

Equipment purchases should help increase security at schools

By OWEN MACDONALD

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READING - The purchase of approximately \$11,000 worth of walkie-talkies and other communication equipment is the latest in a series of steps taken by the School Department to increase security levels and emergency response times in the seven public schools.

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The equipment, purchased out of funds from the Fiscal Year 1999 budget, included one high-powered walkie-talkie for each school, and seven low-powered walkie-talkies for use exclusively in the high school.

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In a memo to the School Committee, Superintendent of Schools Dr. Harry Harutunian indicated that the high-powered walkie-talkies will all use the Central Office as the main communication center, but the equipment would also afford each principal the ability to contact any of the other principals if need be.

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Currently, said Harutunian, the only way for a principal to react in an emergency where the phone lines are out is to pull a fire alarm. The new communications system, once in place, will provide the administrators with another option.

At the high school, the principal and two assistant principals will also have access to a low-powered walkie-talkie, as will three administrative secretaries, with another walkie talkie for back-up. That equipment will be for use exclusively within the high school for any internal situation that may warrant their use.

In his presentation to the School Committee, Harutunian indicated that an emergency can be anything from a student having a seizure to an abusive parent to an act of violence, and the response may be different depending on the circumstances (such as grade-level, degree of seriousness, or whether the emergency is group or individually based.)

Harutunian also delivered the news last week that the School Department's emergency response plan may not be ready for publication before school begins, as was anticipated earlier this year.

The plan's development includes police and fire department walk-throughs of the buildings, as well as each principal meeting with Lieutenant Robert Silva, head of Reading's SWAT team.

"At this time," wrote Harutunian, "I don't anticipate having the written procedures ready for the opening of school."

The School Department will, however, have their Safety Line up and running with the start of school. Harutunian's office will send off approximately 20,000 business cards with the Safety Line's number, 1-888-3-HOT-TIP, printed on it home to parents this fall. Harutunian hopes that students will use the number to confidentially report any number of incidents in the school, from cheating to bullying to weekend beer parties.

Dr. Harutunian also offered one other piece of good news: Reading, along with twenty-seven other towns in the area, has applied for a state grant that could supply around \$2 million for emergency training and planning.

"If this grant comes through," said Harutunian, "a lot of the things we have talked about will be done, and taken to a higher level as well."