Wake County Public School System

School Safety Assessment

Executive Summary

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This Executive Summary is being provided to the Wake County Public Schools System as part of the Comprehensive School Safety Assessment.

CAVEAT

Recommendations in this Executive Summary reflect the School Safety Advocacy Council understanding of the state of security at the Wake County Public School System at the time of our initiative. We recognize that security, safety, emergency management and crime prevention/reduction strategies are dynamic processes. As the District functions or activities change or facility conditions are modified or expanded, some of the assumptions made during this review process will also change. Therefore, security process management, technology, policies and procedures should be routinely reviewed and updated to reflect changes in the environment and the expectations of the community.

Although we believe the recommendations contained in this Executive Summary are reasonable and appropriate, the School Safety Advocacy Council cannot provide legal guidance or advice. Therefore, we recommend that legal counsel be sought, if indicated, before policies or programs are changed or implemented.

INTRODUCTION

The goal of this report is to synthesize the information gathered from the Wake County Public School System during the Comprehensive School Safety Assessment. As a result of the information collected, The School Safety Advocacy Council developed an expert opinion about the key challenges associated with keeping the District safe. The School Safety Advocacy Council examined all the available evidence on current District safety measures and procedures, and is proud to present an expert view of the needs and limits of current safety solutions and other safety practices.

The Wake County Public School System should be commended for understanding that a comprehensive district-wide evaluation should be conducted before implementing or purchasing any school safety improvements. When considering which school safety and security recommendations to select, it is important for the administration to use all the available information to justify and document the decision. With the intent to provide the Public School System with as much information as possible, this evaluation drew from several approaches, staff interviews, staff focus groups, school safety assessments, document and MOU reviews, and the state mandated climate survey reports.

Decisions about whether to invest in school security improvements for the Wake County Public School System are complex and must consider a variety of logistical, economic, and political factors. Security improvements, such as those referenced in this report, provide numerous solutions that the school system can adopt to enhance student, visitor, and staff safety. Although security measures are often crisis-driven, the public school system should consider the following items before acquiring and implementing the safety improvements:

• A positive school climate is crucial to fostering learning; security should not create a prison-like atmosphere or generate additional fears.

• Policy cannot compensate for inherent building design weaknesses.

• Without training, school safety improvements can be ineffective.

• Without the appropriate culture, school safety measures can be jeopardized or ineffective.

• School safety improvement should focus on addressing a specified problem.

It must be understood that full implementation of the recommendations included in this report cannot guarantee that Wake County's campuses or the surrounding areas will be crime-free or totally safe without threats. Rather, this document is meant to assist in reducing the potential for incidents by providing a "roadmap" for enhancing the effectiveness of security resources by improving training and staff awareness of potential problems and further implementing security improvements. However, the

School Advocacy Council believes that security equipment is only one part of the Wake County Public School System total security "system."

Additional components of the overall security strategy must include the application of existing policies, procedures and processes, the selection, recruitment and retention of trained staff, proper staff supervision, communication and collaboration with the administration and other stakeholders, proactive law enforcement participation and community involvement.

ABOUT THE SCHOOL SAFETY ADVOCACY COUNCIL

The School Safety Advocacy Council (SSAC) was established with the goal of providing the highest quality school safety training and services to school districts, law enforcement agencies and communities. The Council strives to expand beyond a singular approach of relying on law enforcement as the only solution to school violence and transition to a cooperative approach which includes all of the educational stakeholders.

With Curtis Lavarello as the Executive Director and Sean Burke as the President, the School Safety Advocacy Council has become the recognized leader in school safety services and training. The Council is currently the host of the largest conference in the nation addressing all aspects of school safety, the National School Safety Conference, as well as the National Conference on Active School Threats, both conferences draw professionals in their respective fields from all over the world. The Council also hosts the National Executive Leadership Academy on School Safety, which is attended by management- level professionals from education and law enforcement from across the nation.

In addition to the national conferences, the School Safety Advocacy Council has worked in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice and its centers, the Justice Technology Information Center and the Small Rural Tribal Boarder Center, to provide training and services to school districts and law enforcement agencies nationwide. In an effort to provide the most accurate and up-to-date information to education and law enforcement, SSAC works to develop technology and initiatives with the U.S. Department of Justice and its centers on addressing current school safety needs. The School Safety Advocacy Council also prides itself on its partnership with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the FBINAA (Federal Bureau of Investigation National Academy Associates).

PROJECT OVERVIEW

The Wake County Comprehensive School Safety Assessment Initiative was divided into three phases: Information Collection, Recommendation and Implementation, and Review and Presentation. These phases guided the process and ensured the effective achievement of the goals set forth in the scope of work.

Phase1: Information Collection

This was the most important phase of the project and is the cornerstone for all recommendations or actions going forward. It was imperative to be as thorough in all information-gathering efforts so that as many stakeholders as possible were involved in the process.

For the purpose of this project, the School Safety Advocacy Council was not solely attempting to collect negative opinions or safety areas in need of improvement, but also making a concerted effort to identify the positive efforts and initiatives the District has implemented. In any accurate assessment of school safety, it is just as important to recognize the positive efforts as it is the negative ones in an attempt to improve.

Phase2: Recommendations and Implementation

In this phase of the project, all the collected information was synthesized, reports and deliverables were completed and submitted to the district. Reports detailing the information collected of positive school safety initiatives and opportunities to strengthen safety and security were created and sub-divided by department and/or initiative. This format allows the team to meet with any department or individual necessary to discuss the findings and recommendations.   .

Phase 3: Review and Presentation

In this phase, all of the individual reports, findings, recommendations, policies and procedures, deliverables, and evaluation components were combined into a single comprehensive report on the initiative. This report is reflective of and provides a pathway to accomplish the strategic goals of the Wake County Public School System. A comprehensive final report was presented and discussed with the Wake County School District Administrative Team.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

District Staff Assistance During the Assessment Process

Upon our team being notified by the Wake County Public School System that our team had been selected for this highly technical initiative we were immediately contacted by the Wake County Office of Safety and Security Director Russ Smith. Mr. Russ Smith served as our team's point of contact throughout the entire assessment process. Our team applauds the assistance provided by Mr. Smith and his Leadership Team, who were there for us from the beginning until the end of this project. Unlike other School District's we have worked with, Wake County Public School District Leaders made no attempt to restrict our focus of the safety assessment process. From the onset of this process, Wake County School District Leadership remained extremely helpful and focused on the protection of students and staff.

SCHOOL SAFETY ASSESSMENTS

The School Safety Advocacy Council completed several school safety assessments and developed a data-driven justification for matching a problem to a potential solution(s). The objective of a school safety assessment is to gather, analyze, and communicate information about threats, likelihood, assets, vulnerabilities, and consequences in a way that allows school officials to decide what actions to take. Actions are intended to create a level of protection that reduces the vulnerabilities to threats and their potential consequences, thereby reducing risk.

A school safety assessment is useful in determining the potential impacts of threats and hazards to the assets in an individual school, or across a district. The school safety assessment can provide the foundation and justification for identifying and prioritizing actions, including modification to existing safety and security initiatives. No matter the method used, the end result should be a prioritized list of security improvements for the school district. District leadership should review their identified needs and assign prioritization, keeping in mind limits imposed by Federal, State, local and school mandates, political and parental concerns, and, lastly, local law enforcement and fire departments are advised as appropriate.

District-wide Staff Surveys

As part of this comprehensive district-wide assessment process, the School Safety Advocacy Council conducted an anonymous staff safety survey to assist our team in gaining valuable insight into both existing safety strengths and perceived and actual opportunities for improvement within the school system.

As a result of this, every school administrator was sent a link for both their instructional staff, as well as their support staff to take the survey. Some of the key findings of this survey were:

- 76% of those completing the survey were classroom teachers
- 48% were from Elementary Schools, 28% from Middle Schools and 22% from Elementary Schools
- 46% of those surveyed had over 5 years' experience. 27% had 1-3 years' experience, 18% had 4-5 years and 9% newly hired.
- When surveyed if the employee currently feels safe within their school, 90% indicated Yes.
- When surveyed if the employee felt they were well trained and prepared handle a critical incident at their school, 78% stated Yes, while 15% stated No, and the remainder did not respond.
- 72% of those surveyed stated they had read and were familiar with their school's crisis plan. 22% stated they were not.
- 94% of those surveyed stated they have taken part in their school's lockdown drills. 6% stated they had not.
- 18% of those surveyed stated they had taken part in table-top school related safety training. 45% stated they had not, and 37% stated they were unsure. This was an identified concerned relayed to district staff in the final report.
- When asked if there was a specific area that could be at risk for student and/or staff safety, 44% stated Yes. Examples of areas of focus are highlighted Training and Visitor Management

During the assessment process, examples of areas of focus and highlighted as:

- Training received

- Parents on campus

- Staffing levels.

- Drill timing.

Purpose of Executive Summary and Limitations

This executive summary outlines the scope of work that was performed by the School Safety Advocacy Council. A full district-wide assessment report, as well as individual school assessment reports were provided to school-district leadership. That comprehensive report outlines many areas that the district is already performing extremely well in the area of safety and security. The report also outlines areas of safety and security that can be enhanced and improved. Many of the areas identified as opportunities for improvement are purposely left out of this executive summary as to not alert potential perpetrators to an area of risk.

As part of this comprehensive assessment process, there were several areas that our team identified as opportunities for enhancement as it relates to safety and security. Specific recommendations for each of these areas were highlighted in the full district-wide security report provided to the district. It should also be noted that not all areas identified as having opportunities for enhancement, were included in this summary. This was intentional and based upon national best practices as they related to security assessments and sensitive information.

The areas identified in the main report were:

- **School Resource Officer (SRO) Program**

  During the assessment process, our team members continually received praise and support for the district's School Resource Officer Program. However, due to the fact that there were several law enforcement agencies participating in this, the selection, training and supervision of the SRO's was not always consistent, and our team felt it could be improved upon. A district-wide School Resource Officer Operations Committee was recommended.

- **Review of off campus lunch / dining policy**

  During the assessment process, the assessment team members noted that many high schools have an off-campus dining / lunch policy.

While the School Safety Advocacy Council does recommend that all schools maintain a closed campus policy for high schools, the Wake County School District would be best served to explore this policy in the future with key district staff, the Wake County School Board, and the broader community.

- **District-wide Emergency Communications and Mass Notification**

  Several opportunities for added Emergency Communication were identified in the final report. A district-wide communications center should be prioritized as the district moves forward.

- **District-wide Visitor Management protocol**

  The district should continue to prioritize a district-wide standardized visitor management system.

- **Campus Signage**

  Throughout the districtwide assessment process, our team noted that many schools lacked proper signage which can assist in the overall school safety protocol. Many schools lacked the basic signage directing visitors to the proper parking areas and/or the main entrance of most schools. Additionally, our team made note that many schools lacked "no trespassing" signs, or signs indicating the use of video surveillance cameras. A number of recommendations were made district-wide in this area, but additionally, recommendations were made for each individual site as well.

- **District-wide Staff Development Training in the Safety and Security field**

  Several opportunities to add to the overall school safety related training district-wide were identified in the final report. Wake County Public School System should develop and implement a professional development program focused on building employee capacity in the area of school safety and emergency management. A professional development program delivered online and/or in person, with content developed by subject-matter experts, will support and enhance the capacity of the school district and its schools to provide a safe and orderly learning environment for students.

- **Volunteer Screening and Protocol**

  It is the recommendation of SSAC that any volunteer undergo a criminal records and sexual predator check per WCPSS Board of Education Policy.

- **District-wide Threat Assessment Team**

  Wake County Public Schools should establish a threat assessment policy and team within the district. The threat assessment process is centered upon an analysis of the facts and the evidence of behavior of each situation.

- **School Security Department**

  As part of the school safety assessment program, the school district security department was evaluated. The security department, headed by Senior Director Russ Smith, consistently received positive feedback during school staff interviews. The positive opinion of the security department was also reaffirmed in the school safety survey conducted as part of the assessment process. The survey found that 90% of school-based staff responding felt safe in their school, which reflects

  positively on the efforts and work of the security department. During the evaluation the team was impressed by the quality and quantity of work the security department does with minimal staff. The minimal staffing of the security department is the basis for most of the recommendations below.

  As a result of our evaluation of the security department, we recommend the following.

   • Increase the number of security administrators to nine to reflect the current district breakdown and area superintendents' assignments. This would decrease the number of schools each security administrator would have to service, thus increasing the attention they can provide to their assigned schools.

   • Establish a dedicated position for a physical security specialist that would work in cooperation with school principals to improve physical security at each school. While conducting school-based interviews numerous principals of newer schools related to our team that they would have liked to have more input on the security features of the new buildings. This position would consult on new school building designs and systems, such as surveillance upgrades, and be able to provide the principals point of view to the process.

   • Establish the position of Emergency Manager, who under the direction of the Senior Director of Security, will be the district leader and expert in disaster, security, and emergency planning for school sites and administration offices. This

position will be responsible for complying with increasing state mandates, while directing the coordination, development, and promotion of emergency service operations procedures, and best practices. The position will coordinate emergency management programs and activities associated with preparation for, response to, and recovery from natural or manmade disasters or emergencies.

• Establish a security training division to plan, direct, and coordinate security and emergency management educational programs to enhance the knowledge and skills of the district's employees. The division would be responsible for creating or selecting course content and materials for security and emergency management training programs. Training may be in the form of a video, self-guided instructional manual, or online application and delivered in-person or through a computer, tablet, or other hand-held electronic device. The division must ensure that training methods, content, software, systems, and equipment are appropriate and meaningful.

In place of hiring employees to staff this division, the district may contract the services out to a qualified provider. If staff chooses to proceed with a contracted provider, they should have knowledge of both the district's security and emergency management policies and procedures as well as national best practices.

CONCLUSION

The School Safety Advocacy Council strongly feels that as a result of the findings of this report, the leadership of the Wake County Public School System cares deeply about the safety of district students and staff. We are confident that that District leadership will continue to focus time, funding, and resources in improving school safety. Along with this focus, District leaders need to implement less tangible items such as standardization and professional development. It is not sufficient to simply develop policies or provide trainings. It is critical to follow-through to confirm that policies are enforced, that trainings were understood and that information was applied.

The culture of school safety is set each day by the adults on campus. In other words, students will rise to the high expectations of adults or misbehave when low expectations are established. The challenge is that in the absence of shared high expectations by all adults, low expectations are allowed to spread. All administrators, teachers, and site staff must be empowered to take responsibility for the safety of their campus and must be shown how they are an integral part of making their schools safe.