

Printer Version Of
richmond.com

Making Schools Safer

Bill would alert principals to students with criminal records

Joannah Nwokeabia

Wednesday February 1, 2006

Capital News Service -- When a Smithfield High School student was charged with selling cocaine, Principal **Rebecca Mercer** found out about it in the newspaper. When another teenager was charged with stealing a gun, Mercer also was in the dark - until she learned about it from other students.

A bill proposed by **Del. William Barlow**, D-Smithfield, and approved Monday by the House would shed light on such situations. It would require law enforcement officials to notify school principals when students are charged with certain crimes or released on bond.

Mercer, who brought the issue to Barlow's attention, considers the bill a reflection of the precarious world in which people live.

"We live in a society where we need to protect our children," she said. "We cannot protect our children without knowledge."

Mercer said students who are considered as a threat to school safety or involved in criminal cases are sent to an alternative school until their case is reconciled.

Barlow said the general goal of the measure is to make schools safer - specifically for students.

"Principals and superintendents should know in order to ensure the safety of students and faculty and so they can keep an eye on students," he said.

Virginia already requires law enforcement officials to alert school superintendents and principals if students commit serious crimes such as assault and battery, rape, acts involving controlled substances, illegal gun possession and threatening school personnel.

Still, Mercer worries that she is not notified of all crimes her students commit. To keep abreast what is going on in her school, she said she keep her eyes and ears open.

Much of the information she receives now comes from students. In the case of the teenager who stole the gun, it was the students who informed

Mercer that the youth had been having problems with schoolmates.

"We should know if a student is charged with stealing a gun," Mercer said. "That happened, but we were never notified."

A complicating factor: Laws protecting the anonymity of offenders under age 18 make it difficult to obtain information from the juvenile court system.

"The privacy of a juvenile should not supersede the safety of a school," Mercer said.

Barlow said his bill would amend current law to expand the type of crimes law enforcement officials are required to report to school authorities. The bill also calls for police to report students who have been released into the custody of their parents.

Existing law doesn't obligate superintendents to disclose a student's criminal behavior to the principal unless they consider the student a danger to himself or the public. But Barlow's bill would require school system administrators to report any felonious acts to the principal at the school in which the offender is enrolled.

Michael McPherson, superintendent of Isle of Wight County Public Schools, said his locality doesn't have a problem with delinquent students. Nonetheless, he said he welcomes any legislation that would allow school officials to better monitor students.

The House Education Committee last week voted 22-0 in favor of Barlow's proposal, House Bill 1279. On Monday, the House approved the bill, 99-0. It now heads to the Senate for consideration.

Capital News Service is staffed by students from the School of Mass Communications at **Virginia Commonwealth University**. They provide state government news coverage for news outlets throughout Virginia including *Richmond.com*.

A service of Richmond.com

All material copyright © 1999 - 2003 Richmond.com and Partners.