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## Policing our schools

Sgt. John Morella, president of the  
New Jersey Association of School  
Resource Officers **PAGE 10**



# Policing our schools: New Jersey ahead of most

## Resource officers try to improve the odds

■ BY KAREN DEMASTERS

Newark Special Police Officer Dwayne A. Reeves was shot and killed outside Weequahic High School in Newark in the summer of 2005 after breaking up a fight between two young women. He had worked in the Newark schools for three years when he was killed at the age of 35.

His death, and the rash of killings in schools across the country in recent months, is a graphic reminder that working in a school is not an easy or safe assignment for a police officer. The New Jersey Association School Resource Officers (NIASRO), representing the officers assigned to schools throughout the state, tries to improve those odds with proper training.

The association has trained 600 officers in the five years it has been in existence and about 270 school districts in the state now hire officers to patrol the halls and teach a variety of classes.

New Jersey is ahead of much of the rest of the nation in that a state law now mandates that a training curriculum be developed for School Resource Officers and that is being done with the assistance of the state Police Training Commission, said Sgt. John Morella, a school resource officer at West Orange High School and NIASRO president. Until now, New Jersey, like other states, used a national curriculum.

"We want to make sure the departments are putting qualified people into the schools," Morella said. "And we do not want to put someone in the school who does not want to be there. It is not a question of 'if' violence is going to happen; it is a question of 'when.'"

NIASRO was invited to attend a recent National School Safety Conference in Chevy Chase, MD, at the request of the White House. The conference was attended by President George W. Bush, Attorney General Alberto Gonzales, US Education Secretary Margaret Spellings, crisis counselors and a survivor of the Columbine, CO, High School shooting seven years ago.

The conference was designed to develop standards for combating school violence. The conference included law enforcement officials, schools officials, community representatives and families to discuss best practices for preventing violence.

"Never has the need for school resource officer training been more necessary than it is today," said Robert V. Tessaro, NIASRO executive director. "The events of the past few weeks have shown us how vulnerable our schools can be if the proper steps are not taken to ensure the safety of the students and staff."

"NIASRO supports the efforts of the White House to develop a plan to help combat the wave of school violence that has been infecting the United States," Morella said. "Our organization represents the police officers who walk the halls of New Jersey schools, and are often the first responders in cases of violence. We are asking that the federal government devote as much resources to protecting our schools as it does to protecting our bridges, tunnels and infrastructures."

School safety officers often were hired during the Clinton administration when community policing grants were available. Some schools have managed to continue the practice, despite budget cutbacks, Morella said.

Some funding is now available through American Recycling Technologies (ART), an organization that puts clothing bins in public locations to collect donations. The company donates money to police departments that will sponsor the bins, the sergeant said.

Communities interested in the program should contact Michael Conway at ART at 917-807-2174.

"We can't prevent all violence, but we can mitigate it," he added.

The West Orange schools recently installed a security system using matching federal grants that includes electronic identification cards for students and personnel, and digital cameras in the schools.

"It has definitely made an impact. The rate of suspensions has gone down and our thefts have gone down," he added.

"We also want to get officers into as many classrooms as possible. We can teach a variety of things, in addition to legal and law enforcement classes, safe driving courses, and anti-drugs and alcohol instructions. We can go to a science class and analyze how a breathalyzer works; we can go to a math class and analyze an automobile accident scene," Morella said. "We want to break down barriers between the cops and the kids and make us more approachable."

NIASRO conducts a training class for responding to school shootings in the Atlantic City schools each year. NIASRO would like mandated school shooter training for all officers, a national reporting system for school violence, mandated education for school faculty on dealing with crises, increased federal funding for resource officer training and federal grants to pay for school resource officers..

"We would like all officers to be trained in active school shooting and we are working for funds to do that," said Tessaro. "A school resource officer from Bailey, CO (where Duane Morrison sexually molested a group of girls and then shot one before shooting himself in September) told me the schools would have lost even more children that day if the school resource officers had not been as well trained as they were.

"That officer said he lived in a small



PHOTO BY DENIS MILANO

Sgt. John Morella, a school resource officer at West Orange High School and NJASRO president, addresses students.

town and never thought anything like this would ever happen there. We want active school shooter training to be mandated nationally. It is not a case of 'what if violence occurs' but 'what now' when it does," Tessaro said.

"Most people think it is a good idea to have officers in schools, but the flow of information needs to be better," he added.

Contrary to what many believe, statistics show that out of 600 school shootings that have occurred in the United States since 1990, in 80 percent of the cases the shooters told someone ahead of time they were going to do it. Four out of five of those shootings occurred outside the school in a playground or parking lot, rather than indoors. In New Jersey, 1,500 incidents

of weapons in schools were reported last year and NJASRO believes many schools are underreporting.

"Ninety percent of our officers report taking a weapon of some sort off of a student during the year," Tessaro said.

Educators also need to be taught what to do when confronted with signs of potential violence.

"At one New Jersey school meeting recently, parents swore there was no problem with gangs. The SRO offered to take the parents to the boys' bathroom where he had found gang graffiti on the walls. The point was the presence of gangs needed to be acknowledged, and the graffiti needed to be documented before it was erased in case it was useful in some future investigation," he added.

NJASRO will hold its fourth annual school safety conference in Atlantic City Nov 8-10. The conference will include active shooter training and table top exercises for critical incident responding.

"As the nation again mourns the loss of young life in senseless school violence, law enforcement agencies and school districts continue to search for answers on how they can best prepare for and prevent such incidents in the future," the conference website notes. The conference includes presentations by experts on school violence and is held in conjunction with the New Jersey Education Association annual conference in Atlantic City that same week. Additional information can be found at [www.njasro.com](http://www.njasro.com).

# Corzine stumps for SAVE

BY KAREN DEMASTERS

In response to the recent rash of school shootings, Gov. Jon S. Corzine created a school security initiative known as SAVE, Strategic Actions for Violence Elimination that will include active participation with law enforcement and the community.

The governor's office said the program is designed to help "ensure close and routine coordination with school officials, to review school security plans, to exercise school lockdown and active shooter protocols and participate in other crime prevention types of programs."

"We've all been saddened and shaken by the recent school attacks that have given a life-and-death urgency to the call for strengthening our protections for kids," Corzine said. This plan "will take real steps towards making our schools truly secure, and addresses gun safety issues at the same time, to ensure our efforts to keep our children safe will be effective."

The program grew out of the School Security Task Force, which the gover-



PHOTO FROM THE OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR

Many gathered to mark the new SAVE initiative. From left to right are: Dr. Elizabeth Holley, NJASRO education consultant; Sgt. John Morella, West Orange PD, NJASRO president; Robert V. Tessaro, NJASRO executive director; Fort Lee Det. Louis Yocovelli; NJ State Trooper Gregory Williams, NJASRO Region 2 director; Gov. Corzine; Fort Lee Chief Thomas Ripoli; Wayne Det. Christian Wittig, NJASRO Region 1 director; Fort Lee Det. Sgt. Patrick Kissane, NJASRO 1st vice president; West Orange P.O. Keith Holley, NJASRO treasurer Saddle River Det. Timothy Gerity, NJASRO 2nd vice president; Fort Lee Deputy Chief John Reuter; and Saddle Brook Chief Robert Kugler, NJ State Association of Chiefs of Police 1st vice president.

nor created to examine the issue of school violence. SAVE will be headed by Richard L. Cañas, director of the state Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness.

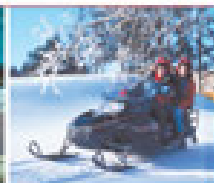
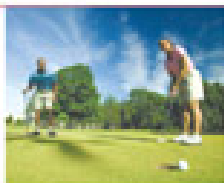
Corzine said he will work with the federal government and other states to enact

stricter gun control laws based on New Jersey as a model. He will also ask for legislation to require each school in the state to run security exercises and drills.

The Police Training Commission will be asked to modify curriculum that is under development for school resource officers.

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