

The presentation below was given by Dr. Lorie Hackett at the March 12, 2018 School Board Meeting.

The Purpose of my message to you this evening is to provide information regarding the safety and security of our campus, information regarding supports in place for students, and review recent events which have occurred in our district.

Safety and Security is one of the district's major goals

Three years ago the district contracted with an outside firm, Standing Stone, which has expertise in risk and threat assessment in schools and universities to conduct an in depth assessment of our district. They concluded that study and submitted recommendations for all of our buildings, as well as our campus grounds, exits and entry ways.

The district developed action plans based on the assessment and has been systematically addressing the recommendations that were made.

As recently as last month the Officer from the Pa State Police who conducts School District Safety Assessments completed an assessment of our High School and found that the building met all of the standards and exceeded safety expectations in some areas.

Several of the safety measures in place are:

Locked school buildings.

Controlled monitored access to all buildings, a person checks all visitors IDs upon entrance to the buildings.

Secure double entry vestibules in Gockley, Steckel and Zephyr. There are plans to complete the Middle School this summer and to complete the High School by January 1st.

A State of the Art Camera Surveillance System was installed across the district

An Emergency Operations Plan and Districtwide Evacuation Plan which are updated regularly and shared with the Whitehall Township Police Department

(WTPD) and all other Emergency Management Agencies who serve our district are in place.

Building Emergency Operations and Evacuation plans are posted in every classroom across the district.

Planned professional development is conducted with all staff teaching best practice in safety and security.

Routine drills (fire, weather, lockdown, bus evacuation, building evacuation) are held at each building with students and staff. Teachers provide ongoing instruction to their students in the classroom in addition to the drills conducted building wide.

Tabletop drills with a variety of unique scenarios are conducted at each building with administration and staff

We currently employ a school Resource Officer (SRO) who is a member of the WTPD and is dedicated to our campus with the plans to employ an additional SRO next school year. Additionally, we request an increased police presence on campus when warranted.

We have 6 trained security personnel on our campus

Our situation here in Whitehall may be a little different than in other districts. We have the advantage of being located on one campus and located 3 miles away from the Police Department. Response time to an incident in any of our buildings is greatly increased due to the officer stationed on campus and the close proximity of the WTPD.

Additionally, we have an outstanding relationship with the WTPD and in fact all of our serving law enforcement and emergency personnel. We meet routinely to discuss issues, exchange information, and update plans to stay on the cutting edge of Emergency Management Response. Just this year we have already met as a team 4 times. Present here this evening are LT. Bealer and Officer Christman. Officer Christman is our SRO.

It would be irresponsible of me to elaborate on the specifics of safety measures, specialized trainings and Emergency Operation plans that we have in place. These must be kept confidential to ensure the safety and security of our students and staff. Law enforcement, consultants and many other security experts continually emphasize the need to keep these plans confidential.

We are also extremely cognizant of the needs of our students in the district and have many resources in place to support and assist students who may be struggling. Just a few of these are:

Student assistance program (SAP) a staff, student, and community system for referrals on students in possible distress, which utilizes trained certified professionals to identify available supports and resources for students in crisis.

Communities in Schools (CIS) , an organization which provides various resources for students struggling in school based on a variety of issues. We have a dedicated professional who has an advanced degree specializing in mental health issues and drug and alcohol abuse placed at our High School.

An On Site Children and Youth worker is stationed in our district.

The district has trained school counselors and school psychologists in each building

Alternative educational placements are utilized when needed.

Most recently, at my request, Mr. Noack and Officer Christman have addressed the middle school students in grade level meetings. The meetings emphasized the seriousness of making jokes that may be considered to be threats, outlining the consequences both legally and from a school disciplinary perspective that will occur if students are identified.

They emphasized the importance of reporting things that you may see or hear to ADULTS not their friends and likewise refraining from perpetuating rumors either in person or through social media. Asking students to be part of the solution rather than part of the problem

But most importantly, they reiterated all of the safety measures we have in place to keep students safe and secure in school, reminding them of the caring adults that are there each and every day to support them.

Mr. Davidson gave the same message on two separate occasions to the HS students over the morning announcement program

Shifting to recent events that have been communicated to you in the past few weeks.

During the past weeks unfortunately even prior to the event in Parkland, Florida I have had to send you notifications of possible threats made that could impact our staff and students.

The majority of these threats actually occurred outside of school hours, several on weekends.

As an overview when an incident occurs in school:

The administration along with the SRO immediately investigate, questioning all involved and searching individuals, lockers and belongings when warranted. All parents are contacted.

If a threat is verified police will arrest, if warranted, and school discipline will be invoked from suspension through expulsion after all due process is afforded the student.

If the incident occurs when school is not in session the investigation is conducted by the WTPD.

In both cases the WTPD and the administration collaborate and make an informed decision as to whether the threat is substantiated or credible.

Then and only then will I make a decision to inform parents of the situation.

I cannot divulge specific information about the incident. There have been questions regarding what will happen to the students involved. Once again due to confidentiality of minors I cannot respond to those requests or those involved due to legal confidentiality restraints.

I am aware that there has been criticism surrounding the amount of time that passes between when parents may have heard something from their children and when I send out a notification. I will always wait until I have all the facts regarding the incident so I am sending out a notification that is as accurate as possible based on the information we have collected. Unfortunately, sometimes that takes time to be accurately completed. The safety of our students and staff is my first concern and I will not compromise that safety by sending information to parents before we have finished an investigation.

Additionally, I know there were concerns about the most recent event that occurred in the MS last week.

As reported in the message that was sent out there was a threat found in one of the bathrooms in the MS. District administration and our SRO investigated and found it to be unsubstantiated. This was a unique incident because it was coupled with a rather sudden early dismissal due to increasingly deteriorating weather conditions.

As we investigated the incident, protocol was followed and there was no movement throughout the building.

Sixth grade students were not dismissed to eat lunch and students were not dismissed to use the bathrooms resulting in the use of our Safety buckets that each classroom is furnished with.

All protocols were followed for the safety of our students. Safety is our first concern and unfortunately sometimes in order to provide that, routines are disrupted. Again, I cannot release the specifics of our School Emergency plans.

I am also aware that the call to parents notifying them of this incident did not reach parents until 8:30 pm, well after dismissal.

The message was sent at 1:20, however due to a technology failure coupled with several power outages the message did not go out until the evening.

We have investigated the issue, contacted the software provider of our Emergency notification system and put measures into place to help to ensure that this would not reoccur.

Finally, we are currently dealing with very troubling and disconcerting issues. Our community, parents, students, staff, administration, and law enforcement are dealing with a lot of uncertainty. We are constantly learning from recent national events and our security planning is constantly evolving to reflect those changes and lessons learned.

While the focus tends to be on security measures put in place in schools, much of the research points to a positive school culture and climate where quality relationships are formed among the students and the adults in schools, as one of the first steps in preventing school violence. This is a major goal and focus for our district.

As parents I am well aware that your children are your most prized possession. Please continue to take the time to talk with them, listen to them, monitor their social media and support them.

Together we can work to promote a culture and climate in our district where we all support each other in a safe and supportive learning environment and campus for our students and staff.