



MICHAEL LEE / The Salt Lake Tribune

Salt Lake City School District holds an open house at Highland High School shortly before weapons detectors were installed in October to demonstrate how they work.

# 'They're fickle machines,' a respondent says

## Detectors

Yet when parents answered, 46% said they felt students were safer. Leeson Taylor, the district's chief officer of school leadership and performance, told board members that the question was designed to gauge "perception" of the devices.

"The perception of the parents is straight on, what you said — it's perception," board member Kristi Sweet told Taylor. "But as I look at who's actually in the building, it's a little disconcerting."

The weapons detectors were installed at the high schools last fall, after board members in January 2023 approved a \$1.44 million expenditure to lease them. More funds were also approved later last year to support installing the devices at Horizon Instruction and Training Center, the district's alternative high school. Those devices were rolled out in March.

In a separate survey question, the district asked West, East and Highland high students, teachers and parents, "How have the weapons detectors changed your feelings about your school this year?"

In response to the general statement, "I feel the school is safer," around 47% of students said they "somewhat" or "strongly" agree, while almost 22% said that they "somewhat" or "strongly" disagree.

When teachers answered, about 48% said they "somewhat" or "strongly" agree with the statement, while 33% "somewhat" or "strongly" disagreed.

## STUDENTS SHARE SPECIFIC CONCERNS

In more specific survey responses obtained by The Salt Lake Tribune through a public records request, one student said that when the devices "alerts go off, security staff 'don't actually check the bags.' But when staff do decide to check bags, 'it takes too much time.'"

Leeson told board members in April that it is difficult to gather tardiness data, because it's hard to know whether the detectors themselves caused a student to be late.

"Let's say school starts at 8:45 [a.m.] — you got somebody that's getting out of a car in the front of the school building at 8:40, 8:43," he said. In that case, he said, a student would likely still be late to class, regardless of the screening process.

At a January board meeting, Leeson also told members that people are not stopped unless an alert is sounded.

According to district data, 126,092 device alerts were logged at the three high schools between Feb. 1 and March 31, the latest reporting period. The alerts were tagged with descriptors of what was detected, if anything, including computers and other technology; umbrellas; and "gun/law enforcement."

District spokesperson Yandray Chatwin said the "gun/law enforcement" alert tag only pertains to adults carrying firearms. She added that the devices detected no students carrying firearms in the February and March reporting period. Within that time frame, however, the district took disciplinary action against two students, meaning administrators contacted families regarding "found items." It is unclear what those items were.

## 'A WASTE OF TAXPAYER MONEY,' ONE TEACHER SAYS

According to the survey responses, some students feel the machines don't work properly.

"I've seen officers walk through and [the machines] not go off, even though the officer is carrying multiple weapons," one response stated. "They're fickle machines in the fact that sometimes my bag gets flagged for no reason, and sometimes it doesn't."

Other students felt that weapons could still be snuck into school, the responses indicate — such as if a person with a weapon came to school before 8 a.m. or after 4:30 p.m., the window during which the weapons detectors operate.

Leeson acknowledged that the devices are not the end-all, be-all, "but instead one piece of security intended to keep students safe."

More security measures are expected

in accordance with legislation passed this year, Chatwin said, including HB84, from Rep. Ryan Wilcox, R-Ogden, which allows a designated school employee — or a "school guardian" — to be armed and trained to respond in emergency situations.

A school guardian can be any school staffer, excluding teachers or principals. The same law also requires that public schools install panic buttons in every classroom.

In addition to the over \$1 million spent on leasing the weapons detectors, the district also approved spending \$11 million in August to staff the detectors through Pal-American Security Inc.

One of the "negative themes" the district found in its survey was that, as one

teacher said, the move felt like "a waste of taxpayer money that could be better allocated to other needs."

Parents expressed similar concerns, with one describing the devices as "security theater that makes people feel safer without actually accomplishing anything at a huge cost."

Chatwin said the decision to lease out the devices for 48 months amounted to a "trial period."

"If we find that there hasn't been any benefit and it might not be worth the cost, then we won't renew that lease," she said. "But to really see what impact this could have, we're going to keep it for the full length of that lease and evaluate it from there."



There's a perfect place for your mom or dad. And we'll help you find it.

We know that finding the right senior care for your mom or dad is a big decision. That's where A Place for Mom comes in. Our senior living advisory service ensures you'll get a full understanding of all the options in your area based on your loved one's care needs and budget.

You'll get more than just expert advice and recommendations. You'll also get peace of mind.

Start the conversation with one of our expert Senior Living Advisors today.

Our service comes at no cost to your family. Connect with us at 866.333.4907.



aPlaceforMom.com  
THE PLACE FOR SENIOR LIVING ADVICE

PHOTO: MICHAEL LEE / THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE

**Sabra Richins\* is a Reverse Mortgage Specialist who is OUTSTANDING in this field!**

Let her help you reap the great benefits this program has to offer!  
Call or visit her today!  
**801.281.0345 or toll free 800.883.3066**

Don't let school aging or Postman discrimination stop you from...  
We do it all, today!  
888 Mortgage - 115 East 2000 South - Suite 100  
St. George, Utah 84770 - 888.888.3066  
www.ReverseMortgage.com