

SAFETY: Schools must plan for an array of potential problems

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“Schools cannot provide a quality education without an element of safety,” Dorn says. “Statistically, schools are still one of the safest places to be.”

Given the times, when many discuss school safety the first thought is how to prepare for an “active shooter” situation. In reality, there are many safety issues our schools work through to have a prepared staff and student body. Students and staff participate in monthly fire drills; quarterly earthquake drills; lockdown drills and others. All types of risk require plans — and a District safety committee meets monthly to discuss current and potential issues.

Staff have plans in place for slips, falls, and inclement weather; minor and major accidents; dangerous animals on property; protecting students from child predators; and even understanding the intricacies of custody battles.

The High Desert ESD represents all school districts in Deschutes and Crook counties. A regional collective known as the Safe Schools Alliance convened by High Desert ESD is made up of over 40 agencies that come together, and develop strategies and plans for all types of incidents within local school districts.

“Any major incident will require multiple agencies working together and Central Oregon does a great job of fostering and maintaining those relationships already,” says Dorn.

It’s not just about having the newest and best equipment — although it is ideal that schools keep up with the technology available to

private-sector entities. It’s about developing and implementing training for staff so people know how to use the tools that are made available to them.

Currently the schools in Sisters have a variety of safety protocols at each building. All visitors are funneled through the main entrance at each building working to create a contained entry corridor and are required to check-in at the office. Veronda McConville, the lead secretary at Sisters Elementary School, is one of the first to greet students and parents every day.

“It’s so important that parents sign in when they come to the building,” she says. “It’s our best way of knowing who is here and having contact with the kids. We want to make sure we have eyes on the door at all times. I’ve been known to chase people down in the commons area and ask them to come back and sign in at the front counter. It takes a village to make our schools work — and everyone in our community is a part of that village.”

The exteriors of each building have other doors and gates locked to secure the perimeter and protect occupants.

The District has plans for increasing security as funds become available. New security features would include upgrading and replacing doors and door hardware as needed at each of the schools and implementing a video surveillance system.

“The hardware we would like to install takes the human element out of locking down the schools,” says Bliss. “We would be able to set all the doors up on a timer to ensure proper opening and closing procedures both on a daily basis and during emergencies.”

During Dorn’s walk-through with Bliss, he noted

that even though some of the schools are older there were no significant hazards which would required an immediate fix.

“Everything we discussed, including enhancing the hardware, is setup for multi-use,” says Dorn. “Not only would new hardware on doors help with security, but it will also help prevent damage to the doors, resulting in less maintenance costs. These are long-term solutions.”

In addition to the personnel at the front office, there is a dedicated school resource deputy (SRD) provided to the District from the Deschutes County Sheriff’s Office. Officer Brent Crosswhite is a community-based deputy who is responsible for helping schools ensure student safety.

SRDs become a part of the school community, and focus on early intervention. They attend a variety of school functions including sporting events and performances in order to be available for students.

Deputy Crosswhite works with school administrators to prevent crimes before they happen and develop positive relationships with students and staff members.

“Deputy Crosswhite’s office is at the high school,” says McConville. “The school resource deputies have always been good about sitting down with students at every school and talking with them if there are issues that come up.”

Much like Crosswhite developing relationships, Dorn thinks of security as a customer-service business. He noted that the culture of

the Sisters School District, with increased parent and community involvement, is important in keeping students safe.

Dorn works at schools around the country and knows that the level of engagement seen in Sisters schools is not common in other areas.

“Classes that require students to apply themselves, like your (Sisters High School’s) guitar-building class, keeps students engaged in school,” says Dorn. “When students want to be at school there are less fights and less instances of vandalism. You can’t buy a culture like that.”

Parents often wonder how they can support the staff with safety and security of students. Dorn recommends the best way: following District policies regarding entering and exiting the building or picking up or dropping off students. If you have a child in the schools remember to have your contact information up to date in case of emergencies.

“It’s hard to say the best thing to do is to follow the rules,” Dorn says. “But that’s the truth. It’s easier for school personnel to do their job when parents and community

members do theirs.”

Signing in when coming into the school is just as important as signing your child out. McConville notes, “If children aren’t checked out from the front office (when leaving early) and we have a fire or lockdown emergency — that child is marked as missing. No one wants a missing child.”

If there is an emergency or crisis at one of the schools, the best thing for parents and guardians to do is wait. Wait for more information from the school or the lead agency responding to the incident. If parents rush to the school it makes it difficult for emergency personnel to access the areas they need to. In some instances students may be bused to another location for parent pick-up as well.

In a real sense, learning safety is a big part of education.

“Doing the safety drills and preparing students and staff for emergencies is preparing them for life,” says Dorn. “You never know where you may be when there is an emergency; it’s our job to help prepare kids on how to respond no matter where they are.”

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