

West Chester Area School District
Safety Advocacy Committee Report

June 1, 2018

In response to the national epidemic of school shootings, the West Chester Area School District organized a Safety Advocacy Committee to review safety protocol for its schools. Safety has been a priority in the West Chester Area School District since 1999 when the first high profile school shooting took place in Columbine, Colorado when 13 people were killed by two high school students.

We have tried in West Chester to take a holistic approach to this very serious problem, addressing both prevention and mental health concerns. We continually review and update our safety procedures, training, and equipment, as well.

Here are some of the things that we do to protect our students and staff:

- Our high schools participate in the Sandy Hook Promise program (“See something, say something”) in which students are encouraged to speak up if they see or know of anything alarming – in school, in the community, or online.
- Started mental health outpatient services at our high schools three years ago for students who had difficulty accessing the supports on their own. An intervention specialist is at each high school to handle students in crisis and to connect the students with the appropriate level of mental health or emotional support.
- Adding a mental health therapist at our middle schools for the 2018-19 school year.
- Require all administrators to take an active shooter drill course; security plans are reviewed annually with staff.
- Regularly practice lock down and intruder drills with staff and students at all levels
- Added additional security cameras at our high schools
- Our local police departments have assigned a school resource officer to our schools; that officer is often visible in our buildings and police response time to any of our schools is 2 – 4 minutes.
- Provide our schools for use for active shooter training for police in Chester County during the summer.
- All local police departments have schematics of our building plans and aerial views of our buildings and grounds to help coordinate police efforts during an emergency.
- Ensure all doors are locked after students arrive in the morning and visitors can only enter through one door. They must be buzzed in at the front door. Once in, all visitors must wear a visitor badge. Anyone not wearing a badge will be asked to report to the office to receive one.
- Identification scanners in our schools use photo driver’s licenses for immediate background checks for visitors.

- The district works to create a safe and caring environment by providing school-wide behavioral expectations, bullying prevention programs, positive interventions and supports, and counseling services.

More than 100 people attended the first committee meeting in April 2018. A full list of committee members is listed at the end of this report. The focus of the committee was to provide a report of findings the school board and administration could use when planning for safety measures in its schools. In addition, the committee provided some priorities for our legislators to take action in a way that will help school boards and their communities keep children and staff as safe as possible. The committee organized in four sub-committees, consisted of parents, law enforcement staff, school staff, students, board members and community members. The group met on three different evenings in April and May focusing on the following areas:

1. Physical Plant safety measures
2. Program safety measures
3. Legislative action
4. Funding

Summary of Findings:

1. **Physical Plant Safety Measures** – While many topics were discussed, the following six priority findings were identified:
 1. ***Require all staff to take part in Emergency Management and Active Shooter Training such as ALICE or FEMA.*** Currently all administrators have been trained and active shooter drills are practiced with all staff in coordination with local police.
 2. ***Establish one point of contact for safety and security measures in the school district.*** The school district has established an excellent working relationship with its local police departments and multiple people have safety responsibilities. Given the size of the district (17 buildings, and more than 12,000 students), there should be one point of contact overseeing and constantly evaluating safety procedures.
 3. ***Expand the number of surveillance cameras to the schools.*** Currently, web-based cameras are used at the three high schools, and every school has an external camera to identify visitors prior to entering a building. Additional cameras should be considered for the three middle schools. Consider providing police access to these cameras.
 4. ***Additional safety and security presence should be considered for the schools.*** Currently the four local police departments provide five school resource officers assigned to be visible in the schools. The committee discussed a full time security

officer in each of the three high schools with three others available to patrol the feeder middle and elementary schools to each respective high school.

5. ***Vestibules with lockdown capabilities should be considered.*** As the district renovates its schools, it is redesigning entrances to include double locking doors at the entrances. Consideration should be given to add security film to these areas.
 6. ***Escape windows should be considered for first floor classrooms.*** The district has been including breakaway escape windows in classrooms of renovated buildings. Consideration should be given to install additional windows in first floor classrooms.
2. **Program Safety Measures** – The committee discussed various programs to help students, teachers and parents address stress and anxiety in the lives of children, as this has been identified as a common theme with student school shooters. The following six priority findings were identified:
1. ***Expand mental health services to the middle schools.*** The school district started a high school mental health program for students three years ago and is considering an expansion to middle school for the 2018-19 school year.
 2. ***Extend program similar to Second Step at the MS level.*** Second Step is an elementary program started three years ago to help students with social skills and executive functioning skills that are developmentally appropriate. While each of the three middle schools has procedures in place to address peer mediation and bullying, consider expanding to a formal program at the middle schools.
 3. ***Develop a class to allow students to talk about stressors, create the forum for students to talk, and teach strategies for students to use prior to escalating actions to violence or name calling.*** Consider ways to build this time into the regular school day schedule such as: an elementary fifth special time, middle school unified arts rotation, or high school course, or intervention schedule.
 4. ***Establish sessions for parents on the topic of anxiety, reducing stress, and information about anti-bullying programs taking place in the district.*** The school district has been offering sessions to parents on the topics of teen stress and anxiety; consider adding a section to the website for parent access to resources; provide additional training on the Second Step program.
 5. ***Establish a student-mentoring program.*** The school district has established formal protocol to identify students at risk, and provides referrals to services. Consider assigning staff to students to develop a relationship.
 6. ***Create an anonymous reporting system to identify possible students at risk.*** The district has been conducting violence and suicide risk assessments for the past two years, but referrals are made by staff and parents. Consider

establishing a hotline for anyone to report students who may be in need of a risk assessment.

3. **Legislative Action** – The committee discussed legislative changes that have been taking place in other states. While some federal legislation is needed to limit teen access to guns and funding for safe schools initiatives, a majority of legislation falls on the state General Assembly. In researching various state laws on guns and school safety, the committee found that Massachusetts and Colorado appeared to be more proactive than other states. Pennsylvania had some of the fewest legislative action taken for gun control and school safety. The following six priority findings were identified:
 1. **Encourage Pennsylvania legislators to model some of the legislation in Massachusetts.** Massachusetts established a commission to make recommendations for safe schools legislation.
<http://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/safety/?section=commission>
 2. **Encourage Pennsylvania legislators to establish a safe schools fund similar to that in Massachusetts HB No 1082.** This Act establishes a community safe school fund. The bill outlines how the fund would be established, contributions made, and what the fund can be used for. This may provide language needed to address funding issues in Pennsylvania.
 3. **Parents and Educators should consider working with legislators to pass laws that allow local school boards to increase property taxes for safety and security measures.** Currently, Act 1 of 2006 limits tax increases to a complicated cost of living formula. There are two exceptions to the formula: cost for state mandated pensions, and excess costs for special education. Consideration should be given to add a third exception for school safety. Representative Mark Mustio has introduced legislation to do this.
<http://www.legis.state.pa.us/cfdocs/Legis/CSM/showMemoPublic.cfm?chamber=H&SPick=20170&cosponId=25429>
 4. **Legislators should consider imposing a tax on gun sales, creating a gun registration fee, or increasing the fee for background check as a way to create revenue for a safe schools fund.** The state of Pennsylvania needs to look for alternative revenue sources to fund school safety initiatives. This is one possible way to do this.
 5. **Legislators should consider passing laws that provide funding or tax breaks for mental health resource providers.** More time and money is needed for mental health services. Psychologists agree that with the onset of ubiquitous social media, young people are feeling more anxious than ever and more teens are suffering with mental health conditions. These services can help to prevent violent acts from taking place in our schools and communities.

6. ***Legislators should consider passing laws that make it more difficult for teens to access guns.***

4. **School Funding** – The Funding sub-committee reviewed several grant opportunities and ways in which funding can be provided for programs, and physical plant changes for safety. The following priority findings were identified:
 1. ***Explore PDE Grant Opportunities*** – The PA Department of Education offers Safe Schools Grants from \$20,000 to \$60,000 to pay for security upgrades and/or school resource officers. These are competitive grants and are subject to available funds each year.
 2. ***Explore Federal Grant Opportunities*** – Sites such as www.grants.gov offer funding opportunities for programs such as mental health awareness training grants.
 3. ***Explore Local/Community Grant Opportunities*** – consideration should be given to partner with townships to share resource officer costs, and community donations to fund safe schools initiatives.
 4. ***Investigate the Stop School Violence Act of 2018*** –This is a federal law, passed in March, 2018 that allows for opportunities to create an anonymous reporting systems for threats of school violence, implement improvements to school security infrastructure, and develop student, teacher and law enforcement training to prevent violence.
 5. ***Expand Scope of West Chester Area Foundation or create new Foundation to allow for contributions.*** The Education Foundation’s mission is to make meaningful connections between school curriculum and the world of work. Perhaps the Foundation can establish a fund for contributions made that would provide for a tax deduction for contributors with money allocated directly to school safety initiatives. We should also consider working with other local Foundations to support funding for safe schools initiatives.

Thank you to all of our committee members for their contributions to this Safety Advocacy report. This will help the West Chester Area School District Board and Administration as it establishes the next phase of safety priorities for the school district.

For more information on our Safety Advocacy Committee, please visit <https://www.wcasd.net/Domain/4848>

Committee Members Participating in the Safety Advocacy Committee ReportPhysical Plant safety measures

Karen Adams	Mike Meiswich
Kevin Campbell (facilitator)	Elisha Ozer
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Jonathan Cleck	Joan Ryan
Robyn Conroy	Alicia Smith
Tammi Florio	Alex Soutos
Ed Fordyce	Tricia Stevens
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Program safety measures

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Rebecca McConnell	Cheryl Whalen
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Legislative Action

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Funding

Kerry Egan	John Scully (facilitator)
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