

Alabama lawmakers develop school safety measures

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Securing Schools

After the school shooting in Newtown, House Speaker Mike Hubbard called for a joint hearing of the House and Senate education policy committees. Members of the law enforcement and education communities shared their perspectives with lawmakers at the hearing. The committees also accepted comments and concerns after the hearing. The following are the proposals Republicans are pushing from the Alabama School Security and Student and Teacher Safety Report:

- Public schools are required to have regular fire drills, but are not required to have shooter or intruder drills. Rep. Alan Baker, R-Brewton, introduced legislation that would take into consideration other emergencies and require a “Code Red” drill to be conducted once a semester.
- Baker also sponsored legislation that would make it a crime to trespass on school buses, making it a class A misdemeanor punishable by up to a year in jail. The House has already passed the proposal, which is named the Charles Poland Jr. Act after the bus driver in Dale County who died trying to protect students earlier this year.
- Authorize the Alabama Public School and College Authority to sell and issue up to \$50 million to fund renovations to secure the entrances to schools and provide other equipment such as surveillance cameras and metal detectors.
- Currently, schools can use certified, trained officers on campus if local law enforcement, whether the police department or sheriff’s office, pays their officers to patrol the schools. The proposal by Sen. Dick Brewbaker, R-Pike Road, would allow local school boards to use local funds to hire armed, certified officers.
- Rep. Mary Sue McClurkin, R-Indian Springs, introduced a resolution that, if passed, would require the Alabama Department of Homeland Security to create an active shooter preparation course for school personnel.
- Increase funding for the Department of Homeland Security for active shooter training for law enforcement and for Virtual Alabama, a 3D visualization tool that can be used to determine the layout of buildings. Some of the \$3.9 million in the proposed education budget for the 2014 fiscal year would be assigned to the Virtual Alabama program.
- McClurkin introduced a resolution that would encourage the expansion of mental health support services in schools to detect and treat mental health issues.
- McClurkin introduced a resolution to encourage the School Safety Task Force to continue to hold regular meetings.

House Speaker Mike Hubbard, as he and other Republicans unveiled their proposals to secure Alabama schools, said the tragic events in Boston on Monday speak to the importance of being prepared.

Hubbard and other Republicans outlined initiatives on Tuesday that they said would immediately make Alabama schools and buses more secure, keeping students and teachers safer.

Hubbard said he wanted a measured response after the tragic school shooting in Newtown, Conn., in December and did not want a “knee-jerk reaction.”

The Republicans unveiled plans on Tuesday to move forward with proposals that would sell and issue up to \$50 million in bonds for equipment to secure schools; require schools to have active shooter and intruder drills; create a crime for trespassing on a school bus; and allow school districts to hire certified, trained officers as resource officers.

Hubbard said, with nine legislative days remaining, that he is confident the proposals will pass.

“If we make this a priority, which we will, I have no doubt we will be successful,” said the Auburn Republican.

Hubbard said they might not be able to prevent the tragedies from occurring, but they can take action to make sure Alabama schools are prepared.

Sen. Dick Brewbaker, R-Pike Road, said the list of initiatives are very practical and preserve the autonomy of local school systems, “but also give us a real opportunity to make real improvements in the day to day safety of children.”

Rep. Allen Treadaway, a Morris Republican who is a lieutenant with the Birmingham Police Department, introduced

the proposal that would allow the state to sell up to \$50 million in bonds to purchase safety equipment such as locking doors, surveillance cameras, and metal detectors.

Treadaway, who has been on the force for 24 years and who has five children who have gone through public schools, said some people might argue the proposals are not enough.

“It’s a start to secure our schools,” he said. “ ... This is the first line of defense. We are living in a time where we cannot live in an environment that is open and accessible.”

“The first thing we need to do is secure the facility and then we can expand and build on that.”

House Minority Leader Craig Ford, D-Gadsden, said Republicans were asking local school boards to pay for security enhancements. He also dismissed the \$50 million bond issue.

“They come up with a lot of great ideas, and then they want to borrow money to make it happen,” he said. “They’re shifting the burden to future taxpayers.”

Brewbaker proposed legislation that would allow local school districts to fund armed, certified resource officers with local funds. Currently, local police departments and sheriff’s offices can pay officers to patrol schools, but local schools cannot use their local funds for those positions.

“We’re talking about bonafide law enforcement officers who have been trained and know what they’re doing,” Brewbaker said.

The senator acknowledged the issue of who is carrying firearms in schools is very sensitive.

“It’s permissive. No one has to do anything,” he said.

Staff writer Brian Lyman contributed to this report.

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