

Administrators reviewing public access to schools, emergency protocols to better protect students

Port Washington-Saukville School District administrators met before classes on Monday and again on Tuesday to review school security, launching a process that will continue through the holiday break and undoubtedly change the way schools operate following the massacre at Sandy Hook School in Newtown, Conn., last week.

The Administrative Council, comprised of principals and other administrators, is considering changes that range from locking entrances to each of the district's four schools to ensure that all doors are locked during the school day to changing or ending the practice of using schools as public polling places, Supt. Michael Weber said.

"We have done a good job of making our schools secure, but there can be more done in our schools, and there will be more done," he said. "In 2007-08, we tightened access to our buildings. Now we'll probably have to tighten it even more."

But, Weber said, administrators are taking a logical, reasoned approach to dealing with an unimaginable tragedy — the murder of 20 young children, as well as teachers and a principal, at their school — and won't enact procedures that unduly restrict public access to schools or make them intimidating to students. For instance, he said, administrators won't even consider measures such as installing metal detectors in schools.

"We want to make our schools as secure as possible, but we also want to maintain a balance that ensures our schools remain places that are welcoming to students, parents and the community," Weber said. "It's a delicate balance."

"This is still a very safe place to live and to raise children. Our schools reflect our community, and like our community, they are safe."

But there is the realization that the tragedy in Newtown could have happened anywhere and that it will affect how schools across the nation seek to protect their students.

There is also a clearer picture emerging of the security measures that were in place at Sandy Hook School. The school, it appears, used some of the same protocols used in Port-Saukville schools and may have been more secure in some respects than local schools.

According to news reports, all doors to the Connecticut school were locked during classes and the gunman was not let into the building but rather forced his way in. School staff members enacted lock-down procedures, protecting as many children as possible behind closed doors

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Written by BILL SCHANEN IV

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and, when they could, evacuated students to a designated safe area, which was a nearby firehouse.

Much of the work already done by administrators in the Port-Saukville School District has focused on ensuring existing security protocols are being followed. Principals met with teachers and other staff members before classes Monday to review those procedures, Weber said.

A security consultant, who is a parent of a local student and is donating his time and expertise, is advising the district.

That same consultant reviewed school security measures in 2006. His findings and recommendations became the impetus for changes made throughout the district.

Access to buildings was restricted by locking all doors except one while classes are in session.

The entrance at Thomas Jefferson Middle School was reconfigured to ensure that people entering through the one unlocked door must go to the main office before going elsewhere in the school.

A similar system is in place at the high school, where all doors except an unlocked main office door are controlled by a sophisticated electronic key system.

At Dunwiddie and Saukville elementary schools, unlocked doors are in the immediate vicinity of the offices and secretaries have clear views of the entryways.

The unlocked entrance at Lincoln Elementary School is more remote, but a closed-circuit video camera relays images of the entryway to the school office.

The district also put in place protocols that require school staff members to wear identification badges and visitors to go immediately to the office to receive visitor badges. Staff members are instructed to approach anyone they don't recognize and who is not wearing a badge in school to determine why they are in the building.

Typically there is not a large public presence in schools except on election days. Thomas Jefferson Middle School and Dunwiddie Elementary School are used as polling places, and rules that require school visitors to sign-in at the office are suspended.

A suggestion by a School Board member several years ago that polling places be removed from schools because of security concerns was rejected by district officials who said the polls give residents an opportunity to visit public schools and students the chance to see the election process in action. That issue will now be revisited.

Behind the scenes, the district has in place emergency and crisis plans that have been drafted and practiced with the assistance of the Ozaukee County Emergency Management Department and local law enforcement agencies.

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Those organizations participated in a “live-shooter” exercise at Dunwiddie Elementary School.

Some schools have had lock-down drills similar to fire and tornado drills, Weber said. Other schools will conduct such drills in the near future.

The district will also follow through on plans that were in place before the Newtown shooting to conduct so-called tabletop emergency exercises in which school officials, police and emergency management officials use models of school buildings to run through various scenarios, Weber said.

Lincoln Elementary School Principal Jane Gennerman said a handful of parents have asked about school security following the Newtown tragedy and have been pleased to learn about existing security protocols and the ongoing review by administrators.

“They are comforted by the fact that we’re being very thoughtful in our response because a knee-jerk reaction could make things worse,” she said.

Gennerman said parents have also thanked her for the multiple updates they have received via email from administrators.

Weber said administrators have made the review of security measures a top priority and will work to make any necessary changes as soon as possible. He noted that the School Board has given administrators the authority to make security-related changes without board approval, although the board will be briefed.

“We will continue meeting regularly until we have put together an action plan,” he said.