

I seldom write a column after school ends but recent events call for an exception. On Tuesday, a horrific event happened that gives parents, grandparents, teachers and especially students an image in our minds that we never want to face. In Uvalde, TX, the second worst school shooting in our country's history occurred. It is natural for everyone to place themselves in a position of being faced with such a tragedy from their own perspective. Truly, it is the worst nightmare imaginable for anyone remotely connected to education.

In December of 2012, my first year as GPS Superintendent, we all watched the Newtown, CT, shooting unfold. I had already begun to carefully examine the habits of our district with regard to safety. At that time, only the high school could secure their entrance doors effectively with an electronic lock system. We had one dedicated School Resource Officer and one off duty Deputy Sheriff hired for security. Most perimeter doors in all buildings other than the high school were unlocked allowing entry into the building. There was no standardized process to screen visitors entering our buildings. We had a handful of cameras located at the high school and junior high that were only accessible from one access point in each building. To say we were vulnerable would be an understatement.

Over those ten years, we have asked many experts to review our facilities along with our practices to improve safety. During the summer before the 2013-14 school year, we installed a card entry system across the district for all perimeter doors and began the practice of locking all doors. Beginning with that school year, we added two School Resource Officers which gave us a dedicated officer at the High School, Junior High and Upper Elementary. At that time, each officer also had a satellite assignment at one of the three elementary grade centers. In 2014-15, we began work on installation of an integrated security camera system that is networked across the district. As we built this network, we paid close attention to camera placement at areas of the school where experts deemed critical such as building entry points. The network allows administrators or law enforcement officers to view any camera across the district remotely. This camera network now has over 300 cameras that record everything and store it for an appropriate amount of time. Due to the COVID pandemic, we have most recently added specialized cameras at key locations of each school site which will also take a thermal temperature reading of everyone passing by and will sound an alarm to the principal if a person has a body temperature above an established threshold.

During the 2013-14 school year, we also commissioned our school architect and their engineering firm to examine where we were sending students in each building as a response to tornados. They carefully examined the buildings and recommended some modifications based on existing conditions and best practices. At this time the Board of Education and I pledged that any new construction would include areas of shelter which were built to withstand a tornado. We made this pledge with the expectation that future renovations to existing buildings could also incorporate such shelters. When Charter Oak Elementary was built, the gymnasium was designed to withstand the most severe of tornados.

When we started the 2018-19 school year, many things changed as we transitioned from the grade center concept to neighborhood schools and also opened Charter Oak Elementary. Before the year started, we gave each door in all of our buildings a number. That number is labeled on the outside and inside of each door. In the event of an emergency, first responders can be notified of the best door to gain entry and all first responder vehicles have maps of all buildings showing the door numbers that

provide them with a clear direction of where to enter. Opening Charter Oak provided new challenges given the location, which is over 13 miles from the center of Guthrie and also outside of the Guthrie Police Department jurisdiction. We added a dedicated School Resource Officer for that building who is a Logan County Deputy Sheriff that is on-site daily and within their enforcement jurisdiction. This addition brought our total dedicated law enforcement officers at school sites to four. At the same time, we also made the financial commitment in our budget to hire off duty officers from the Guthrie Police Department or the Logan County Sheriff's Office who would provide security at our remaining three elementary schools (Central, Cottler and Fogarty Elementary) so each school would have a law enforcement officer on campus when classes were in session.

Before the 2019-20 school year, we installed a visitor entry system in all of our buildings called SAFEID. This system controls checking your child in or out of school for the day and records the event while taking a picture of the adult parent/guardian and logs their driver's license. Because of COVID, our campus visitors have been drastically limited but this system can also produce visitor badges. In each case, the person requesting a pass or registering their presence on our campus receives a background check. If they are flagged for any reason in the background check process, multiple members of our administrative team receive an immediate text message and email. The visitor can then be referred to the on-campus law enforcement officer for review.

As we closed school in the Spring of 2020, we used that additional time to begin installing secure entrances to the High School, Junior High, Fogarty and Central Elementary schools. These entry doors add a layer of security to our buildings forcing visitors into the office instead of the rest of the building but only when staff remotely unlock the door. This required extensive reconfiguring of several school offices but has served us well since the construction was completed.

We routinely have what we call table-top events where many of the parties we have identified above meet to discuss how we would handle a certain situation. Since every situation is different, we discuss and attempt to prepare for all potential scenarios. Those discussions cannot fully prepare us for a real-life event, but they give us some comfort as we have prepared for a potential similar situation to something we could face in the future.

In November of 2021, I sat down with Guthrie Police Chief Don Sweger and Logan County Sheriff Damon Devereaux to discuss school safety. If you would like to listen to that podcast here is a link <https://anchor.fm/aaron-ryburn/episodes/GPS-CHALK-TALK---SEASON-1-EPISODE-3-e1alt23>

I won't begin to tell you that every door is always locked and secured but I can say that is our goal. We continue to educate our staff and students about best practices with regard to school safety. As troubling as the events of this week have been for all of us, I felt it necessary to let everyone know that safety at Guthrie Public Schools is an ongoing effort, not a sudden reaction to events in another community. With that being said, we will surely review the reports from Uvalde, TX, when they are finalized and use them as a learning opportunity while comparing them to our protocols. I will also tell you that there are many other details which will never be revealed publicly because of safety considerations of our students and staff.

Please keep the Uvalde, TX community near to your heart. Know that Guthrie Public Schools is committed to the safety of our students and staff and will continue to work toward creating the safest learning environment possible as we move forward.