Newport News schools eye changes

Metal detectors to be installed, student violence protocols under review

By Nour Habib Staff Writer, Daily Press

The Newport News School Board announced it had secured funding for state-of-the-art metal detectors at each of its school sites. Richneck Elementary, where a first-grade teacher was shot Friday, will have a metal detector installed before students return.

School Board Chair Lisa Surles-Law made the announcement at a news conference Thursday, during a recess from a special board meeting. The meeting, held in closed session, was for the purpose of discussing “the performance of a specific officer.”

Surles-Law also announced that an administrative change has been “proposed” for Richneck elementary.

Surles-Law acknowledged that many people in the community are frustrated with the school division after last week’s shooting of a teacher by one of her first-grade students at Richneck. It was the third shooting on the property of a Newport News school in less than 17 months.

“We understand that this has been a difficult and uncertain time for everyone,” she said. “We are truly sorry this has happened during our watch. In light of this ongoing crisis, I want to assure you that the school board is fully committed to leading our district through this difficult time.”

Surles-Law said the board is thankful that Abigail Zwerner, the teacher shot on Friday, is improving every day.

“Abby, your school family misses you immensely,” she said.

Surles-Law said a roundtable session will be held in the upcoming weeks for teachers and staff to provide recommendations for improving building safety.

“Division leadership has been directed to review and bolster protocols for addressing and handling violence in schools, so that staff and teachers are safe and feel safe, well-prepared, well-informed and feel supported by division leadership,” she said.

Asked whether Superintendent George Parker had the school board’s full support, Surles-Law responded that he did.

Thursday’s news conference, and special meeting, came less than a week since the Richneck shooting. Since Friday, the administration, and particularly Parker, have faced a wave of criticism from the community and from teachers.

Teachers have since expressed their anger in online forums and in letters sent to the superintendent and school board, saying student behavior problems have reached unprecedented levels and their complaints are not addressed by administrators.

Julianne Marse, an elementary school teacher at Newport News for 20 years and an administrator for 11, said she retired in 2019 because of student behavior concerns. As an assistant principal at the time, misbehaving students often were sent to her office. She said she has been hit, kicked and spit on by students.

“I would come home with bruises constantly,” she said.

She said requests for help from her principal, executive director and the special education department were often ignored.

“Basically, it was just, ‘Figure out yourself, there’s nothing we can do,’ ” Marse said.

This sentiment has been echoed in recent days among teachers online and in conversations with the Daily Press.

Marse, who still lives in Newport News and is in touch with several teachers in the district, said many of the people she’s spoken to since the shooting are demanding change.

“After this shooting at Heritage, why hasn’t anything changed?” she asked. “Then after the shooting at Menchville, why hasn’t anything changed? And now the third one, we’ve got a teacher shot. Well, what is going to change?

“The first thing that needs to change is Dr. Parker. “He needs to go.”

James Graves, president of the Newport News Education Association, said similar concerns about student behavior were expressed to him at a union meeting on Wednesday.

“They are upset,” Graves said of the teachers. “I mean, tensions are very high.”

Graves, a teacher for 18 years, says he understands their concerns.

Parker this week acknowledged the anger that many are feeling, saying that Friday’s shooting has traumatized the entire city. He said the mental health of staff is one of his highest priorities, and he held a meeting with Richneck staff Monday to seek input on what support they need before they are able to return to school.

“I have received many emails — some supportive, some concerned, some afraid — and it’s understandable,” he said in a news conference Monday. “Some angry, and I’m angry. But I know that we have to find a pathway to move forward.”