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Gun range in school is targeted as health, safety issue

By Robert Gutsche Jr
October 17, 2007

SHEBOYGAN, Wis. - When Lisa Janairo read the word "Range" - as in gun range - on a basement door at her children's middle school here last year, she saw it as something of a relic.

Of course there wouldn't be a gun range in a school today, she thought.

But she learned that in the basement beneath science and English classrooms at Urban Middle School there was indeed a shooting range, where members of a sports club and others fired rifles and pistols for target practice, sometimes during school events.

"I was surprised, because I never would have suspected to have something like that in my child's school," said Janairo, 41, a mother of three formerly of Chicago.

Sheboygan Area Schools Supt. Joe Sheehan said he knows of no other schools with shooting ranges on campus and said he often gets raised eyebrows from other educators around Wisconsin when he talks about the gun range at Urban Middle School. But while data are hard to come by, military and national gun advocates say it has been common for decades to have school rifle ranges, and Sheboygan is among several districts around the country facing this issue.

Last month, the Plum Borough School District Board, about 15 miles east of Pittsburgh, voted to allow an Air Force Junior ROTC air-rifle club use a high school rifle range for marksmanship training. The range is in the basement of a school with more than 1,500 students.

Paul Helmke, president of the Washington-based Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence, said gun ranges in schools have dwindled since World War II. But interest in the military fed by the war in Iraq seems to be making sportshooting more prevalent.

"Gun ranges themselves doesn't concern me," said Helmke, who attended a school in Indiana that had an indoor shooting range. "If anything, we need more of that [education] in this country. But if I were a school administrator, I would think long and hard before I would want that liability."

Meanwhile, Janairo had learned the Sheboygan range was contaminated with lead released during the firing of guns. School officials say the lead levels weren't high enough to have harmed students.

But that news combined with the occasional sound of bullets hitting metal targets during school concerts, led Janairo and another parent last year to start a campaign to get the range cleaned up or shut for good.

After an initial cleanup last summer, the range remained closed while Sheboygan schools administrators gathered the estimated costs for replacing the ventilation system in the gun range. Those numbers are being reviewed by the Sheboygan Rifle & Pistol Club, which uses the facility and would be financially responsible for the upgrade. A decision is expected late next month.

Janairo said she wonders about the message the range sends.

"If you have guns in school, that does away with the whole zero-tolerance policy," she said. "Guns and school don't mix."

Sheboygan Rifle & Pistol Club member Augie Margenau, 67, said the range has always been a safe place to teach hunter safety and that the club is no threat to students.

"Why not have it in a school?" he asked. "No one has ever been affected in the school by the lead" and "nothing has been pinpointed that anything came from the range that led to violence."

The range is an important part of the community, Margenau said, where generations of hunters have learned responsible practices.

"This is like a person putting together a knitting club. It serves the public," he added.

But questions about the range are louder since last year's shooting death of Weston Schools Principal John Klang near Baraboo, about 115 miles southwest of Sheboygan. More recently, a 20-year-old police officer gunned down his ex-girlfriend and five other young people Oct. 7 in Crandon. And at an Ohio school last week, a 14-year-old student shot two students and two teachers before killing himself.

Critics ask whether guns should enter school doors at all. Margenau points out that shooters bring their guns in cases and enter the range from an alley through a back door.

Sheehan said the district might close the range if it costs too much to clean up, but not because of the perception that it could breed violence.

"There's not really conflict here," Sheehan said. "It is that simple."

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