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New system brings more safety to Snohomish County schools

By Kari Bray, Herald Writer

Four Snohomish County school districts are rolling out a new system for reporting safety concerns on and off campus.

The SafeSchools Alert program already has seen success in the Monroe and Sultan school districts, which have been using it since 2011. The Marysville, Lake Stevens and Arlington districts each launched the system in January or February, and Everett plans to follow suit this spring.

SafeSchools Alert is a different service than the Rave panic buttons that are being installed at many of the same schools. The buttons are meant to help deal with emergencies; the reporting system is meant to help prevent them.

Unlike phone hotlines, SafeSchools Alert lets people report information anonymously by email, text message, phone call or through an online form. It was designed by Ohio-based company Scenario Learning to combat bullying, harassment and violence in schools, but can be used for any tip related to campus safety, company spokeswoman Donna McMullin said.

“We want students to go to school free of fear, where they do have a voice and they can report something they see happening or that’s happening to them,” she said.

The system includes a reporting website and a back-end system to track each tip and how it’s handled, McMullin said.

State law requires school districts to educate students and parents on anti-harassment policies, and to maintain records of complaints and how they’re resolved. The system has helped Monroe and Sultan manage their reports over the past four years, administrators say.

Monroe schools get several tips each week, spokeswoman Rosemary O’Neil said.

“We’ve had a reporting system for a long time,” she said. “It started with rotary phone numbers and evolved as technology evolved.”

SafeSchools Alert is the next generation of the tip line, she said.

Sultan has received 58 tips since 2011, superintendent Dan Chaplik said. Some were spam, but at least 50 were legitimate.

“We worried when we first did it that we’d get buried in every little thing, but that just hasn’t been the case,” he said.

Students have reported when they knew peers were planning to fight after school, and when they were bullied on the bus. A parent informed administrators that her son was being called names.

Chaplik sees each report and has noticed some trends. The most common theme is social media, he said. A lot of the conflicts on campus are sparked by online conversations off campus.

O’Neil noted the same problem. “The majority of concerns that seem to come forward involve social media and text messages,” she said.

For other Snohomish County schools, the system is too new to outline any trends. Nationwide, many districts find that most tips are related to bullying and harassment, McMullin said. However, some administrators have used tips to catch students with weapons on campus, she said.

In Marysville, SafeSchools Alert was launched less than four months after a student shot five of his friends and himself at Marysville Pilchuck High School. Five students died, including the shooter.

Contrary to what people seem to think, that violence was not the impetus behind installing SafeSchools Alert, district spokeswoman Jodi Runyon said.

“This is something we would have been moving toward regardless,” she said. “The safety of our children, our students, is our top priority.”

The Arlington and Lake Stevens school districts have received tips in the system’s first month, a good sign that people are figuring out how to use it, administrators say.

In Arlington, someone reported that the track needs upgrading before someone gets hurt using it, district spokeswoman Andrea Conley said.

“That’s interesting to me because it means they were able to go right online and figure it out,” she said. “I hadn’t had a report on our other system in years.”

The Everett School District plans to start using SafeSchools Alert this spring.

“It’s on the horizon,” spokeswoman Mary Waggoner said. “Right now, we have the old-fashioned tip line where people call in, and that’s been really useful. But we recognize that technology is changing, and having a text and web feature is really important.”

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