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Minnechaug bill on school lockdowns moves to Massachusetts Statehouse

By Douglas Farmer, *Staff Writer—Wilbraham/Hampden Times*

WILBRAHAM—There will be a lot of hurdles for a bill proposed by Minnechaug Regional High School’s Model Congress team concerning statewide standards for school lockdowns to get through at the state level, said State Rep. Cheryl Coakley-Rivera (D-Springfield). But just by filing, the students will get people in school districts across the state to consider the issue, she said.

The bill, formally presented to Coakley-Rivera and State Rep. Gale Candaras (D-Wilbraham) at the high school on Friday, April 7, would expand upon current concepts such as “shelter in place” where in the event of an intruder in a primary or secondary school doors would be locked, lights would be turned out, windows would be shaded and students would quietly hide in a part of the room. With the aid of local police departments and other agencies, special precaution would also be taken for larger rooms such as cafeterias, said Minnechaug sophomore Kevin Fogarty, who wrote much of the bill.

Front row (r-l) State Rep. Gale Candaras, Model Congress Advisor MaryLou Brewer, President Meagan Richard, Vice President Ashley Han and Brian Stack; back row (l-r) are Minnechaug Principal M. Martin O’Shea, Model Congress members Kevin Fogarty (author of the bill), Andrew Rzeznik, Treasurer Philip LaCombe, and Jen Madawar, with State Rep. Cheryl Coakley-Rivera and Assistant School Superintendent Donna Scanlon. Model Congress student members not pictured are Doug Moore and Ben Rsczek



Two Drills Per Semester

It also calls for two drills of these procedures per semester, with possible federal funds targeted for this purpose.

Coakley-Rivera said the bill could have financial impact not just on the local district, but on cities such as Springfield and Boston that would have to invest substantial money on such drills. But she also said she was pleased the students had considered various forms of funding.

Mary Lou Brewer, the chairwoman of the high school’s history department and long-time advisor to the Model Congress team, said while many bills are proposed and defended at the annual competition at American International College, this is the first time anything was ever sent to the statehouse for consideration.

Minnechaug students took first, second, third and fourth place delegate awards, as well as “outstanding delegation” at the 66th annual Model Congress competition held at AIC Jan. 12 to 14.

“There is something special about this group, and they really have a desire to make a difference,” said Brewer last week. “They are learning about participation in citizenship and have spent a long time meeting, plotting and planning.”

Minnechaug senior and Model Congress team member Benjamin Rusczek said in their group discussions it was determined statewide standards were incomplete when it came to preparing for such school emergencies and that it may be time to take the issue to the next level.

“We have worked with the local police departments and the state has been great in communicating with us,” said Rusczek. “Gina Kahn (the district’s coordinator of risk prevention services) has helped out a lot, and it’s been good to get support from Candaras’ office. Our group has had disagreements, that’s kind of what the Model Congress is about; but it has been nice for us all to team up on something.”

Coakley-Rivera said she could help with advancing the bill through the legislature’s public safety committee (which she chairs) but it might also require input from the House Ways and Means Committee and the education committee. But both she and Candaras said with enough support, it does have a real chance.

“Any letters you get or testimony in support would be helpful, and I think you should be prepared to come to Boston to testify,” said Candaras. “It can take several sessions to get a bill passed sometimes, but we’ll certainly do what we can.”

William Metzger, an aide to Candaras, said he began working with the Minnechaug students several months ago to put together rough language for the legislation, and said he was excited about the idea immediately.

“We’ve thought a lot about complications that could come up in a school intruder situation, and the bill gives a good deal of latitude to local agencies and the state police to be involved in planning,” said Fogarty.

Hampden-Wilbraham Regional School District Superintendent Paul Gagliarducci, present at last week’s presentation, said he was proud the students had already come this far with the legislation.

“Politics is about compromise and I think you need to be prepared for the bill to come out not exactly as it was initially,” he said. “But this is a good idea and it is something that everybody should be doing.”