kids and families know that there are other choices that can be made," Loeschner said.

The Middle Country school district works closely with law enforcement even though it doesn't have what Superintendent Roberta Gerold considers an obvious gang presence.

"We always err on the side of caution," she said.

Not long ago, for example, the Suffolk sheriff visited the district's high schools to talk about gang violence, drugs use and bullying, Gerold said.

"You can see after the conversations, that their body language relaxed, because they got to see that they are real people who aren't out to get them," she said.

Central Islip's superintendent, Howard Koenig, expressed his confidence in the Suffolk police and spoke to the challenges of restoring gang prevention programs cut when government dollars went away.

"We are working to replace grant funds for after-school and summer programs and activities for our students," Koenig said in a statement. "These initiatives were lost when the federal government made mass funding cuts."

Suffolk's police officers are doing their own bridge-building, said Commissioner Geraldine Hart.

The officers assigned to a school are making a point to reach out to the kids every day, she said. Officers also come into the schools just to get to know the kids — playing a game of basketball and even sitting in on a cooking class.

"Over time, the uniform starts to melt away and they become part of that school community," Hart said of the officers. "They become a mentor to the students."

Robert Mickens has had his life directly touched by gangs. MS-13 gang members have been charged in the 2016 death of his daughter, Nisa, a junior at Brentwood High School. He was one of the parents at last week's forum with the president.

In response to Nisa's death, Mickens made a run for the Brentwood school board last year but lost. At the time, he said he wanted to create more recreational and volunteer programs to keep kids occupied and out of trouble.

Of late, Mickens has seen the district doing just that. And he'd like to see more.

"Just got to keep working at it," he said in an interview a day after the forum. "And keep fighting."

And Mickens had as message for all kids.

"Don't be afraid to speak up for yourself."

Voters overturn Irish abortion ban

The Associated Press

DUBLIN — In the end, it wasn't even close.

Irish voters — young and old, male and female, farming types and city-bred folk — endorsed expunging an abortion ban from their largely Catholic country's constitution by a 2-to-1 margin, referendum results compiled Saturday showed.

The decisive outcome of the landmark referendum held Friday exceeded expectations and was cast as a historic victory for women's rights. Polls had given the pro-repeal "yes" side a small lead, but suggested the contest would be close.

Since 1983, the now-repealed Eighth Amendment had forced women seeking to terminate pregnancies to go abroad for abortions, bear children conceived through rape or incest or take illegal measures at home.

As the final tally was announced showing over 66 percent of voters supported lifting the ban, crowds in the ancient courtyard of Dublin Castle began chanting "Savita! Savita!" in honor of Savita Halappanavar, a 31-year-old dentist who died of sepsis during a protracted miscarriage after being denied an abortion in 2012.

With exit polls showing a win for abortion rights campaigners, Prime Minister Leo Varadkar called the apparent victory the "culmination of a quiet revolution." Later, he hailed the momentous outcome as a victory for Ireland's future.

"I said in recent days that this was a once in a generation vote. Today I believe we have voted for the next generation,"

said Varadkar, who is Ireland's first openly gay leader as well as its first prime minister from an ethnic minority group.

The next battleground is likely to be Ireland's parliament, where the government led by Varadkar hopes to capitalize on the fresh momentum and enact legislation spelling out the conditions under which abortions will be legal for the first time.

The plan is to allow abortions during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy and in special cases after the first trimester, likely ending the trail of Irish women who go elsewhere — mostly to neighboring Britain — by the thousands each year for abortions they can't get at home.

Opponents of the repeal conceded defeat Saturday morning after exit polls suggested they had no hope of victory.

John McGuirk, spokesman for the Save the 8th group, told RTE that many Irish citizens would not recognize the country in which they were waking up. The group said on its website that the referendum was a "tragedy of historic proportions," but McGuirk said the vote must still be respected.

The support for lifting the ban highlights the liberalization of traditionally Catholic Ireland, marking the diminishing influence of the church hierarchy and a desire to align Irish secular laws with the other countries of Europe.

First it was same-sex marriage, approved here in 2015, and now it will be the consignment to history of the Eighth Amendment, which banned nearly all abortions and turned women seeking them into pariahs.



A "yes" voter with a badge during the vote count in Dublin.