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TOP STORY

Fast Path to safety: Recent shootings force schools to seek ways to protect themselves

By Mike Scogin Georgetown News-Graphic Feb 17, 2018



Explanation of Fast Path signs displayed throughout all school buildings in Scott County.

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Georgetown Police Department

Just as the shooter was entering Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Florida Wednesday, teachers and administrators were completing training on the Fast Path safety program at Elkhorn Crossing School, here in Georgetown.

The Fast Path program is the latest addition to a series of measures developed by Scott County Schools in cooperation with multiple law enforcement and emergency responder organizations to make its schools safer.

"There is really no one thing that can be done to make our schools safe," said Dwayne Ellison, who wears multiple hats for the school system including Director of Safe Schools. "There is nothing magical about what we are doing. It is paying attention to the little things. Staying involved with kids. Parents and teachers building a trust with kids so they feel comfortable bringing information to you."

“It is not one thing and it is not one person that will make our schools safer. It is everyone working together.”

The Fast Path program was designed for an active shooter situation, but it is just as valuable in any type of emergency, said Lt. Phil Halley of the Georgetown Police Department. Halley, School Resource Officer Ben Martin and Ben Jones with the Scott County Sheriff’s Department have conducted Fast Path training at almost every school in Scott County, and are now starting another round of training.

“Once we had everybody on the first responders side — police, sheriff, fire, EMS — and agreed this was something we wanted to try, we came to the school system and eventually to Dwayne and he has been very good at making this happen. It really didn’t take much of a push, the schools have been very good about receiving.”

School Resource Officer Deputy Monty Chappell with the Frankfort Sheriff’s Department developed Fast Path and approached the Georgetown Police Department about the program around two years ago. Chappell, who has experience with the U.S. Marine Corps and the Secret Service in addition to local law enforcement, developed a method to help first responders find the location of the emergency quickly.

Fast Path teaches a method, so familiarity with a building is not necessary. Numbers are posted in hallways, over doors and exterior windows beside elevators, along with directions to nearby locations. The signage points out halls with dead ends and exits. Teachers are expected to know their hallway number and room number and in an emergency, provide that information to dispatch. Scott County Dispatch has a diagram of each school along with the corresponding numbers so they can direct first responders immediately to the location of the emergency.

“It helps us — first responders — navigate a large structure,” Halley said. “The teachers and students are intimately familiar with their own school. They are going to know easily how to get around things. That’s not necessarily true with (the first responders). But if they told me to go to hallway number 4 on the second floor, I can do that because all you have to do is follow the numbers on the signs.”

Fast Path has already helped first responders recently with several medical emergencies at area schools, sending help more directly.

“There was a situation in which we estimate Fast Path saved about three minutes or so,” Halley said. “For a child in distress those three minutes are critical.”

It has taken about 18 months, but Fast Path is now in place at every school. Funding had to be secured first and then signs designed and printed. The police department actually installed the system, Ellison said. The cost was about \$750 per school, he said.

As the school system's safety director, Ellison leads a committee which meets monthly and includes representatives of many responder organizations including police, sheriff, fire, EMS, Kentucky State Police as well as multiple school officials.

"Everything is on the table," Ellison said. "If they find a loose doorknob or whatever, they tell us. We encourage them to look around and offer suggestions. There are lots of door checks. Nothing is off the table.

"We try to share as much information with these agencies as possible."

Most Scott County schools have "security vestibules" and almost every school has a "buzz-in" safety system now in place. The security vestibule separates a visitor from the main part of the school until cleared by staff or administration. Several older schools do not have security vestibules, but Ellison said he is determined to find a way to eventually have one at every school. Every Scott County school built from this point forward will require a security vestibule, he said.



Law enforcement has stepped up its presence on area campuses. As part of regular patrol, officers will visit school campuses at random for a routine check and to be visible to students and others. Two or three schools at a minimum are visited every day.

"We are trying to be proactive," Ellison said. "At any point you're likely to see police going in and out of our schools. There is a lot of communication going on between the schools and emergency responders."

The school system is trying to "harden" school faculty, staff and students to be alert and aware, said Superintendent Kevin Hub.

"The first line of defense is not to let an assailant in," Ellison said. "We are always telling students not to open the door for just anyone. Not to prop doors open. We encourage students to pay attention to what is going on around them."

On weekends when schools are empty, area law enforcement have been training in various schools. This allows the officers to become more familiar with the building's layout, as well as prepare in the event of an emergency.

Metal detectors have been discussed, and Ellison said if that is necessary, he would find the funding somewhere. But so far the school system's safety steps are less intrusive in order to help students feel safe and secure.

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