

SAFETY: Connection with students is key to security

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physical plant could create a false sense of security. For him and his staff, the key to preventing violent or dangerous acts by students is through connection. Students who feel connected to each other and to the adults in school are both less likely to act out in destructive ways and more likely to report concerns about others' behavior — either in school or on the pervasive social media that occupies so much of a young person's attention.

Hosang said that staff's message to students is that "If you see anything on social media that makes you nervous, you're on it way more than we are ... you need to tell an adult."

And students are willing to do so, especially when it comes to vandalism or incipient violence. Hosang acknowledged that there can be a bit of a "wall of silence" about drug and alcohol use — "but not violence."

Deputy Brent Crosswhite is the School Resource Officer for the District. He, too, puts a lot of effort into connecting with students and building the kind of trust and rapport that allows them to feel comfortable coming forward with concerns they might have about fellow students.

"It takes a pretty good period of time," he said. "It takes a couple of years to build that level of trust with kids."

Crosswhite notes that the schools have established an anonymous reporting mechanism that is available if a student feels he or she can't come forward in person. Such a system is open to abuse — but Hosang and Crosswhite

both said that has not happened. In fact, it's hardly used; students are comfortable coming to Crosswhite or to staff members when they need to.

And staff and law enforcement have worked up protocols to address problems to "try to intervene as early as possible so the kids can be successful."

The small scale of Sisters schools makes it easier to keep a handle on things.

"We're small enough and we don't have a lot of incidents (so) that we can jump on it and investigate it when an issue crops up," Hosang said.

Hosang and Crosswhite noted wryly that educators in Madras laughed at them when they found out that Sisters had disciplined a youth for throwing an orange against a wall. But being able to act on small incidents makes it more likely that they can head off bigger problems before they fester and grow.

"Once you get them into the conversation, even when they have those feelings, the incidences of execution go way down," noted schools Superintendent Curt Scholl.

Deputy Crosswhite is responsible for all three schools, and the possibility of an incident is never far from his mind.

"That's something I think about on a daily basis, really," he said. "I guess my biggest fear is that something happens at the high school while I'm at the elementary school. I want to be there to put myself between whatever it is and the students and staff here."

Crosswhite constantly games out potential scenarios, and he shares his insights with staff. Educators are in the business of educating, not security, so it can be helpful to get them thinking along the lines of "what if."

"I encourage them to think

about what they would do, even on a weekly basis," he said. "Getting them comfortable with 'what would I do and would I even be able to do that' — I think it's healthy to get them to think about their options."

Sisters schools have lockdown and lockout protocols that they practice. And active-shooter scenarios have been discussed. Superintendent Scholl described the protocol:

"If you have the ability to get out, you get out, but if you don't you lock down until you're released by a first responder."

In April, Sisters High School will host a multi-agency active shooter drill. Teachers are not required to attend the drill, but they are invited to do so.

Being able to respond effectively to a violent incident is obviously important — but both Crosswhite and Hosang emphasize the importance of prevention. Some measure of security can be gained through keeping unused doors locked, maintaining good visual sightlines and through physical security measures like better-controlled entry.

Scholl notes that security measures alone may not stop a determined assailant, but they can slow one down to allow for response.

But the real key to safety and security rests on connection and communication.

Scholl told *The Nugget* that the issue of school safety requires an effort to avoid creating a constant level

of anxiety while providing an appropriate level of protection.

“ I feel good about where we are — where we've come in the last three years.

— Curt Scholl

He thinks that, between physical security enhancements and ongoing efforts to build strong relationships with the kids, Sisters schools are doing a better job at that than ever.

"I feel good about where we are — where we've come in the last three years," he said.

Should Sisters teachers be armed?

By Jim Cornelius
Editor in Chief

Faced with the specter of a well-armed assailant rampaging through a school, the idea that at least some teachers or school staff should be armed to meet the threat has gained traction in recent years.

Sisters High School Principal Joe Hosang told *The Nugget* that he rejected the notion out of hand a few years ago. Subsequent incidents left him open to reevaluating that stance. Yet, in walking through the pros and cons of such a move — which is not on the table in Sisters at the moment — he comes back to the same conclusion.

"It's not a good idea," he said.

Hosang and School Resource Officer Deputy Brent Crosswhite shared their thoughts on the matter with *The Nugget* last week.

Hosang, once a Marine infantryman, said. "When your heart-rate is up and you're trying to hit a target — I know how difficult that is."

For a teacher or administrator to face down an armed assailant in a panicked school environment — especially if the shooter was a student — would be excruciatingly difficult and extremely dangerous.

"Your ability to shoot straight would be severely compromised in that kind of situation," he said. "Which makes me nervous."

Crosswhite emphasized that a familiarity with firearms is not enough to make a shooter tactically proficient.

"If they were going to carry, you can't just go out and shoot one time a year," he said. "There would have to be some kind of documented training."

And, he noted, if a law

enforcement entry team is responding to an active-shooter situation, having a gun in hand is not the best situation for a staff member to be in.

"When the entry team comes in and sees somebody with a gun — they're at risk," he said.

And both men noted that consistent carry in preparation for what remains a highly unlikely event might lead to complacency, which could have its own negative consequences. A pistol accidentally left in a bathroom or accessed by a student from a teacher's desk is a headache no staff member ever wants.

So, while having the ability to respond with lethal force as a last resort in a life-or-death emergency may seem appropriate, school and law enforcement officials in Sisters continue to believe that the risks outweigh the potential benefits.



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