

Guardian Angels helping at York's William Penn

Group has been volunteering at city high school, to the surprise of some officials

By ANGIE MASON
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The Guardian Angels have been walking the halls of William Penn Senior High School this year, news that came as a surprise to some school officials.

Mike Smith, leader of the York chapter of the Guardian Angels, said his group has been in the school during the day about four times since it opened last week.

"We're just patrolling the halls," he said.

School district officials said the Angels are there as volunteers but not security.

"They are absolutely not any kind of security or enforcement presence in the district," said Jonathan Heintzman, school spokesman.

Rona Kaufmann, principal at William Penn, said the Angels are volunteers like any parent or grandparent that might help in the school.

"They're kind of just like a presence," she said.

"They're walking the halls, in the cafeteria when we serve lunches."

School board vice president Tom Foust said he was not aware of their presence and views it as more than just a typical parent volunteer, "based on what I know about them and what their functions have been in the city."

Kaufmann and Heintzman said they act as role models for the students.

"They're there to build relationships with them," Heintzman said.

Smith said the Angels have the respect of students.

"We know them, they know us," he said. "It makes it real easy."

He said the Angels will be at the school three days a week, from about 11 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.

Kaufmann said there was no set schedule or agreement.

"We will take whatever help we can get from our community," she said. She said the group was helpful the day there was a hazmat incident nearby at the post office. The Angels helped keep students out of the area.

Smith said that the details of what the group will do are still being worked out. He said they are not enforcing school rules, they are just around to help.

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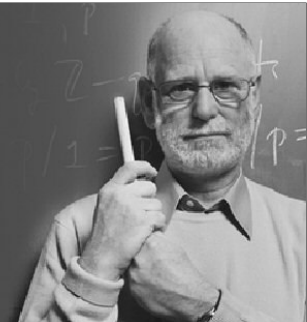


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"Now, (we're) just a visual deterrent to fights and things of that nature," he said. On the first day, he said, the group assisted in breaking up a scuffle, restraining one student.

Kaufmann said she thought they'd be acting as any adult would do in such a situation, though it "certainly wouldn't be anything I'd encourage (them) to do."

She said the school has its own security team -- one school resource officer, two security officers and six hall monitors -- and staff, who "would intervene in a situation long before there'd be any community volunteers that would be engaging," she said. "They're not really here for that purpose. They're here as just additional presence."

She said that the Angels, like other volunteers, are never alone with students. Other staff are always around.

Heintzman said volunteers have to go through criminal clearance checks if they have unsupervised interaction with students.

Some school board members raised concerns about the group's presence.

Jeanette Torres, president of the board, said the board had not been informed about the Angels' presence.

Even if they are volunteers, "the fact that they are the Guardian Angels, there is a reason to have a discussion about that," she said.

Foust said he had heard the group suggested as a possibility for school sporting events, and he urged caution, saying there could be legal issues.

He said guidelines should be established as to what exactly the Angels can do. There could be risks associated when dealing with restraint or discipline, he said.

Kaufmann said she had not involved the school board, viewing it as a volunteer matter.

"I believe our board supports community volunteerism," she said.

Earlier this year, the school board and city had discussed the possibility of having six city police officers in schools, but federal grant funding for the plan didn't come through. The district then hired several safety and security officers.

About the Guardian Angels

The Guardian Angels are a national nonprofit, volunteer crime-prevention group that began patrolling city streets last year. The York group has about 25 to 30 members, said chapter leader Mike Smith.

"I'm happy with the first year," Smith said. "Things are better in York."

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