

# Mt. Olive Chronicle

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## School violence is on the increase

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MOUNT OLIVE TWP – The number of violence-related incidents in township schools went up significantly last year over the prior year, according to the latest state report on violence in schools around New Jersey.

The district has a total of 4,739 students in grades K-12. A total of 46 incidents were reported for the 2003-04 school year. That was an increase from the 29 reported incidents for the 2002-03 school year, according to the report.

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The most recent report showed 30 incidents of violence, three weapons incidents and three vandalism incidents. There was also 11 instances of substance abuse reported.

Superintendent of Schools Rosalie LaMonte said Monday that there are a variety of reasons why the number went up.

“In 2003-04, Mount Olive showed some increase in incidents related to violence and substance abuse over the prior year, while incidents of vandalism remained the same and incidents related to weapons decreased,” LaMonte said.

“The increase in the number of incidents of violence occurred mostly at the high school. We believe this may be related to overcrowded conditions at the high school, as well as three changes in administration during that school year,” she said.

She also said that more diligent reporting of incidents may explain the increase.

“The increase in incidents related to substance abuse we believe is definitely due to greater vigilance and also a change in reporting whereby last year, for the first time, we were to report students suspected of substance abuse and not just those confirmed,” she said.

“This year (04-05), we have seen a substantial decrease in the number of disciplinary referrals at the high school as compared to 2003-04. We attribute this decrease to higher student expectations in both academics and behavior, as well as the addition of a third vice principal whose primary responsibility is the freshman class,” LaMonte said.

The state Department of Education released its annual violence, vandalism and substance abuse report for the state’s public schools for the 2003-04 school year last week.

In Morris County, there was a total student enrollment last school year of 78,536. In total, there were 489 incidents of violence reported by districts in the county, 183 incidents of vandalism, 64 instances of weapons in schools reported and 120 reports of substance abuse.

### Roxbury Down

Neighboring Roxbury saw the number of violent incidents down slightly, and Superintendent of Schools Dennis Mack credited many anti-bullying and anti-harassment programs for the numbers.

The district enrollment is 4,635 students. For the 2003-04 school year, there were 25 incidents of violence, two incidents of reported vandalism, four weapons in schools incidents and 12 substance abuse reports.

In total, Roxbury reported 43 incidents for the 2003-04 school year. For the 2003-03 school year, a total of 44 incidents were reported.

“Obviously, we don’t have many incidents in the grammar schools. Most of our incidents come from the high school. There’s a list, where you describe the incident as either an aggravated assault, fighting, gang activity, threats, kidnapping, bullying. There’s a check off box for substance abuse. These incidents are recorded when they happen. We do keep close track,” Mack said.

He said, however, that simple shouting matches and arguments aren’t considered violence. If physical contact occurs, and if blows are thrown, the incident is recorded as a violent incident.

He pointed to an anti-bullying assembly last year by Guardian Angels founder Curtis Sliwa. Another recent assembly was designed to promote acceptance and tolerance and understanding.

“If you have four kids in one fight, that’s considered four incidents. So, even though 43 sounds like more than we want to see, it’s not necessarily really that much,” Mack said.

He said none of Roxbury’s incidents were aggravated assault.

“If someone puts on a pair of brass knuckles and really hurts someone else, that’s an aggravated assault. We did not have any of those,” he said.

“Our anti-bullying and anti-harassment initiatives really help with this. Today, kids are taught that what they might think is a joke can be considered a biased incident. Bullying is reported. It has gotten very strict. If a kid feels they are being bullied, it gets reported, but we have programs in place that try to deter those type of behavior among students,” Mack said.

According to the state Department of Education, more than two-thirds of the schools in New Jersey, or 69 percent, reported five or fewer incidents of violence, vandalism or substance abuse during the 03-04 school year, with one school in three, or 34 percent, reporting no incidents at all, according to the annual report.

The report, which is required by statute, is compiled from the data that the state collects from schools through the Electronic Violence and Vandalism Reporting System and is submitted annually.

According to the state, the report is extremely detailed, ranging from fighting, trespassing, theft and fireworks possession to major behavioral problems such as assault, extortion and possession of firearms and drugs at more than 2,400 statewide public and charter schools.

“This report shows that the overwhelming majority of our schools are safe places where teachers can teach and children can learn,” Acting Gov. Richard Codey said in a statement issued with the report last week.

The total number of incidents reported by school districts was 20,207. That’s down statewide by 1,979 or nine percent from the 22,186 incidents reported in 2002-03. Only 10 percent of the schools reported 25 or more incidents, and that’s down 12 percent from the year before.