

A letter from Bedford School Superintendent Dr. Jon Sills

Thursday, December 20, 2012

Dear Bedford Faculty, Staff and Families,

Before we break for winter vacation, I want to update you on our next steps for identifying and addressing safety and security concerns at each of our four schools.

What follows is:

- a brief history of Bedford's approach to school safety and security,
- a description of the in depth study that we did in 2009 and the policy decisions that followed,
- the steps we took in the immediate aftermath of Friday's tragedy,
- and the steps we are taking to move forward.

I wish you all some precious family time over the winter break, and look forward to your input as we chart the way forward.

BRIEF HISTORY

Like most school districts, Bedford has been paying close attention to school security ever since Columbine in 1999. Each school has had a crisis team, and since 2005 we have had a district level crisis team that coordinates our work across all four schools. It includes representatives from the police and fire departments as well as Bedford Youth and Family Services and it oversees our ongoing security work, which includes the following:

Training for our faculty and staff.

- Practice lockdown drills so that our students will know what to do should we ever have to face a real crisis. We have had one in each of our four schools already this year.
- Frequent trainings for our School Resource Officers, which enables them to bring back the latest security information.
- Collaborative partnerships with two police/school consortiums that have assisted us over the years when we have confronted a few instances of threatening graffiti. Several of our staff members have assisted other communities in crisis in turn.
- Clear protocols and procedures for a wide range of dangerous situations: armed intrusion, pandemic flu, evacuation, lockdown, sexual assault, hostage taking, death of a community member, etc.
- A locked door policy- except for the front doors. Visitors are expected to check in; anti-bullying programs and counseling work to protect victims but also to minimize acts of retribution, etc.

REVIEW PROCESS

Meanwhile, we have reviewed our procedures several times, but most recently we did an in depth two-year study that ended in 2009, during which time we took a very close look at our

schools, our procedures, and any areas of concern. A parent volunteer who is a security systems analyst for Mitre helped us conduct a comprehensive examination of all safety issues. As part of the data gathering process, over 600 parents responded to survey questions that included whether or not our faculty and staff should wear badges, whether we should deploy cameras and whether we should keep the front doors locked and use a buzzer system to admit visitors.

2009 DECISIONS

Informed by the survey data, by the professional judgment of the school administration and crisis team and by the School Committee's careful deliberations, it was decided that:

- All faculty and staff would wear badges
- Specific areas of concern identified in the study would be addressed: e.g., increased parking lot lighting.
- Cameras would not be deployed
- The front doors would not be locked or buzzers installed.

These decisions sought to balance realistic appraisals of how effective such measures would be in preventing an intruder, intent upon entering, from gaining admittance to the building with maintaining our longstanding open and welcoming school culture. At the time, while many did favor them, the majority of parents did not think that cameras or buzzers were necessary.

SINCE SANDY HOOK

In the immediate aftermath of the shootings in Newtown, we:

- Resolved to re-examine our safety and security measures and policies and to find solutions for persistent vulnerabilities like the student-propping open of the back door at the high school.
- Strived to set an appropriate tone that was reassuring and deliberate rather than alarmist and reactive.
- Coordinated with the Bedford Police Dept/ communicated with SC chair
- Called a meeting of the District Crisis Team and the District Leadership Team
- Asked for increased police patrols and around the four schools
- Asked the parents association at Lane and Davis to provide volunteers to enable us to staff the front doors and keep them locked this week.
- Increased SRO presence at JGMS and BHS and locked the front doors. Did this to reassure, help calm fears, in a people-friendly way- not because doing so can prevent someone who is intent upon entering to do harm.
- Communicated by email with families and staff
- Offered talking pointers for addressing Newtown with children
- Corresponded with other superintendents, and
- Communicated with each principal about how they planned to proceed in their buildings on Monday where they each implemented an age-appropriate approach.

Accordingly, on Monday, nothing was said at Davis School, teachers took their students' lead during their class meetings at Lane School (in about 70% of the classes students did bring up the

event; and at both JGMS and BHS the principals spoke to the entire school in calm, respectful ways about the tragedy, about our commitment to their safety, and about the availability of our counseling staff if students felt the need.

PROCESS MOVING FORWARD

I am establishing a Task Force that will include principals or asst principals, police and fire dept representative, the Director of Facilities, a BYFS representative, a parent from each school, and a School Committee member.

The first meeting will be held on January 7 at 7:00 PM, and the Task Force will present its findings to me on February 14.

[The Task Force] will be charged with identifying the safety and security procedures at each of the four schools and the areas of concern or potential danger that exist and can be in some way addressed through the implementation of new procedures, the addition of personnel, or the use of technology.

Included will be a review of how we identify and provide support to students in crisis. It will identify the benefits and costs associated with each recommended solution, including, but not limited to, locking the schools' front doors.

Each of the principals will hold a Roundtable discussion on the topic of school safety and security, at which time they will gather input from interested parents and community members. They will also gather data from their faculties and staffs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

I will make my recommendations to the School Committee at the February 26th School Committee Meeting.

IN THE INTERIM

For the week after vacation, I have asked the BEST parents to continue to help support to keep front doors locked at Lane and Davis schools and will do the same at JGMS and BHS. I will reassess this at that time.

Thank you to all for your affirming emails and for your thoughts about our schools' safety and security.

Jon

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