

School Safety

September 2013

The recent incident involving a gunman who entered an Atlanta elementary school rekindled feelings of fear throughout our community and across America. Episodes like this remind us that school shootings and other acts of violence are very real possibilities in any school district. Media coverage of school incidents may give us the feelings that these are commonplace when they are actually rare. Children are statistically safer at school. According to the American Crime Prevention Institute, “Children ages 12 to 18 are almost three times as likely to be victims of serious violent crime when they are away from school than at school”. (ACPI 2001) The Center for Disease Control and Prevention reports that a total of 17 homicides of school-age youth nation-wide occurred at school during the 2009–2010 school year. This accounted for less than two percent of all youth homicides during this time period (CDCP, 2012).

The way Atlanta school teachers and staff stayed calm and followed their safety plan to lead students to safety demonstrates how being prepared to meet emergencies can lead to a positive outcome. Events of school violence over the past few years have focused the attention of school leaders and parents on the safety and security of our students. In the last Georgia legislative session, legislators shared much discussion while weighing the pros and cons of arming teachers and/or administrators in every school. As school personnel, we are very conscious that our foremost responsibility is the safety of our children. Each new incident of a school intruder brings calls and questions from Whitfield County parents who want to make sure we are doing all we can to protect our children.

I am often asked about the possibility of putting School Resource Officers (SROs) in each school. These officers are an effective measure to increase school safety. We currently have five deputies from the Whitfield County Sheriff’s Office who work in our schools. A worthy goal would be to have one in each school all day, but current budget restraints do not allow us to do so and ESPLOST revenue cannot be used to pay personnel.

Our school administrators spend countless hours refining their school’s safety plan each year attempting to include every conceivable threat from tornadoes to intruders. They try to anticipate many situations and carefully plan a response for each scenario. These plans are reviewed by local emergency management officials.

Being proactive like this is one of the simplest and most important ways to safeguard our students. Our teachers and maintenance employees are trained to observe the normal physical environment to recognize if something is out of place or objects that are not ordinarily in the room or on school property. For example, should we receive a bomb threat in one of our schools our maintenance personnel as well as law enforcement officers are immediately sent to the school to survey the building looking for unusual items. Each school has staff members designated to perform certain duties in case of an emergency and an off-site reunification location if students must be evacuated from the campus. School representatives make up a central-level team that meets regularly to talk about emergencies and receive training on what to look for and how to deter problems.

Teachers and students talk about how to be aware of what goes on around them. Recently I was allowed to participate in active shooter training conducted by the Whitfield County Sheriff’s Department at the old Eastbrook Middle School building. For several days, deputies were put through scenarios where there was a shooter in the school. Observing this realistic training gave me confidence in our local law enforcement officers and their ability to handle such an emergency situation, though we hope they are never called upon to test their training.

ESPLOST may not be able to pay more officers to patrol our schools; however, thanks to community support we have been able to put equipment in place to better protect the safety of children and staff. Every Whitfield County School has keyless door access for heightened security. This technology allows school personnel to enter the school without using a key. This is especially useful in elementary schools where teachers take children to recess and re-enter the building without having to prop doors open. It allows schools to keep exterior doors locked, requiring guests to enter the building through a designated front door where they can be observed and screened by office personnel when they check in for a visit. Security experts tell us the area in schools most vulnerable to a security breach is the main entrance, closely followed by the parking lots, athletic fields, and playgrounds. ESPLOST dollars have been used to build secure vestibules at the entrance of most of our schools where visitors have to enter the school through the office. Renovation plans call for the remaining few schools to have this security measure completed as soon as financially possible.

Security cameras have been installed in our schools allowing principals, SROs, and other administrators to monitor schools and grounds 24 hours a day from their desks or remotely from their computers. These cameras store several weeks of video footage that can be reviewed should a problem arise. All Whitfield County School buses have also been equipped with front and rear security cameras that record video with sound. This equipment helps monitor the safety of students while they’re on the bus.

The Blackboard Connect mass notification system we use, as well as Twitter, Facebook, and our network of websites give us the ability to reach parents in minutes by phone and/or by text in the event of an emergency.

While nobody can predict where or how a school emergency may occur, we remain alert to the possibility, plan and train for emergency situations, and put equipment and personnel in place to safeguard our students. Student safety remains our primary concern in Whitfield County Schools.