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Drug dog to sniff out Burr and Burton

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MANCHESTER — Burr and Burton Academy will invite police with drug sniffing dogs to conduct random searches of its campuses, a decision that has caused concern over civil rights and led school leaders to schedule a community forum on substance abuse by students.

"We decided that the presence of drugs, real or perceived, was having an impact on learning at the school," said Burr and Burton Headmaster Charles Scranton.

According to Scranton, the decision to implement searches did not come from any incident at the school or with its students. Instead, it was Burr and Burton taking the point in leading the community to "acknowledge we have problems," he said.

Sheriff's deputy to help

The school will be working with Sgt. James Wright of the Bennington County Sheriff's Department. Wright will be asked to visit the campus randomly and search limited areas of the school selected by school administrators.

Scranton said the dog would never be used to search individual students.

Wright said he believes the searches will proceed like those he has conducted at other Vermont schools. The dog will search a common area at the school while students are either practicing emergency drills or in class.

Wright said he knows that some people are uncomfortable around dogs, so he always has a school administrator with him to help students avoid contact with the four-legged officer of the law.

"The dog doesn't really care if the kids are walking by or not. He's working," Wright said.

If the dog responds to anything, Wright will let administrators know exactly where the dog showed an interest. Wright doesn't really know how effective the dog is because he leaves after passing along the information. It's up to administrators and the police officers in that jurisdiction to investigate further.

"But the feedback we've gotten has been really good so far," Wright said.

Assurances by police officers and administrators leave Bradley Myerson unconvinced, however. The Manchester lawyer, who has a long-time commitment to working with the American Civil Liberties Union, thinks drug-sniffing dogs don't belong at Burr and Burton or on any school campus.

"It's like they're saying, 'We're going to take the most drastic measures we can to scare these kids,'" Myerson said.

Myerson is very concerned about substance abuse and, said that he has a lot of respect for Burr and Burton, Scranton and the chairman of the school's board, Seth Bongartz.

"That's why I'm baffled by the whole policy. It's demeaning, it's offensive and it's sends kids the wrong message. What does this policy teach kids about respect? About trust?" Myerson said.

Bongartz said the board had been unanimous in its decision to allow the searches and that its members strongly supported the school's efforts.

Scranton said after he and the board had consulted with attorneys, he had no concerns about whether the school was allowed to conduct the searches.

"The argument that this violates civil rights carries no weight whatsoever. This casts no shadow, no cloud over Burr and Burton. It sends the message that on this high school campus, at least, drugs will not be tolerated," he said.

Scranton said the civil rights of Burr and Burton students would always be protected as long as he was headmaster.

'A great school, but ...'

"We have a great school and part of that is that we have a healthy culture and climate. We had a lot of concerns about compromising that culture but ultimately we realized that drugs were a bigger threat," he said.

Students were informed of the searches at a school assembly and parents through a letter sent to their homes. Scranton said the news of the policy "raised the level of the conversation," which led to the decision to host the forum on Feb. 8.

Manchester Police Chief Manfred Wessner, Scranton, Bongartz and a substance abuse counselor will appear at the forum, scheduled for 7 p.m. at the Riley Center for the Arts at the school.

Myerson said he would be there as well and he intended to speak. Myerson admitted that he may be in the minority in his opinion about the searches but he believes so strongly that school officials are wrong that he intends to continue to speak out.

Burr and Burton officials, meanwhile, are hoping to hear something else from students, parents and other Manchester-area residents.

"What we find at the school is that very often parents are saying, 'Why don't you do something about this?' We want people to understand, this is a family issue, a community issue as well as a school issue," Bongartz said.

Bongartz believes it will be especially helpful to hear from students about drug and alcohol abuse, how it's happening and how it can be prevented.

Scranton is hoping adults are paying attention too.

"Our goal is to see parents step up to the plate. We also want local law enforcement to see the only way to lessen the impact of drugs is through partnership with the community," he said.

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