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LAWRENCE

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A good grade for security

Officials pleased with new school

By Russell Contreras, Globe Staff | June 26, 2008

State-of-the-art classrooms. Freshly painted walls and shiny floors. A new uniform policy. Three hundred surveillance cameras.

As "Year One" winds down at the new \$110 million Lawrence High School campus, school officials are tallying up all that went right and wrong. They're gathering data on student performance, evaluating faculty, and reviewing facilities.

But one noticeable difference from the old high school campus, according to Superintendent Wilfredo T. Laboy, is that school officials know and see more of what goes on throughout the school. The strategically placed cameras and the uniform policy - which assigns different colored uniforms based on a student's area of study - are helping school officials closely monitor student behavior, making the campus "safe for learning," he said.

"You know, kids are going to be kids," said Laboy. "Our issues have been around arguments, fights that kids have had. Certainly, our ability to minimize things are important to us."

This past school year, the district reported 267 serious discipline violations at the new high school. That includes assaults, theft, and possession of a deadly weapon. Last year, 283 violations were reported. And while the slight decrease is hardly an indication of a trend, school officials and police say the new security measures and the layout and location of the new high school are a big help in maintaining control over students and making sure they are doing what they are supposed to be doing.

"Last year, we could lose 30 percent of students after lunch because of all the doors throughout the building," Mark Rivera, the district's urban liaison said. "It's not like that anymore."

Police Chief John J. Romero said the old Lawrence High School campus presented a challenge for police to patrol because it was located downtown, and it was easy for outsiders to enter. He also said the city historically had to wrestle with a youth gang problem.

In the first year at the new campus, however, Romero said school officials have been able to better control who enters and leaves the building at all times. He said school officials have been able to quickly point out and respond to fights because of the cameras. They have helped police with investigations and have aided officials in keeping order.

Romero said there were still "some bumps in the road" during the first year of the new campus. For example, he said, because school buses come in two waves, some students linger outside and occasionally a fight will erupt.

Overall, he was pleased at how the new security measures have helped authorities solve crimes. "The cameras definitely helped. It's amazing," Romero said. "They helped with the prosecution of some cases. And we're going to be better-prepared next year."

Still, Dalia Diaz, editor of the local bilingual newspaper Rumbo, said she believes that a number of cases haven't been reported by school officials to the police. In a column earlier this year, Diaz, citing unnamed sources, wrote about a fight on the high school campus in which students and teachers allegedly were hurt.

She complained that the fight was not reported in the local press and charged school officials with covering it up.

"It's not the building that makes them safer. It's the culture," said Diaz, who publicly exchanged e-mails with Laboy over school safety. "People are afraid to speak out."

But Laboy strongly disputed Diaz's account of the fight, saying it was exaggerated. He said the district remains "transparent" with its safety procedures and challenged Diaz to present hard evidence that the school officials were hiding anything.

"We are not hiding anything and are not sweeping anything under the rug," he said. "What goes on at [the high school] is no different than what goes on at other urban high schools in the state. We're open."

School Committee member James Vittorioso, a regular critic of Laboy, said he falls "somewhere in the middle" in the assessments of campus safety by Diaz and Laboy. "Security has been beefed up, no question," said Vittorioso, adding that problems sprang largely from about 13 repeat offenders.

His main concern, he said, was ensuring that any student who violates school policy and commits a crime is punished.

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