Other improvements prompted by Newtown massacre being considered

The Port Washington-Saukville School District will lock the entrances to elementary schools and install video surveillance cameras and intercoms at the main doors so staff members can identify parents and other visitor before buzzing them into the buildings, Supt. Michael Weber told the School Board Monday.

The security improvements, which will be implemented within the next few months, come in response to the massacre of students and teachers at an elementary school in Newtown, Conn., Dec. 14.

Shortly after the tragedy, the Administrative Council, which is made up of the district's lead administrators and school principals, launched a security review that will result in a series of changes.

"This is an immediate, short-term security improvement," Weber said of the buzzer system, which undoubtedly be similar to the one that was in place at Sandy Hook School in Newtown when a gunman broke in and killed 28 people, 20 of whom were grade-school children.

The district is also considering renovating the entrances to its three elementary schools to create secure vestibules. Visitors would enter through an unlocked door, but would not be able to proceed into schools until being buzzed through the inner vestibule door.

"This way we could get people out of the elements but still make sure we know who's entering our schools," Weber said. "It's an improvement that I think would make schools more welcoming and improve security. It's something we probably should have looked at earlier."

Yet undecided is whether voting will be allowed to continue in schools. Currently, Thomas Jefferson Middle School and Dunwiddie Elementary School are used as two of the City of Port Washington's three polling places, making elections the only time when the public has essentially unchecked access to schools while students are in class.

"Having polling places in schools is a great learning experience for students," Weber said. "Students are able to witness people exercising their right to vote and taking part in a national event.

"That said, we believe we can't allow voting in schools to continue as it does now. We're not overly anxious to discontinue it, but something will have to change."

The district can opt to change the way polling areas are configured to limit voter access to the schools or can choose to end voting in schools, Weber said.

Unlike other security changes, which are being made at the direction of the Administrative Council, altering or discontinuing voting in schools is a decision the board must make, he said.

The board broached the subject several years ago, and although some members expressed security concerns, there was little support for discontinuing voting in schools.

Meanwhile, an FBI security expert, who has children in the district and was instrumental in a 2007-08 initiative that resulted in significant changes at all schools, continues to review security measures in the district and is expected to make additional recommendations to the Administrative Council, Weber said.

The 2007-08 initiative resulted in the installation of automated lock systems in some schools and protocols that require all school doors except the main entrance to be locked during the school day.

At Dunwiddie and Saukville elementary schools, entrances are adjacent to the main offices so secretaries can see who is entering the buildings.

At Lincoln Elementary School, the unlocked entrance leads to a main hallway that gives visitors access to the entire building. Because the office is not in the immediate vicinity of the entrance, a surveillance camera at the main doors allows secretaries in the office to see who is entering the building.

At all three elementary schools, signs direct visitors to report to the office before proceeding elsewhere in the buildings.

Thomas Jefferson Middle School is considered more secure than the elementary schools because of significant renovations several years ago that created a new main entrance leading directly to the office.

Similarly, visitors enter the high school through the main office.

Additional security measures will come at a cost, of course, and the district will have to work within its taxing limitations to pay for them, at least as it stands now.

“It may be easy to absorb the cost of a buzzer systems at elementary schools, but building remodeling is a different thing,” board member Sara McCutcheon said.

In 2009, the Wisconsin Legislature changed school funding laws to exempt the cost of school security improvements from the levy limit formula. In other words, districts could levy higher taxes than they normally could to make schools safer.

That provision, however, was eliminated from the last state budget, and although some lawmakers have proposed reinstituting it, it’s unclear whether that will happen, Weber said.

“We need to do what we can to make schools safer now and not wait for an exemption to the revenue limit,” he said. “We’re fortunate to be in a financial position that allows us to take care of these issues immediately.”