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Schools begin implementing fingerprint policy

Vendors, their employees and contractors who step foot on a school campus at least five times a month will be required to submit fingerprints for background checks beginning this year.

School districts are starting the process of adopting the policy, passed by the state Legislature this past session.

Under the bidding and purchasing procedures, the vendors and contractors must pay for the fingerprint check, though districts can include it in the bidding process.

The governing board for the Chandler Unified School District will likely vote on the new policy within a month.

"There's academics and there's safety. Those are our two primary goals. This adds another layer of safety for our students, and I'm all for it," board president Karen Clark said Wednesday.

The district is in the process of identifying all contractors or vendors who may be affected by this and contacting them, said Frank Fletcher, associate superintendent for support services.

From his department, one vendor has been identified and notified. That particular vendor - who looks after the district's phone system - has already submitted his fingerprints.

"As things come up we're going to say, 'OK, this one now qualifies ...' We're trying to put our heads together to identify them," Fletcher said.

Scottsdale and Gilbert districts are already ahead of some of their neighbors in the background-check area. The Scottsdale Unified School District began strengthening its requirements of vendors and contractors in late 2005, said Jeff Thomas, executive director for human capital.

"What we started doing with our vendors is we had background checks in the contracts themselves. What we did was effective late 2005, and as contracts

have been renewed, we've really tightened our requirements," Thomas said. "Our vendors are required to perform with their employees essentially the same background check we do with our employees. We did that before any policy changes took place through ASBA (the Arizona School Board Association) or the Legislature."

"We do require fingerprinting for any vendor or for that matter any volunteer who works with children," Gilbert spokeswoman Dianne Bowers said. "That's been a long-standing policy of ours."

The bill that is sparking the change in other districts was signed into law by Gov. Janet Napolitano this summer. It was sponsored by Rep. John Kavanagh, R-Fountain Hills.

Kavanagh decided to create the bill after learning contract employees who work on school campuses were not required to have fingerprints on file, nor could schools ask for them.

Kavanagh learned of the problem after a 14-year-old was sexually assaulted at Scottsdale's Saguaro High School in August 2006 by a contract janitor.

"Regular school employees have to be fingerprinted and have a background check but there was an omission in the law that didn't require contract employees even though they have just as much contact with the students as regular employees," he said.

In Queen Creek, the school district's administrative board has asked an attorney for further guidance to see how best to meet the requirement, superintendent James Murlless said Wednesday. The district also wants to see if it can collect the fingerprints itself - as it has done for employees - and then send them out for the background check.

Chandler's board will also vote in the next month on a policy that requires all purchase orders to include a statement that lets vendors know they cannot allow registered sex offenders who work for them to be in district facilities - whether students are present or not.

Again, the board is following state statute, Clark said. There has not been a problem in the past.

"It provides us with another tier of safety for the students, whether or not we've had a problem in the past. Contractors have to be careful in who they hire so that any contractor we hire will know clearly that they have to do their due diligence to make sure these registered sex offenders are not allowed on school grounds in any way," she said.

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