Florida School Shooting Spurs Questions and Concerns

After Columbine High School, Sandy Hook Elementary School and now Stoneman Douglas High School, we have a natural ripple of concerns, questions and emotional responses that sweep across our nation. We are not immune to this natural response and have experienced an increase in community calls since the tragic events at Stoneman Douglas High School in Florida. Political forces are sharing political responses and emotional people are sharing emotional responses. In Haywood County Schools, we try to focus on calm, reasonable and logical responses to credible threats and crisis planning.

We continually work on school safety. Our work includes, but is not limited to, the following. We have extensive crisis management plans that are updated annually. The most recent plans were approved by our Board at the regular February meeting. We conduct annual trainings with principals, assistant principals, system-level administrators, School Resources Officers and other emergency response partner agencies. This annual training occurs on a Saturday in August. We attend additional trainings throughout the year. All elementary schools have locked “buzz-in” front door video access systems. Our schools conduct multiple drills each year for crisis situations. School Resource Officers work on our high school and middle school campuses. We have electronic rapid communication tools for law enforcement notification. Our law enforcement partners have access to campus floor plans and keys for facility entry in crisis situations. We have video surveillance and the ability to remotely access cameras in crisis situations. When we are aware of specific creditable threats, we promptly intervene with law enforcement assistance. We have done this in the evening and on weekends when appropriate. There are many additional safety practices in place. We intentionally do not share each school’s detailed plan. Many items are confidential to keep critical information away from ill-minded people. Earlier this week we communicated with principals about the national call for student walkouts. If our students want to speak in a unified fashion about school shootings, we will help them plan and schedule a safe and reasonable way to do so.

While this is not always popular to say, “There is no 100% safe place in a free and open society.” There have been shootings in public schools, private schools, movie theaters, concerts, malls, work places, urban settings and rural settings. There have also been deadly acts committed with airplanes, automobiles, knives and other items that have been turned into weapons. As a reminder, Sandy Hook Elementary was locked and a crazy person shot his way inside. Stoneman Douglas High School had suspended the student and made many reports to other agencies seeking help. The truth of the matter is that our state and federal regulations usually do not support law enforcement or the courts when it comes to securing public safety in the long term.

So, what do we do? Well, we don’t throw up our hands and give up. We don’t take feel-good knee-jerk actions that have little impact. We ask and expect state and federal decision-makers on the ends of the political continuum to join the rest of us who just want prompt and reasonable action. If done correctly, people from across the political spectrum will need to come together. While nothing will be full-proof, we can make this national problem much safer for our students and staff members.

Bill Nolte, Associate Superintendent