

School security tightened after Newtown tragedy

Written by STEVE OSTERMANN

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Grafton district increases police presence, plans to install security cameras, buzzer-lock entrances at all buildings

The Dec. 14 shooting tragedy in Newtown, Conn., that claimed the lives of 28 people, including 20 students and six staff members at an elementary school, has prompted the Grafton School District to tighten its own security measures.

Grafton Supt. Jeff Pechura said last week that the district's administrative team met quickly after learning of the shooting and agreed to increase police presence in and around all school buildings, a change implemented with the cooperation of Police Chief Charles Wenten.

The district is also poised to install security cameras and buzzer-lock systems at the entrances to district buildings. The new lock system would prevent visitors from entering a building unless a door is opened electronically by an employee inside.

The changes are designed to enhance the district's current security practices, which include locking all school doors except for one main entrance that leads directly to or passes by front offices, Pechura said.

"We feel very comfortable with our security and the timeliness of it," he said. "But you always think you can do more. We'll shore up the areas where we can improve, like making the entryways more secure."

The district has had a longtime police liaison officer at Grafton High School, which is part of a Washington Street campus that also includes the adjoining district office and Grafton Elementary School. Two additional police officers will now patrol all five public schools — including Kennedy and Woodview elementary schools and John Long Middle School — on a regular basis, Pechura said.

To further bolster security, district officials have asked Plunkett-Raysich Architects to incorporate security cameras and buzzer-lock systems into design plans for each building.

The firm, which recently completed a facilities study for the district, is expected to present options to the School Board in January.

There are currently 20 cameras at the high school but none at other schools.

"I foresee us implementing some type of buzzer system for security. The technology is advanced enough to do this," said Pechura, who noted the new measures would upgrade security but not make buildings totally secure.

"If someone really wants to get in the school by force, you probably can't stop them, but at least you can slow them down and have a plan in place to protect students and staff members."

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Pechura said the district was contacted by a number of parents concerned about school safety after the news that a 20-year-old man armed with an assault rifle and two handguns broke into Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown and went on a deadly shooting rampage before killing himself.

“We got some calls but not an outpouring,” Pechura said. “We did receive some questions about safety and security in our schools.

“The horrendous nature of what happened in Connecticut is compounded by that fact that it can happen anywhere. Students have been fearful. Parents have been understandably concerned that their children will be safe, and that’s our No. 1 concern, too.”

In response to the tragedy, the district sent letters to all families reminding them of security measures that are in place and being considered.

Like most school districts, Grafton has had a longtime protocol for emergencies, including a lockdown in case of intruders. In response, police are immediately contacted. If students have to be confined to classroom, each room is locked and they are huddled in the safest area of the room and kept quiet and out of sight.

The district has regular safety drills, including monthly fire evacuations and annual intruder evacuation.

An evacuation was effectively used this fall when a bomb threat forced officials to clear Grafton High School. Students left the building in orderly fashion and walked to nearby St. Joseph Church, where they remained while the school was searched for several hours. When no bomb was found, students returned to classes.

Pechura said the district is fortunate to have the Grafton Police Station across the street from the campus, as well as a short distance from other schools. He praised the district’s close working relationship with police.

“First and foremost, you have to have confidence in the plans we have in place. We also have tremendous confidence in our police department,” he said.

“Chief Wenten has been working closely with us, and the police response time for emergencies is within seconds.

“We’re doing everything we can to be proactive in this. We do not want to become experts on this because we had to deal with a tragedy like the one they had in Connecticut.”