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From the Wichita Business Journal:

<https://www.bizjournals.com/wichita/news/2022/08/26/school-safety-focuses-on-vigilance.html>

See something, say something: Experts say vigilance is key in keeping schools safe

Aug 26, 2022, 5:00am CDT

As students across the Wichita area return to classrooms, the issue of safety has sadly been underscored again by the all-too-recent memory of a school shooting.

But the aftermath of the May shooting at Robb Elementary in Uvalde, Texas, say local and national security experts, shows that nothing is a bigger enemy of safety than complacency.

While school districts across the country are funding security upgrades as best they can, those experts stress the importance of doubling-down on the basics.

“There has definitely been a heightened awareness (around safety) through the summer and heading into the school year,” says John Calvert, director of the Safe and Secure Schools Unit of the Kansas



U.S. DEPUTY SHERIFF'S ASSOCIATION

A member of the Ellis, Kan., Police Department trains for a school shooting situation under direction from the U.S. Deputy Sheriff's Association this summer.

State Department of Education. “We have to be prepared for everything.”

And increasingly, say Calvert and others, the best defense is among the lowest-tech options.

It’s the idea that if anyone sees something like a red-flag comment on social media or suspicious behavior, they need to say something.

The safety impetus on administrators then becomes creating an environment where students feel safe to say something if they see it — as well as one where there is no slacking on the measures already enacted after decades of security concerns in American schools.

“School safety can never sleep,” Calvert said.

Learning the lessons

Preventing the scenarios that keep every parent up at night is the full-time job of Terri Moses, director of safety services for Wichita Public Schools.

In that role, she has been helping implement lessons that can be learned from the shooting in Uvalde that killed 19 students and two teachers.

“We’re using that investigative report that came out last month as a training tool,” she said.

Among the findings in the 77-page report, released July 17 by the Texas House of Representatives, was existing security measures at the school were not being followed properly.

For example, witnesses told the House investigative committee that doors to the school that were supposed to remain locked were propped open for convenience due to a shortage of keys.

The school’s mobile-based alert system also didn’t work properly and the committee found the intercom system was not used to communicate the lockdown alert.

Moses says the report has been an opportunity to remind people about the importance of vigilance.

The report also found, however, that the shooter left cryptic hints online that went unreported to authorities prior to the rampage.

That underscores, Moses said, the importance of empowering students to report suspicious activity.

“And when we talk about ‘see something, say something,’ they have to have a trusted adult they can go to,” she said.

Calvert, of KSDE, said the safety unit he leads with Jim Green, school safety specialist, made more than 80 presentations to schools around Kansas from July 2021 to July 2022.

But beyond being able to work with district employees, he also said it provides the chance to meet with students.

Calvert said the data shows nationally that in 92% of school shootings, there were unreported warning signs.

That brings to light — as many in the national discourse following Uvlade noted — the belief that mental health needs to be part of the preventative dialogue.

“It has to be a multi-faceted approach,” Calvert said. “And mental health has to be a part of that.”

The Wichita district, for example, has a partnership with COMCARE that can help address a wide array of mental-health needs for students.

And, Calvert said, the Kansas Legislature has earmarked for the past five years \$10.5 million annually for mental-health services in Kansas schools. The Legislature also approved \$5 million in 2018, 2019 and 2022 for security infrastructure.

But no camera will ever catch as much as an attentive staff and especially a student body, Calvert said.

“We’re big proponents of change being student-led,” he said.

'Rollercoaster of awareness'

According to national nonprofit organization Sandy Hook Promise, the U.S. has experienced more than 2,000 school shootings since 1970.

More than 900 took place since the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn., in December 2012 that killed 26 people.

The wake of Uvalde, as was the case with Sandy Hook and the shootings at Parkland High School in Florida in 2018 that killed 17, always brings heightened awareness to the issue of safety.

“There is always an uptick in inquiries for services after a high-profile mass shooting,” said Ken Trump, president of Cleveland-based National School Safety and Security Services.

Trump has been involved in consulting on school safety for more than 30 years — which includes past training in Wichita — and has served as an expert witness for both plaintiffs and defendants in school shooting cases. He has testified multiple times before Congress.

What keeps his phone ringing the most, Trump says, are calls from equipment vendors looking to partner or have their safety-related product promoted by his business.

While he doesn't do that, Trump says the consulting work also always increases following a major incident.

Speaking by phone following a morning training session in Cleveland earlier this month, Trump said he put on eight similar presentations in three states in the past two weeks.

“School safety, like public safety, is a rollercoaster of awareness,” he said. “Time and distance breed complacency.”

Infrastructure grants are good, he said, but the funding involved — such as the \$5 million in Kansas — doesn't go far when dispersed across an entire state.

And while old facilities present challenges when investing in “target-hardening” technology and equipment, Trump says new construction isn't always geared around safety, either.

He points to a trend in modern design glass walls and collaborative learning spaces which, while designed to create a better educational experience, don't always best lend themselves to safety.

He, too, is an advocate of teaching everyone in a school environment to report suspicious activity when they see it.

But, he says, the training has to take "see something, say something" and go another step.

"The next step is having people trained to do something," he says. "Everything comes down to the fidelity of implementation."

Preparing for the worst

While educators and consultants are busy training teachers and staff, another local organization is taking a leading role for those that would respond most immediately to an active shooter in a school.

Wichita is home to the U.S. Deputy Sheriff's Association, a nonprofit organization that supports law-enforcement offices nationwide — including training for school resource officers.

Earlier this month, the USDSA held just such a training in Augusta that Mike Willis, national training and programs director, says brought in more than two-dozen officers from nine agencies.

Sgt. Mat Meckel, who has been with the Augusta Department of Safety for 22 years and has been a school resource officer there for more than three years, was getting started planning for the training event the day of the killings in Uvalde.

The shootings naturally heightened the importance of the event and, Meckel said, increased the concern voiced to him by students, parents and staff.

What the training hammered home, he said, is the importance of being proactive.

And for an SRO, that includes building relationships with students so they feel safe bringing potential information to light.

"I think the best thing you can do is have as good a relationship and trust with students as you can have," Meckel said.

But, in the event of an active shooter, Meckel said the key for an SRO or other law enforcement becomes the response training.

"An expert is someone who does the basics better than anyone," he said. "The basics don't let you down."

With upcoming trainings in Oklahoma and Florida already scheduled, Willis says USDSA is already scheduling into next year for similar events.

Often — as was the case in Augusta — that includes participation by key administrators, such as principals and superintendents.

While the training is applicable to other facilities, SRO trainings like the ones in Augusta can be especially beneficial because of the real-world experience it provides.

"It gives them a chance to actually train in that school," said executive director David Hanners. "So if there is an issue there, they've already trained in that school."

That includes specialized equipment, such as a shot simulator that replicates a muzzle flash so attendees are experiencing a scenario they hope never becomes reality.

The special committee report on the Uvalde shootings was also highly critical of the law-enforcement response. That including findings that the reaction by 376 law enforcement officers from various departments became an uncoordinated scene that stretched on for 73 minutes, rather than immediately confronting the shooter, as had been doctrine since the 1999 shootings at Columbine High School in Colorado.

Willis is frank in his assessment, calling the response in Uvalde a "fundamental failure."

And it will be training, he said, that ultimately keeps it from happening again.

"You can't do the basics too much," he said.

Holistic safety

The training in Wichita Public Schools continues to focus around the “Run, Hide, Fight” model popular nationwide. That method teaches students first to run from an active shooter, then to hide from them and, if those measures fail, to finally try and fight off an intruder.

Moses, the district’s safety director, says schools have also done what they can in terms of technology.

But things like additional cameras and key-card doors do have cost barriers. And they don’t always fix one problem without creating others.

For example, Moses said, some vendors have pitched door-locking systems that would violate existing fire code.

And for administrators in roles like hers, the job requires considering all aspects of safety.

“We have to take an all-hazards approach,” she said. “We have to look at things holistically.”

So while schools will continue to implement security technology where they can, Moses says the safest environment will never be created by just one approach.

“Every time I do a presentation, I ask people what makes a school safe?” she said. “And you will always get a combination (answer) of the bricks-and-mortar approach and then you get the idea of a caring, connected community. I tell people all the time: A school isn’t going to be safe — any building isn’t going to be safe — if you don’t have both.”

SAYING SOMETHING

Safety experts say it is vital to provide a means of reporting suspicious activity as part of proactive approach to preventing school shootings. Here is a look at ways students and community members can report such activity, in addition to contacting school safety personnel directly:

Kansas School Safety Hotline – (877) 626-8203

Allows for threats of school violence to be reported directly to the Kansas Highway Patrol.

Suspicious activity report — www.kbi.ks.gov/sar

Allows for online reporting of suspicious activity directly to the Kansas Bureau of Investigation

Parent and youth resource hotline — (800) 332-6378

Allows for acts of bullying to be reported directly to the Kansas Children's Service League.

FUNDING THE TRAINING

The U.S. Deputy Sheriff's Association is a Wichita-based nonprofit organization that provides training nationwide to law enforcement agencies, including specialized active shooter training for schools. The free trainings are supported by donations. More information on the organization can be found online at www.usdeputy.org.

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