

Issue Data On School Incidents, Report Says

Agency Advises ^{w. post} ⁹⁻²⁰⁻⁰¹
Montgomery System

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The Montgomery County school system should notify the public about criminal activity and other serious incidents that occur on school campuses or buses or at school-sponsored events, a county agency recommended in a report released yesterday.

In a 77-page report commissioned by the Montgomery County Council, the Office of Legislative Oversight examined the school system's method for tracking fights, bomb threats and other serious incidents. It found that although the district has tracked the incidents since 1973, the figures are not released publicly and the information is not detailed enough to allow school officials to identify trends or even the number of times a student has been in trouble.

The report also said that by November, the school system, police department and state's attorney's office should develop guidelines for what types of incidents school officials must report to authorities.

Police officers and prosecutors are seeking the guidelines because they believe principals sometimes deal with criminal activity internally. But negotiations over the guidelines have been contentious, and reaching an agreement has been difficult, said council member Phil Andrews (D-Gaithersburg-Rockville), chairman of the council's public safety committee.

"It needs to be resolved," he said. "The agencies have had plenty of time to meet and talk about

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it."

The legislative office, which examines county government operations, also said Montgomery should push state officials to pass legislation that would require all public school systems to offer similar public reports. Under current law, they are required to release information about incidents of bullying and intimidation and the number of suspensions and expulsions.

"The superintendent and Board of Education will review the report and decide the appropriate course of action to take," said schools spokesman Brian Edwards.

Edwards said that despite the shortcomings cited in the report,

system officials believe they have done a good job of keeping parents and the public informed about serious incidents.

He said Montgomery officials last spring began testing at 10 campuses a system designed to gather more information about serious incidents. Previously, the system collected basic information about incidents: the school, the time and day, and a description of the incident. The new system, which will be used in all schools beginning in January, will also identify the student involved, the types of injuries and whether there was gang involvement.

Though schools in Montgomery are relatively safe, high-profile incidents such as the gang-related

stabbing at Springbrook High School in August 2005, followed a month later by the fatal stabbing of a 15-year-old girl after a football game at Blake High School, have left some parents wondering whether schools are doing enough to reach troubled students.

Alice Gordon, a community activist and substitute teacher, said she believes some principals are reluctant to publicize crime and discipline problems because they fear the incidents would reflect poorly on their performance.

"Nobody wants to deal with it," said Gordon, a member of the county's gang task force. "There has to be a big crisis before action is taken. But who's going to be our next crisis?"