

Tighter security awaits PW-S school visitors

Written by BILL SCHANEN IV
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Electronic locking controls, video cameras being installed this week at Lincoln, Dunwiddie, Saukville elementary schools

The days of being able to walk right into Port Washington-Saukville schools are gone.

Electronic locking controls, or so-called buzzer systems, and video cameras are being installed this week at the main entrances to Lincoln and Dunwiddie elementary schools in Port Washington, as well as Saukville Elementary School, at a total cost of \$11,100, Jim Froemming, director of business services, said.

Previously, the main entrances to schools remained unlocked during the school day and visitors were instructed to go to the office to sign in.

Now, parents and other visitors have to ring a buzzer outside the main entrance and use an intercom system to request access to elementary schools. Video cameras that relay live images of the entrance to three monitors in each school office will allow staff members to see who is waiting to enter schools.

“It will take a little getting used to,” Froemming told the Port Washington-Saukville School Board Building and Grounds Committee Monday, adding that the district’s goal is to retain “that warm, welcoming atmosphere in schools” while making them more secure.

Installing buzzer systems at elementary schools became a priority after the Sandy Hook School shootings in Newtown, Conn., in December, but it is just the beginning of changes intended to tighten security at the district’s five schools and administrative office building.

The committee on Monday authorized the hiring of an architect to design new entrances for elementary schools.

The committee also recommended that the district use money from its fund equity account to pay for the security measures.

School officials want to reconstruct elementary school entrances to create double-door systems that will allow visitors to wait in a secure vestibule before being let into schools.

“We’re really not talking about structural changes at Dunwiddie and Saukville, but Lincoln will end up being more extensive,” Froemming said.

At Dunwiddie and Saukville elementary schools, entrances are adjacent to the main offices, which allows secretaries to monitor who is entering the building.

But at Lincoln Elementary School, the entrance is not near the office and gives visitors immediate access to a main hallway.

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“Lincoln doesn’t have a very welcoming entrance,” said School Board member Brenda Fritsch. “You just kind of walk into the building, and there you are. You can be in the building and no one knows you’re there.”

“As a parent, I’m thrilled by the changes.”

Redesigning the entrance to Lincoln Elementary School will likely mean constructing an addition onto the front of the building, school officials said.

“Anytime you do something on the outside of a building it’s going to be expensive,” board member and committee chairman Brian McCutcheon said.

Froemming said, “It’s cheaper to add onto the building than it is to demolish what you have inside and rebuild it.”

Work on school entrances will likely be done over the summer, as will other security improvements.

The district is planning to install electronic locks that are opened with programmable fobs on several outside doors at each elementary school. This will help ensure doors remain locked during the school day while giving select staff members the ability to open them if needed, for instance when children are coming in from recess or returning from a field trip.

“The fobs are really nice because they’re software based and you can see who has accessed the doors and when,” Director of Special Services Duane Woelfel said, adding that the fobs can be reprogrammed remotely if the district wants to deny access to someone who previously had it.

Security at Thomas Jefferson Middle School and the high school is less of a priority because those school underwent improvements several years ago. Both schools have electronic key fob systems, as well as entrances that restrict access beyond the main offices, although officials said additional improvements may be made.