

Washington Township Public Schools



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Dear WTPS Families and Staff

In light of the tragic events in Parkland, Florida, last week, I wanted to write to all of you to give you information about all that the Washington Township School District, in collaboration with the Washington Township Police Department, is doing to secure our school buildings throughout the year. We live in frightening times, and we are reminded of just how fragile life can be when we witness events like Parkland, Sandy Hook, and Columbine. Parents want to be certain that the schools are doing all they can to protect their children.

The Washington Township Public Schools are committed to doing all we can to secure our facilities and keep children safe. However, the work is ongoing. It takes significant cooperation between school officials and law enforcement; it takes the implementation of state-of-the-art security measures; and, most importantly, it requires the cooperation of our children, our staff, and our parents.

Currently, our schools are equipped with surveillance cameras throughout all of our schools. We utilize best practice emergency plans that are practiced and reviewed with our local, county and state officials. These security measures are planned and practiced throughout the school year. Security drills, like active shooter, shelter-in-place, lockdowns, lockouts, fire drills, and emergency evacuations are practiced through real-time drills twice each month. Routinely, our local police department observes our active shooter drills to evaluate the efficiency of the drill. Local and county police have used our schools to practice their own responses to our buildings. This level of rehearsal allows local law enforcement to not only prepare for such an event, but also to become familiar with our school facilities. This is a critical component in training for law enforcement.

Additionally, our schools have three active armed police officers dedicated to working exclusively in our buildings throughout the school year. We have two full-time SROs at the high school, and one full-time SLEO working in our elementary and middle schools. The District has also reengaged with our local police with the return of a revamped D.A.R.E. program that is delivered by full-time Washington Township Police Officers. Additionally, our local police, under the leadership of Chief Patrick Gurcsik, have actively become a visible presence in our schools during routine patrols. Programs like lunch with a police officer, reading in our classrooms, or just visits to the schools are an everyday occurrence throughout our schools.

Nearly three years ago, with the support of our Board of Education, the District began to install security vestibules in all of our schools. This project was completed when the last vestibule was installed in the 11/12 wing of the high school last school year. These vestibules give all of our schools a double layer of entry-level security. Visitors to our buildings are monitored by our front office personnel when they come to our entry doors outside of our buildings. Visitors are required to state their business and produce ID before being “buzzed” into the vestibule. When in the vestibule, the visitor still does not have access to the school. When visitors are bringing things to the buildings, they can, in most cases, simply leave that item in the vestibule. Staff can then retrieve that item and get it where it belongs. Other visitors may be coming to the school to meet with staff. Hopefully, this is an appointed meeting, in which case the visitor, once vetted, will be given entry and escorted to their meeting.

Every school year, the District signs a memorandum of agreement with the local police department that allows our school officials and local police to share information with one another that assist in our efforts to secure our buildings. This year, an additional memorandum of understanding was signed that allows the school district to provide access to the surveillance cameras in each of our schools. Now our local police have the ability to observe live feeds of each school. This added access would be useful in tracking potential threats and allow police to provide information to first responders when coming to our buildings.

Last school year the District was given the go ahead, by our Board of Education, to begin the process of changing out all of the classroom door-locking mechanisms to a state-of-the-art electronic door-locking mechanism. This new locking device allows all of the doors in a single building to be immediately locked down in the event of a threat of any kind. Currently, this action is initiated with the push of a single, wall-mounted button. However, this ability will be enhanced with the addition of compatible software that will allow doors to be secured from a computer or smart phone. This software also will provide mapping data to school officials and law enforcement that will allow staff in the building to communicate real-time information during an emergency that will give first responders the ability to provide assistance or to take out a threat more quickly. This software currently is being beta-tested in elementary schools. We are hopeful that most of our schools will be completed by the end of this school year, with the high school reaching completion by the end of 2018. This software will be made accessible to local law enforcement, our fire department, and first responders.

Throughout each year, there is ongoing planning and communication between school and local officials to ensure the District is up to date with security protocols and exercises. Eighteen months ago, the District went through a security audit with state officials, where unplanned drills were initiated while the officials observed and evaluated our procedure. This was done in collaboration with the local police and local fire department. The District received high marks for its procedures and ideas on how to execute more efficiently. For security purposes, I cannot go into detail on our security plans, but I share this with you to make it clear that school security is very much a major issue that we, along with our local officials, are constantly working on and staying on top of.

The District has a standing committee called the Drug Free and Safe Schools Task Force. This committee meets twice a year, bringing together school officials, staff, school security, local law enforcement, board members, students, and parents to discuss issues related to drugs and school safety. At our last meeting in December the District presented updates on many of the security measures mentioned in this letter. Our second meeting will be held in the spring of 2018. Every August, the Gloucester County Prosecutors Office has hosted a countywide safe school's symposium, in our Investors Bank Performing Arts Center. This meeting has provided county, school, law enforcement, and fire and rescue up to date information on best practices in school security. Members of our local task force routinely attended this meeting.

Even though the District and local officials continue to do all that we can to stay up to date in our attempt to secure our buildings, we realize that with your help we can all do even more. History has taught us that once an attack of this nature is put into motion, that the most we can do to help save lives is to initiate our protocols and respond swiftly to the attack in an attempt to neutralize the threat. Having police present in our schools gives us a better chance than those who do not.

However, the best chance of saving lives is through our shared responsibility to keep our eyes and ears open, pay attention to what we see on the internet, and share that information with school and local law enforcement. Throughout our country, there have been countless threats that were eliminated because information was shared and law enforcement was able to prevent a planned attack from ever materializing.

“See Something. Hear Something, Say Something!”

This a mantra we must adopt and impress upon our children. This is truly our best weapon in securing our

schools and keeping our children safe.

Impress upon our children how they can help by sharing information. Take the time to talk to them about the little things, like never opening a school door for anyone on the outside trying to get in. All of our doors have signs posted directing visitors to the main entrance of each school. This is the only point of entry. It is critical that we do not allow our security measures to be breached with the simple act of opening a door to allow someone to enter. This is reviewed in our schools, but it would be helpful if we all shared in the task of reinforcing this message.

I wish I could say more to help everyone feel more secure. I hope that the information I have provided gives you a better sense of all the District is doing and will continue to do in our efforts to secure our buildings and keep our staff and students safe. I wish I could give you a guarantee that a tragic event like the one in Florida will not happen here. Sadly, I cannot. Like you, I hope and I pray, and continue to do all that I can to prevent it. Please continue to work with us in this effort. This is a problem and concern for an entire community. I believe that if we all actively engage in sharing information, paying attention to the little things around us, and care for one another, then we increase the chance that our community will not have to endure the great sadness that other communities have had to endure.

In the meantime, I know that you are joining me in thoughts and prayers for families in Parkland, and will hold tight the people that you love.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Joseph A. Bollendorf". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Joseph Bollendorf
Superintendent of Schools, Washington Township Public Schools