Chicago Tribune

HIGHLAND PARK NEWS

SPORTS | ALL SUBURBS

Dist. 113 to revisit locker searches by drug-sniffing dogs

By KAREN BERKOWITZ
PIONEER PRESS | OCT 18, 2016 AT 4:10 PM

Five police chiefs are asking Township High School District 113 to conduct random and unannounced searches by drug-sniffing dogs during after-school hours.

The initiative would let students know that drugs and alcohol brought into Highland Park and Deerfield high schools could be discovered, according to the police chiefs in Highland Park, Deerfield, Highwood, Riverwoods and Bannockburn.

"We are writing you to express our growing concern regarding the absence of canine searches at Highland Park High School and Deerfield High School," prefaced the Sept. 15 letter from the police chiefs, which was discussed Monday by the school board. "Our police departments work diligently, hand in hand with (school) staff, to provide a safe and secure environment at all of our schools. Yet one important piece is still absent — random canine searches of lockers within the high schools for controlled substances."

Officials in Township High School District 113 have agreed to discuss dog searches with the police chiefs at the Nov. 1 school board meeting.

Community—The Anti-Drug, a local coalition, is asking the board to give the proposal serious consideration.

Superintendent Christopher Dignam informed the school board Monday that he'd invited Highland Park Police Chief Paul Shafer and Deerfield Police Chief John Sliozis to the Nov. 1 school board meeting.

The police chiefs' letter reported that 70 percent of the 679 Highland Park and Deerfield parents who responded to a 2016 survey supported canine searches in the high schools.

Adlai Stevenson High School and Libertyville High School are among the north suburban schools that use drug-sniffing dogs for random searches. New Trier High School and both Glenbrook North and Glenbrook South are among the schools that do not.

District 113 board member Debra Hymen said the letter from the police chiefs seems to represent a shift in attitudes.

"In the past, even though there were parents who wanted it, many felt ... it was an infringement on the rights of the students," Hymen said.

She noted police did not feel canine searches were sufficiently effective to justify searches, in light of the downsides of implementation. She asked Dignam what might have changed.

"The takeaway I have is that we need to be aggressive in finding measures to address substance abuse because the issues we're having are significant," Dignam said.

Board member Julie Gordon asked that the Nov. 1 discussion include a legal perspective and input from school principals on how random searches might impact school culture and trust between administrators and students.

District 113 board member David Small said the chiefs' request came out of discussions in a Community—The Anti-Drug committee on how to mitigate drug and alcohol use and abuse by students. Small serves on that committee, as do representatives from law enforcement.

"The effort here is not about 'gotcha'," Small said. "It is about sending a message that you can't bring drugs and alcohol to school."

Small said the district could contract with a private firm to conduct searches after hours when students are not in school. The district would set the schedule

The dogs are trained to detect marijuana and other illegal drugs, alcohol and firearms.

Small stressed that most first-time offenses for alcohol and marijuana are handled through a "station adjustment," the police term for giving kids a talking-to at the police station before releasing them to their parents.

"There is no criminal record," Small said. "The goal is not to hurt our students' college or career opportunities."