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## Back to school gear: Cleveland firm pitches bulletproof backpacks



*Impact Armor has a line of bulletproof products for school or the office, including, from left, backpacks, desk calendars and clipboards.*

BY KAITLYNN RIELY  
*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*

Add it to the back-to-school shopping list: bulletproof backpacks.

Throw in a bulletproof whiteboard and a bulletproof desktop calendar, too.

That's the pitch from Cleveland-based Impact Armor Technologies, one of a few companies in the United States marketing safety gear once reserved for police officers and soldiers to teachers and schoolchildren.

And demand, said Rob Slattery of Impact Armor, is up.

"It's really, really growing by leaps and bounds," he said by phone Tuesday from Cleveland, where he had just finished outfitting a kindergartner for a bulletproof backpack.

The reason, he believes, is that "people have finally opened their eyes that bad things happen."

The company, founded in 2006 to create technology to protect against blast threats and bullets for military applications, created a line of protective devices in response to gun violence in school, and Mr. Slattery said the December shootings in Newtown, Conn., in which a gunman killed 20 children and six adults inside an elementary school, brought increased attention to their protective gear.

Impact Armor, he said, can transform a regular backpack into a bulletproof one by adding lightweight, woven Kevlar inserts that add about a pound to the overall weight and range in cost from \$100 to \$110. The company says the inserts can stop a bullet fired point-blank, from a 9 mm to a .44-caliber Magnum.

"This is just a product that you can purchase to help yourself be a harder target," said Mr. Slattery, a former police officer. He said his 25- and 15-year-old children both wear the protective backpacks.

It's not just parents of school-aged children who are interested, he said. Recently, his company has been getting calls from attorneys, looking for bulletproof inserts for their briefcases or leather binders.

It seems unlikely that most children will arrive at schools this fall with bulletproof accessories.

The National Retail Federation, which compiles a survey of back-to-school trends, did not include data about whether school safety devices, such as the bulletproof backpack or calendar, were making it onto parent must-buy lists.



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And spokeswoman for both the Pittsburgh Public Schools and the Allegheny Intermediate Unit said they had not heard of any parents buying the backpacks. Neither had Janice Cain, the Region 2 director for the Pennsylvania PTA, a coverage area that includes Butler County, where the Butler Area School District hired retired state troopers as armed guards to protect students following the Connecticut shooting.

Indeed, some say the backpacks, intended to evoke a feeling of safety, may end up having the opposite effect.

“I think that anytime your kids have to wear bulletproof gear, it’s probably a bad thing,” said Gary Swanson, a child and adolescent psychiatrist at Allegheny General Hospital. “It implies a level of anxiety.”

Bully-proofing, not bulletproofing, is a more common problem parents should focus on, he said. And he questioned the logic of a bulletproof backpack, since students are often without their backpacks during the school day.

A bulletproof backpack — or whiteboard or similar item — is “not at all” practical, said Ken Trump, president of the National School Safety and Security Services, a school safety consulting firm based in Cleveland.

Instead, he said, “it preys on the raw emotions” people feel after school shooting tragedies. Even if students did carry their backpacks around all day, they’d then need a bulletproof frontpack, a helmet and a shield, he said.

“It’s nothing that I recommend,” he said. Instead, he recommends that schools focus on training staff to respond to emergency situations, planning with first responders, working on recognizing warning signs in students and other pro-active measures, none of which included outfitting students in bulletproof gear.

No one mentioned bulletproof backpacks two months ago, when the group Women

for Action South Hills held a community forum in Mt. Lebanon on the sixth-month anniversary of the Newtown, Conn., shooting to discuss gun violence, and how to prevent deaths and injuries.

Kathie Breckenridge of Mt. Lebanon, one of the organizers for the event, said it “appalls her” to think of a world where that might be necessary.

“I don’t want to put bulletproof backpacks on my grandchildren,” she said.