



Kenneth Bossert, Suffolk County School Superintendents Association president



Lars Clemensen, immediate past president of the superintendents group

Making school safer

Superintendents' plan takes steps on several fronts

BY JOIE TYRRELL

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The Suffolk County School Superintendents Association has created a multipoint action plan that proposes adding more security officers in schools, adopting legislation to upgrade buildings' safety and increasing financial support for the ramped-up measures.

The group's "Blueprint for Action" was shared Monday with Suffolk County law enforcement and the office of Suffolk County Executive Steve Bellone. It is the latest local development focused on heightening school security since mass school shootings in Parkland, Florida, in February and Santa Fe, Texas, in May.

More investment in the School Resource Officer program is needed so those law enforcement officers are available to schools across Suffolk and involved in training staff and developing safety plans, the plan says. It notes while having an officer in every school building daily is not feasible, "expanding access to this resource as broadly as possible through our school system is a worthy objective."

The group's blueprint calls for action by local law enforcement, the state Legislature and the federal government. It points to the need for physical and personnel

Suffolk educators' 'Blueprint for Action'

The Suffolk County School Superintendents Association created an action plan focused on enhancing school safety. The organization includes the chief school administrators of the 71 school districts and educational agencies in the county. Highlights include:

- Ensure that School Resource Officers work with existing safety officers to increase training opportunities.
- Expand technical access to schools through

closed-circuit TV and one-button lockdown abilities.

- Use the state's SAFE Act as a template for federal action.
- Require the use of social/emotional screening programs to help identify emotional instability and apply appropriate interventions.
- Pursue research-based programs that address substance abuse disorder and addiction to address the county's opioid crisis.
- Expedite the review period for submission of Smart Schools funding to assist districts in making essential upgrades to safety-related items within districts.

upgrades in districts, as well as measures to boost student well-being and mental health education.

Kenneth Bossert — the association's current president who is the Elwood district's superintendent, and Lars Clemensen, the Hampton Bays schools chief and the group's immediate past president — met Monday with Suffolk County Sheriff Errol Toulon Jr.; Suffolk County Police Chief of Department Stuart Cameron; Southold Chief Martin Flatley, who is president of the Suffolk County Chiefs of Police Association; and Tom Vaughn, director of operations in Bellone's office, among others.

The superintendents' group decided it wanted a comprehensive look "at the many different ways to make schools safer," Clemensen said of the plan. School districts have the "very unique position of having one foot in the community and one foot in the school," he said.

Earlier this month, Suffolk

County Police Commissioner Geraldine Hart said more officers will patrol school campuses, and Bellone recently signed legislation authorizing the county to borrow \$2 million for a smartphone-based emergency alert system to contact police and school personnel in the event of a mass shooting or other emergency.

During the summer, school districts across Long Island have strengthened entryways, changed visitor protocols and added surveillance cameras. Some hired armed guards.

Students and staff in the Island's 124 public districts, as well as private and parochial schools, return to classrooms this week and next. The first public system opening for the 2018-19 academic year is Jericho, where students begin classes on Thursday. The bulk of districts across Nassau and Suffolk counties will start classes on Sept. 4 and Sept. 5.

The superintendents' action plan underscores the impor-

tance of more support for children's emotional and mental health. New York is the first state to require mental health education as a component of health education in state law, with regulations that went into effect July 1 mandating that public and charter schools include mental health in the curriculum.

The superintendents' group asks the county, the state and school districts work together to offer programs such as that offered by the nonprofit Sandy Hook Promise — training for students and adults on spotting signs that may lead to gun violence — and anti-gang initiatives to help students make healthy associations. Sandy Hook Promise was founded after a gunman killed 26 children and staffers at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, in December 2012.

The Suffolk superintendents' group also recommended exploring monitoring of social media for at-risk behaviors.

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Bossert noted that a statewide survey of school superintendents found half of the respondents have increasing concerns about student needs in nonacademic areas such as safety and mental health. "We have to look at this holistically," he said. "Prevention is the number one deterrent to school violence."

The plan also says state lawmakers should seek to have New York's SAFE Act, the gun-regulation law written in 2013 after the Sandy Hook shooting, apply at the federal level and create a state funding stream to pay for security measures. The blueprint says districts' security costs should be exempted from the state-imposed property-tax cap, much as certain construction costs are exempt in those calculations.

The blueprint also asks for changes in election law that would give school districts the ability to appeal a designation as a polling place — a right held by some other public buildings.

Some proposals, such as the tax exemption, have been raised in the past. Clemensen said he is optimistic the association's proposals "will generate conversation — that is what our hope with this blueprint is — that it ends up on the conference table at a lot of meetings."