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Virginia House takes up school safety bills

By BENJAMIN WEST January 21, 2019

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RICHMOND, Va. (AP) — The House of Delegates on Tuesday is expected to pass the first five bills in a package of legislation to improve school safety — proposals drafted by a special committee after the mass shooting last year at a high school in Parkland, Florida.

House Speaker Kirk Cox, a high school teacher for 30 years, and other Republican delegates held a news conference Monday to urge support for the bills, which would help schools improve security, require them to have emergency response plans and ensure that counselors spend most of their time with students.

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“I know firsthand how much students and teachers deal with on a daily basis, and the last thing they need to do while learning is to be worried about their safety,” said Cox, who chaired the Select Committee on School Safety.

The select committee was formed shortly after 17 students and staff members were killed at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland last February.

Cox described the committee as a bipartisan effort — it included 12 Republicans and 10 Democrats — but only Republican members were present at the press conference.

According to GOP officials, the panel issued 24 priority recommendations in December, resulting in 10 pieces of legislation. Five of those bills have cleared House committees and are up for final consideration Tuesday in the House.

“These proposals on the House floor this week will span topics that range from school counseling, mental health, to building codes and security enhancements,” said Del. Daniel Marshall III, R-Danville. “Taken together, we have laid out a multiyear blueprint for

improving school safety that we can draw from as we move into the legislative process.”

The bills, which delegates tentatively approved Monday, are:

- HB 1725, which would require local officials to have a plan that all security enhancements in school buildings comply with building and fire codes.
- HB 1729, requiring school counselors to spend at least 80 percent of their staff time “in direct counseling,” rather than in administrative tasks.
- HB 1732, to require elementary and secondary schools to host at least one general emergency drill a year along with standard fire, tornado and earthquake drills.
- HB 1733, which would ensure that school resource officers understand their roles on school grounds as defined by the local law enforcement agency.
- HB 1738, which says that an architect trained in crime prevention must approve any school building or renovation plans, focusing on

“corridors, open spaces and floor plans through the lens of school safety.”

After approval by the House, the bills then would go to the Senate for consideration.

House Democrats have criticized the select committee for declining to consider policies concerning firearms. So they created a study group called the Safe Virginia Initiative.

“Unfortunately, despite requests from House Democrats, the decision was made that the Select Committee would specifically exclude any exploration of gun safety proposals as well as the role that access to guns contributes to the multiple incidents of carnage,” the initiative’s report states.

Headed by two Fairfax Democrats — House Democratic Leader Eileen Filler-Corn and Del. Kathleen Murphy — the initiative recommended that the state require background checks on all gun buyers, the reporting of lost or stolen firearms, and in-person training for concealed handgun permits, rather than video training. The Safe Virginia Initiative also called for reinstating the state’s limit of one handgun purchase per month.

Last week, a House subcommittee killed more than a dozen of the Democrats' bills.

This story was produced by the Virginia Commonwealth University's Capital News Service.

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