

Senate Majority Policy Committee forum

QCSD voices heard on school safety

By Gary Weckselblatt

The Quakertown Community School District is quickly becoming the epicenter for discussion on school safety.

Just hours after the district held the initial meeting of its Community School Safety Committee, the state's Senate Majority Policy Committee visited Quakertown Friday morning to review school safety efforts with students and school, law enforcement and local officials. It was the policy committee's 10th meeting statewide as lawmakers seek ways to protect students in school.

"These days there is no more important topic than school safety, and we are proud that our representatives chose Quakertown as a place to hold this significant discussion," Superintendent Dr. Bill Harner said. "With the support of our School Board, Quakertown is continually improving our security to protect our students and staff members. I thank Sen. Bob Mensch for his



Superintendent Dr. Bill Harner speaks with Quakertown students Nina Shiller and Casey Nguyen prior to the start of the Senate forum.

ardent advocacy on this issue, and for bringing this committee and the important work they are doing into our home. The opportunity for our students

to participate in the building of public policy is an invaluable piece of their education."

Students played a major role in the event. Quakertown Community High School students Nina Shiller and Casey Nguyen responded to lawmakers' questions, as did Pottsgrove High students Brenna Mayberry and Joshua Ross. QCHS students Alexa Cass, Amelia Derry and Alex Hallowell videotaped the event.

Sen. David Argall, chairman of the committee, said "There's been a robust and hearty exchange of information as we learn of your concerns. There's no finished point in this. We're going to continue to be focused on this." He noted that in all of the committee's meetings, Quakertown had the largest student representation, and asked the students "How high on the scale does (school safety) register?"



Quakertown students, from left, Amelia Derry, Alexa Cass and Alex Hallowell interview state Sen. Bob Mensch following the forum on school safety.

"After Parkland, like any time there is a

See SCHOOL SAFETY on Page 2



Key members of the forum included, from left, Superintendent Dr. Bill Harner, Quakertown students Casey Nguyen and Nina Shiller, SRO Brian Hendrzak, Sen. Bob Mensch, state Rep. Craig Staats, Sen. Mike Regan, Pottsgrove students Brenna Mayberry and Joshua Ross, SRO Bob Lee, School Board President Steaven Klein and Sen. David Argall, chairman of the Senate Majority Policy Committee.

SCHOOL SAFETY

Continued from Page 1

fire drill or the principal comes on the loudspeaker the anxiety settles in," Nina said. "The presence of fear is definitely still here." Brenna agreed. "It's not something that ever leaves or is very far away," she said. "The focus on learning has kind of shifted to 'Are we safe here today?' I'm thinking often in school of where the safest place would be for me to go if something happened."

Said Argall, "As a father, it breaks my heart to hear your worries. But as a Boy Scout, I stand by the motto 'be prepared.'"

That preparation would benefit from more funding, school officials said. State lawmakers passed school safety legislation, which includes a \$60 million grant program to give school districts flexible options to improve school safety, including hiring school security personnel and counselors, purchasing safety equipment like metal detectors, and implementing special programs to reduce violence in schools.

Sen. Mike Regan said lawmakers understand funding needs to continue on an annual basis. "Now that we've done it once, it's going to be easier going forward. Who's going to vote against this?"

North Penn Superintendent Curtis Dietrich called for school safety to be add-



Quakertown Community High School assistant Principal Jason Magditch, along with his students, listens to the discussion.

ed as an exception, like retirement and special education costs, under Act 1, the state's property tax law. "I don't like the property tax either," he said. "But I think our community would say 'absolutely, do it.'"

Dietrich said school board's are locally elected and if the community believes raising taxes for school safety is a bad decision, directors would be held ac-

countable.

Mensch, who represents Quakertown and pushed for the meeting to be held here, said, "We need to give more flexibility locally. (How this money is spent) shouldn't be a Harrisburg decision."

Steaven Klein, president of the Quakertown Community School Board,

See SCHOOL SAFETY on Page 3



Students from Quakertown Community and Pottsgrove high schools were each asked questions by members of the Senate panel.

SCHOOL SAFETY

Continued from Page 2

agreed that decisions on school security should remain local. He also commended Senators on the panel for supporting Senate Bill 1078, which was added to the PA School Code. The new law allows school boards to discuss certain security measures as a group in executive session without fear of breaking the law.

Dr. Harner, who was described by Regan as one of the forefathers of School Resource Officers for his work in other districts, said in his educational readings it's clear that parents want SROs in buildings. QCSD's SROs Brian Hendrzak and Bob Lee were in attendance. "They protect our most precious resources," Dr. Harner said.

Nina said she believes Lee "plays a vital role" in making sure students are safe and said she'd be comfortable going to an SRO or administrator if she knew of a potential threat. She also thanked Lee and teacher Sean Burke for giving lessons to groups of students on how to counter someone. "It's very proactive," she said.

Nina was one of the students who helped organize the student walkout last March, to pay their respects to



School Board President Steaven Klein, right, speaks with Sen. Mike Regan following the September 21 meeting.

those who lost their lives in the attack on Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, FL.

Mensch commended her for the way the walkout was handled. Dr. Harner explained that the district met with law enforcement and emergency services officials, and used the event as a training exercise for the protection of the students, and to learn where "we may need to improve in the event of an

emergency."

Several speakers, including Dr. Harner, Souderton Superintendent Frank Gallagher, and Palisades School District Superintendent Bridget O'Connell, suggested lawmakers provide more funding for school counselors and psychologists. O'Connell suggested incentivizing medical students to pursue careers in mental health.

Mensch asked everyone in the room to continue the dialogue. "We need you to be partners and advocates," he said. The good ideas for legislation come from you all. ... Don't be shy. Tell us what you think. ... Believe me, we hear you."

The night before, during the kickoff to QCSD's Community School Safety Committee, 15 parents began their important work. "They covered a great deal, and laid a strong foundation to move forward," said assistant Superintendent Nancianne Edwards, facilitator for the committee. "Having parents fully involved in this process will help make sure that any decisions made will be fully supported by the school community."

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