

Search on for gunman who shot at Willingboro school

By Melanie Burney

INQUIRER STAFF WRITERS

A Burlington County elementary school was locked down for more than two hours Monday after a gunman peppered the outside of the building with bullets, police said.

No one was injured in the 11:24 a.m. drama at Garfield East Elementary in Willingboro, Lt. Joseph Dey said. The lockdown was lifted shortly before 2 p.m. Police were searching for the gunman, Dey said.

The incident unnerved nearby residents and some parents.

"It's a little bit disconcerting," said longtime resident Donna Rogers, who lives across the street from the school. She called her Garfield Park East neighborhood "one of the few safe havens left in Willingboro."

The school, in the 100 block of Evergreen Drive, enrolls about 350 students in pre-K through fifth grade.

Police have no motive for the shooting, Dey said. The gunman did not enter the school building, he said.

The gunman entered the school grounds and fired a weapon toward the school, Dey said. Several bullets struck the school but did not penetrate the brick building, he said.

"All of the circumstances are still under investigation," Dey said. "It's an odd situation."

Dey said police were looking for a person who was seen on the school grounds wearing a black hooded sweatshirt, light-colored gloves, and a gray mask. That person may have been gardening in a nearby residential area, he said.

A handful of students remained inside the school yesterday afternoon for an after-school program. The building's window shades were pulled down.

Interim school Superintendent Edward Kern did not return telephone messages seeking comment.

The 5,300-student district has been plagued by fights, violence and turmoil in recent years. During the 2005-06 school year, the district reported 161 such incidents, including threats, assaults and weapons possessions, according to a report on violence released last month by the state Department of Education.

School officials vowed to beef up security, including adding security officers and metal detectors, after a rash of incidents.

Last March, the township's middle school was shut down for several hours after officials found a hit list and a bullet. Three students were arrested in that incident.

That same month, five Willingboro High students were charged with rioting after a cafeteria fight.

Police ask that anyone with information about the latest shooting call Willingboro police at 609-877-3001.

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Inquirer staff writer Alex Seise contributed to this article.