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Students use new app to anonymously report concerns

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A new state violence prevention program teaches students to recognize warning signs and signals and submit concerns anonymously through a tip line, website or cellphone app.

And, in the first week of Safe2Say Something, hundreds of students across the state had something to say.

Area school districts trained teachers and administrators, and for the last two weeks, introduced the program to students. Some schools already investigated concerns.

Lakeland students learned about the app on Thursday. By the end of the day, a student used the system to alert administrators about a concern.

“The kids seem receptive,” Superintendent William King said. “It seems like a great tool that will keep our students safe and our school district safe.”

Funded by the Pennsylvania legislature and signed into law by Gov. Tom Wolf last year, the Safe2Say system is based on strict principles of anonymity and confidentiality to encourage reporting of problems, potential threats of violence, self-harm or other incidents.

In the program’s initial week, the system received 615 tips. A crisis center reviews, assesses and processes all submissions and sends them to school administration and/or law enforcement for intervention.

Crisis center analysts processed every tip and referred more than several hundred to local law enforcement and school officials to follow up and interact with students, according to the Pennsylvania attorney general’s office, which runs the program.

Last week, Hazleton police took a 14-year-old into custody after learning of a gun threat posted on social media from a tip made through Safe2Say.

“Pennsylvania students deserve a safe place to learn, free from the threat of violence from classmates or other individuals,” Attorney General Josh Shapiro said in a news release. “We’ll never know if this threat would have resulted in yet another tragic school shooting, but thanks to a tip that came in through Safe2Say Something — and the swift response of Hazleton-area law enforcement — fortunately all we are doing now is wondering, rather than mourning.”

The attorney general’s office is working closely with Sandy Hook Promise on education and outreach on how to use the reporting system. Sandy Hook Promise, a non-profit organization based in Newtown, Connecticut, formed after the 2012 school shooting there.

Most area school districts already have reporting systems for bullying and other concerns.

“They obviously can talk to any adult in the building, but this is just another avenue,” Old Forge Superintendent John Rushefski said. “If students have an app, by all means, we want them to use the mode of reporting they’re most comfortable with.”

When Abington Heights introduced the system, several students came forward with concerns, Superintendent Michael Mahon, Ph.D., said. Scranton has had six reports since the program started, Superintendent Alexis Kirijan, Ed.D., said.

Districts posted information on their websites and sent information home with students.

“I don’t think there can be too many resources in dealing with student safety,” Mid Valley Superintendent Patrick Sheehan said. “To have something statewide is definitely a good thing.”

For more information, www.safe2saypa.org.