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Visitors to 3 Va. Beach schools must pass sex-offender check

VIRGINIA BEACH

Principal Daniel Keever can't recall any child predators trying to roam the halls at Larkspur Middle School.

But then again, how would he have known?

That won't be a problem under a new security system put in place last week at Larkspur Middle and two other Virginia Beach schools. As part of a pilot program, all parents and visitors at the schools are required to produce a photo ID, which is then scanned and compared against a national database of registered sex offenders.

"This is a step toward ensuring the safety of our students and employees," Keever said.

The school system paid \$5,100 to install the Raptor Technologies security system at Princess Anne High School, Birdneck Elementary School and Larkspur Middle School. The monitoring program will cost an additional \$432 a year at each school.

If all goes well, school division spokeswoman Melissa McQuarrie said, the district will consider expanding the instant sex offender registry checks to every school. "This is a proactive step," McQuarrie said. "We haven't had any incidents in the past, but I feel it is responsible to take this step to provide the highest level of security we can for our students."

Some parents and civil liberties advocates, though, say the ID scans and instant background checks go too far.

Dennis Tompkins, whose child attends Larkspur Middle School, wrote to Gov. Bob McDonnell last week after learning the ID checks had been implemented. Tompkins said the system is a waste of time and money.

"It's just too much," he said. "What's next, full body scans?"

Other parents praised the new security measures.

Cristen Hunter said she was happy to hand over her driver's license at Larkspur Middle School before signing her child out for a doctor's appointment Friday. "It doesn't bother me, as long as the children are safe," Hunter said.

The general reaction from parents and volunteers has been positive, McQuarrie said. Most people,

she said, support protecting children.

A similar security system was tested at three Chesapeake schools in 2008. The program was so popular, system spokesman Tom Cupitt said, the division used \$268,400 in federal stimulus funds to expand the ID scans districtwide at the start of the school year.

To date, the system hasn't flagged any sex offenders attempting to enter a school, Cupitt said.

"But that might be because the system has deterred people who are on those registries from attempting to enter a school," he said.

Allan Measom, president of Raptor Technologies, said the Texas-based company has installed its system in more than 7,000 schools across 42 states, including schools in Richmond, Fairfax and Prince William County.

When an ID is scanned through the Raptor system, the name and address are checked against a compilation of state sex offender databases. If the visitor is flagged as a sex offender, an instant alert is sent to select school officials, who would then be instructed to contact authorities.

That's what happened earlier this month at a Chesterfield County school when a convicted sex offender attempted to drop off lunch money for his nephew. The 45-year-old Petersburg man, who was convicted of second-degree rape in Baltimore 22 years ago, was taken into police custody and later released on a \$2,000 bond. Sex offenders are by law generally barred from entering elementary and secondary schools in Virginia.

"That's proof that this system works," Measom said. "Our job is to keep the bad guys out."

Opponents, including Jim Harper of the libertarian Cato Institute, say the instant sex offender registry checks are a disproportionate response to an exaggerated threat. "It's worth asking how often someone has actually accessed a school to commit a crime against a child." Cato said. "I'm guessing the answer is, not very often. And so, over a period of several years, you might spend tens of thousands of dollars and prevent zero instances."

Keever, the Larkspur principal, said he doesn't have a problem with that.

"Everybody is entitled to their opinion, but my primary responsibility is to ensure the safety of students at this school," Kever said. "Even if we only stop one child predator, it's worth it."

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