Drug-sniffing dogs to search schools

The program, which Newport-Mesa district abandoned several years ago, will return to the halls after spring break.

By Michael Miller, Daily Pilot

The Newport-Mesa Unified School District plans to reinstate the use of drug-sniffing dogs at its secondary-school campuses this spring, subjecting each middle and high school to random searches at least once a year.

Several years ago, the district stopped conducting the searches due to unease over recent nationwide lawsuits, most filed by the American Civil Liberties Union, which argued that bringing drug-sniffing dogs onto campus violated students' civil rights.

However, after a number of requests from administrators and school resource officers, the district decided this year to begin conducting limited searches again.

"Every school has issues with drugs," said Jaime Castellanos, assistant superintendent for secondary education. "I've worked in the parochial and public school systems and they both have them. Drugs are unfortunately a problem with society, and they do trickle into the schools."

The searches, according to student services director Mike Murphy, will take place at each school about twice a year and will only entail inspections of students' lockers and cars. Most of the ACLU lawsuits -- filed in northern California, South Dakota, New Mexico and elsewhere -- centered around dogs inspecting students' clothes and backpacks, a procedure that Newport-Mesa forbids.

In February 1995, the district first instituted police dog searches after the school board voted 5-2 in favor of them. Over the next few years, the Costa Mesa and Newport Beach police departments provided dogs to inspect the school grounds. While the dogs rarely uncovered anything in Newport-Mesa, nationwide tension over the issue caused the district to temporarily abandon the procedure.

"I think our board just backed off for a couple years," Murphy said. "There were several cases out there and our board was being prudent and wanted to make sure that we didn't get caught in a court case."

The searches, Murphy and Castellanos said, will most likely begin after spring break; the district hopes to have searched all of its secondary schools by June 2006. In recent weeks, site principals have sent letters home to parents informing them of the inspections.

Jane Garland, spokeswoman for the district, said the dog searches were mostly preventive and that Newport-Mesa has minimal drug problems compared to other schools.

"We have no reason to believe we're looking for something," Garland said. "It's a deterrent, and it's proactive."

Sgt. Larry Hicks, who runs the canine unit for the Costa Mesa police, said searches are usually conducted when classes are in session. Officers and dogs walk down the corridors accompanied by school officials, and tag any lockers that appear suspicious. If students are suspected of drug possession, the schools will decide on the consequences and notify the police of their actions.

Despite the volume of nationwide court cases protesting the use of dogs, Newport-Mesa never drew such a complaint during the years that it conducted searches.
"We got a little backlash from the community, but not a lot," said Lynne Bloomberg, who coordinated the district's Safe and Drug Free School program during the 1990s. "It was mostly community activists, people who didn't have kids at the schools. The dogs were a little bit different and more dramatic than other things we had done."

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