

Many schools will start the new year with stricter safety, armed guards

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Marjory Stoneman Douglas students were given clear backpacks as part of their school's new security measures after the February 14, 2018, school shooting in which 17 people were killed. Photo: Emilee McGovern/SOPA Images/LightRocket via Getty Images

MIAMI, Florida — Six-year-old Tyhler Herrera knows exactly where he will soon start school.

"KIPP Miami," he says proudly. The first-grader also knows elementary school means new responsibilities, like bringing home good grades and doing chores around the house to help his mother, Jessica Rodriguez.

Rodriguez also knows Tyhler's school will be different. Soon, she will have a tough conversation with officials there: Who will be patrolling the campus with a gun? How will they be screened? Are they mentally stable? Then, she will have to talk to Tyhler about school safety, too.

"I never saw the day where I was going to have to have these conversations with the school, let alone with my child about what are the possibilities that surround this," the 30-year-old Rodriguez said. "I can't believe that I would have to have this conversation."

Changes Are In Place For South Florida Schools

Public school families across Florida have a different first day of school ahead compared with past years. The 2018-19 school year brings new school safety laws. The laws were created after a former student killed 17 and wounded 17 more at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High in Parkland, Florida. Every school campus will have an armed employee, increased security technology, and stricter rules.

School districts have spent the summer scrambling to hire security staff by the time students arrive in mid-August. It's a big change for elementary schools, but most middle and high schools in South Florida already have a school resource officer.

"Parents will want this to be dealt (with) in a delicate manner, particularly for younger children," said Nancy Lawther, the new president of the Miami-Dade County Council of Parent Teacher Associations and Parent Teacher Student Associations. "But people forget, high-schoolers are children, too."

Police Chief Says Schools "Will Be Safer Than Ever"

The Miami-Dade Schools Police Department, established in 1957, is looking for school resource officers that have a unique skill set, including someone who is like a mentor, coach and parental figure, said Edwin Lopez, Miami-Dade Schools' new police chief. The district is in a hiring spree, recruiting about 10 officers a month.

"As a former elementary teacher, I know the importance of law enforcement," Lopez said, even for young students. "I feel that our elementary schools will be safer than ever before."

A school resource officer's salary and benefits, such as health insurance, cost about \$100,000. About 90 Miami-Dade schools remained uncovered as of July 25.

Facing a shortage of sworn law enforcement officers for hire, the Broward County School Board where Stoneman Douglas High is located had no choice but to reverse its plan to only use school resource officers. They will hire armed security guards instead. The main difference is officers have received more job training on protecting people.

Safety In The Big Picture

As of July, Broward County had 17 applicants training to become armed guards. According to the Chief of Staff Jeff Moquin, they expect another group of 30 to qualify in August.

"Our community expects us to make sure that we have armed security on our campuses, and we're going to make that happen," Broward Superintendent Robert Runcie told reporters. The school leader gave them a tour of new security improvements at Miramar High in late July.

Runcie said his district will send a message to parents before the first day of school reminding them safety is a top concern, but the district's core work is teaching and learning.

"We can't forget about the other pieces. We've got to create and get back to some sense of normalcy that includes not just the academics, all the great programs that we have," he said. "Athletics, music, art, debate programs, clubs throughout the county. All those things that keep kids engaged, that to me is part of the whole safety picture."

Is Increased Safety Distracting?

Aside from hiring officers, Miami-Dade County will increase security technologies that will be mostly invisible to students and parents, said Superintendent Alberto Carvalho. He said parents should expect new closed-circuit, real-time TV systems, a synchronized radio feed, only one building entrance, more police dogs and ID checks. There will also be a new electronic ID on school visitors' smartphones allowing schools to track where visitors go.

"Our theory of action going forward is that the parents and students do not see it as a different school year," Carvalho said. "We're going to strike a balance between safety and normalcy that schools bring to kids."

Even if the changes are behind the curtain, it's a new normal for parents who have never dealt with preparing against an active shooter.

"It starts to feel almost like a police state," parent Nicole Crooks said. She wonders if security will help students learn or distract them. "I struggle with the fact that I want every child to feel safe, but what exactly does that look like? Does that really mean having them surrounded by armed security all around? And who is to say that will really and truly make the difference?"

Handle Concerns With Honesty

Dr. Nicole Mavrides, a University of Miami mental health specialist for children and adolescents, said parents should talk to their children about safety and the importance of "see something, say something" over the summer.

"For us, it's so foreign, but if you grew up having these drills multiple times a year or seeing police around the school, it's not going to be any different because it's all you know," said Mavrides, who went to Stoneman Douglas and now lives in Parkland. "Most kids are going to be able to be resilient and work through stuff like that."

In case students are worried, Mavrides suggests parents ask open-ended questions about their children's concerns and answer questions honestly, emphasizing that school guards and safety technology are there for their protection. Parents may also want to watch their children for trouble sleeping and changes in appetite in the weeks leading up to school.

Quiz

- 1 Read the paragraph from the section "Handle Concerns With Honesty."

In case students are worried, Mavrides suggests parents ask open-ended questions about their children's concerns and answer questions honestly, emphasizing that school guards and safety technology are there for their protection. Parents may also want to watch their children for trouble sleeping and changes in appetite in the weeks leading up to school.

Which of the following can be inferred from this paragraph?

- (A) Students likely are eager to check out the new technology and security systems installed in their schools.
 - (B) Students might be worried about their safety as the beginning of the school year approaches.
 - (C) Parents do not need to worry because students will speak up if they are upset before school starts.
 - (D) Parents might not be truthful when talking to students who are concerned about how safe their schools are.
- 2 Is the author suggesting that Florida's new school safety laws have been implemented without any difficulty? Which detail from the article BEST supports your response?
- (A) Yes; It's a big change for elementary schools, but most middle and high schools in South Florida already have a school resource officer.
 - (B) No; "Parents will want this to be dealt (with) in a delicate manner, particularly for younger children," said Nancy Lawther, the new president of the Miami-Dade County Council of Parent Teacher Associations and Parent Teacher Student Associations.
 - (C) Yes; "As a former elementary teacher, I know the importance of law enforcement," Lopez said, even for young students. "I feel that our elementary schools will be safer than ever before."
 - (D) No; Facing a shortage of sworn law enforcement officers for hire, the Broward County School Board where Stoneman Douglas High is located had no choice but to reverse its plan to only use school resource officers. They will hire armed security guards instead.

- 3 Which of the following sentences from the article BEST develops a CENTRAL idea of the article?
- (A) Every school campus will have an armed employee, increased security technology and stricter rules.
 - (B) The district is in a hiring spree, recruiting about 10 officers a month.
 - (C) A school resource officer's salary and benefits, such as health insurance, cost about \$100,000.
 - (D) According to the Chief of Staff Jeff Moquin, they expect another group of 30 to qualify in August.
- 4 Which option provides an accurate and objective summary of the article?
- (A) New school safety laws will mean changes for students and parents to adjust to, but school and law enforcement officials feel confident that Florida's schools are now safer.
 - (B) The safety laws that have been implemented by Florida's schools were long overdue, but school officials have worked tirelessly to ensure they will be in place this year.
 - (C) Parents are sharply divided over the usefulness of the safety measures that schools are putting in place this year, and school boards are working to win over all parents' approval.
 - (D) Students have not shown much interest in the new safety measures that their schools have adopted, and instead are looking forward to their academics, athletics and other activities.