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Rite of a new school year: Remembering 9/11

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As many New Jersey schools reopened this week, they immediately will grapple with Friday's anniversary of the worst terrorist attacks on American soil.

How do they remember the 9/11 attacks in a meaningful way for students and, more importantly, how do they teach children about it?

To help schools address those questions and teach what many consider a daunting subject, dozens of New Jersey classrooms -- including those in Hillsborough, Glen Ridge, Livingston and Camden -- this fall will begin a pilot curriculum developed over the last year on 9/11 and global terrorism.

The curriculum will be optional for teachers. But it will provide a detailed framework with age-appropriate lessons for students in kindergarten through 12th grade, organizers said.

"For students who lived through 9/11 or for kids who don't remember, it's going to be a really important part of history," said MaryEllen Salamone, a mother of three whose husband was killed in the attacks and who has been involved with the curriculum development. "They need to be taught it. They need to make informed choices."

The idea began with the Families of September 11 and the effort includes the Liberty Science Center, the state Commission on Holocaust Education and about 20 New Jersey teachers.

With guidance from the Commission on Holocaust Education -- which has written not just the state's Holocaust curriculum but also lessons on other acts of genocide -- teachers from around the state gathered several times over the last year to write dozens of lessons about terrorism for all grades. The curriculum cuts across many subjects, including social studies, history, language arts, art and music.

Many current history and social studies textbooks discuss 9/11 and schools hold memorials each September, but few went beyond that, said those involved in the project.

"They kind of balked at giving students context of why it happened, and could it happen again," Salamone said.

The Families of September 11, a nonprofit support and advocacy group, and the Commission on Holocaust Education wanted to ensure the lessons not focus solely on the events of 9/11 but also explore terrorism globally. The commission also worked with the New Jersey Arab-American Heritage Commission, which was formed last year, for its thoughts on the lesson plans.

"I don't want to just see on 9/11 a moment for remembering," said Paul Winkler, executive director of the Commission on Holocaust Education. "I want it to be used for education. There's good education that can take place in the whole area of prejudice and bias."

Former New Jersey Gov. Tom Kean, who headed the 9/11 commission, said the curriculum is "absolutely vital."

"This is a pivotal event in modern American history, and things are different now than they were before," Kean said. "As kids grow up, they're going to be hearing about it, they're going to be running into people who were part of it, who lost members of their family."

"The families that I know do want the story told," he said. "They do want people to understand what

happened, and they want it told right."

The curriculum includes about 150 lessons -- 50 each for elementary grades, middle school and high school -- with the idea that teachers may only have time in a given year to use just a few, said Helen Simpkins, a retired Vernon educator who worked on the effort.

Winkler said the lessons wrestle with the differences between terrorists and freedom fighters, and how the United States is viewed by others around the world. Students also learn how day-to-day life has been changed by the 9/11 attacks, and ways in which people create memorials and remembrances.

The youngest students learn about bullying, the fear it instills in children and why some people act as bullies, Simpkins said.

One lesson for second through fifth graders has students read a news report about a tree salvaged from Ground Zero after 9/11. The class discusses and writes about why plants and trees become symbols of remembrance.

In a high school unit, students work to define terrorism and discuss violent acts, from the Columbine High School shootings in Colorado to the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City in 1995.

"We wanted the curriculum to be . . . a real effort to look at terrorism, to look at human behavior and to look beyond that to what we could do to make it better," Simpkins said.

The committee also was sensitive to the fact that there are many New Jersey children who lost a loved one in the attacks and is developing a book to accompany the curriculum to guide teachers with students who have been through a traumatic event, Winkler said.

Winkler has already heard from 20 schools that would like to pilot the curriculum beginning this fall, and he is looking for about 20 to 30 more, from all corners of the state -- urban, suburban and rural -- and all grade levels.

All of the lessons will be piloted, and teachers will be asked to evaluate them. The finished curriculum is expected to be distributed to public schools by fall 2010, Winkler said. It also will be available for private schools.

Salamone, of North Caldwell, said her own three children, who range in age from 10 to 14 and attend a private school, have not had 9/11 addressed openly in their classrooms. She said she understands teachers' reluctance but said she felt it was important her children know about terrorism in a broader context.

"My kids would be the first to say, 'Just ask me, ask me how I feel.' All three would be more than happy to share their experiences and their life," Salamone said.

"If a student understands terrorism is not just aimed at the United States but rather is a worldwide problem, it empowers a child to not feel so isolated," she said. "And globally if we work on it, we could make a difference."

A separate New Jersey-based nonprofit group, the September 11th Education Trust, launched its own 9/11 curriculum yesterday. The lessons -- which include interviews with witnesses and family members of victims -- are designed for middle and high school students and will be piloted this year in one Bergen County district. It also will be used in schools this year in New York City, California, Alabama, Indiana, Illinois and Kansas.

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