



O'Hara Elementary School invited School Resource Officer David Harajda to read to students during their lunchtime. The other school resource officer is Kirk Vandembord. The district's two school resource officers get to know students on a more personal level as a part of their jobs.

RELATIONSHIPS KEY TO STUDENT SAFETY

School Safety Measures Discussed with Community

Building relationships is one of the most important ways to ensure safety and prevent violence in our schools, according to Superintendent Gene Freeman, Ed.D. Parents and interested district residents were invited to attend a school safety presentation by Fox Chapel Area school officials and representatives from the local police departments on April 16. "Adults with relationships with kids are probably the greatest tool to preventing this kind of violence," Dr. Freeman stated.

Research has shown that maintaining a supportive school climate in which students experience positive relationships with adults and feel comfortable sharing when they see or hear something is key to stopping tragedies like the recent school shootings. Additionally, cooperative relationships between the school district and local police departments have combined in the

development of a safety plan that puts the school district community "ahead of the curve," said Fox Chapel Borough Police Chief David Laux. School district officials have held regular meetings for many years with the chiefs of police from Aspinwall, Blawnox, Fox Chapel, Indiana, O'Hara, and Sharpsburg and they all attended the safety presentation.

During the meeting, Chief Laux told the audience that the local police departments and the school district have many resources available.

"We are not working in a vacuum," he said. He also pointed out that while many people might think that adding metal detectors, bulletproof glass, and enhanced locks may seem like the solution to protecting students and staff, the first two measures "have serious limitations." He did say that local police and school administrators are looking at enhancing locks. "We believe that would be one of the best ways to protect students and staff



Fox Chapel Borough Police Chief David Laux addressed the public at the school district's safety meeting on April 16.

during an incident.” He also reiterated the importance of relationships and said that the best way to prevent a tragic situation is to provide students with safety nets, and that students tell trusted adults what they are thinking.

An important way to ensure that happens is the presence of specially-trained school resource officers. Currently, the district has two – Kirk Vandembord, stationed at Dorseyville Middle School from the Indiana Township Police Department, and David Harajda, stationed at the high school from the O’Hara Township Police Department. Among other things, they greet students each morning, patrol the hallways, and make themselves familiar with the buildings they are assigned to work, all while developing positive relationships with the students and staff. The two district resource officers do travel to the elementary buildings any time, including to teach D.A.R.E. classes and visit with the students.

“Adults with relationships with kids are probably the greatest tool to preventing this kind of violence.” – Gene Freeman, Ed.D.

Additional safety nets available for students include school counselors, the MAPS (the University of Pittsburgh’s Maximizing Adolescent Potentials) program employees who also serve as home-school liaisons; behavior specialists; and programs that offer support to students who may be struggling with social or emotional issues.

Although the district’s comprehensive safety plan was discussed in general at the meeting, Chief Laux stated, “I cannot and will not tell you what the tactical plan is.” However, he wanted residents to be assured, “We are not here to fail you.” He equated describing the school district safety plan in detail to the offensive coordinator of a football team writing out plays so that the opposition could be prepared for them. Sharing specific details publicly could greatly compromise student, staff, and police safety.

School district Solicitor Paul Giuffre added, that although the public may want to know details of threats or incidents, federal law protects both the victim and perpetrator in incidents and that, under the law, the district cannot disclose “protected” information.

Staff Trained to Keep Students Safe

School principals also discussed some details of the staff training and the school safety plan, as well as student supports and safety nets that are all in place to help prevent a crisis. The district uses the ALICE® method to train all staff for active shooter response. ALICE stands for Alert, Lockdown, Inform, Counter, and Evacuate. This program teaches how to best deal with an intruder based on the information that a person has at the time and the methods can include evacuating, barricading, or confronting. The Fox Chapel Area staff has had training and presentations on this method, as

well as follow-up drills. Additionally, students participate in age-appropriate training.

Eric Schmidt, the School Board safety liaison, stated when referring to district staff members, “I would never ever question... the dedication and professionalism and the intelligence that these people bring to work every single day and to make sure that your kids are safe.”

Mr. Schmidt also passed out information on the Sandy Hook Promise, a series of programs that targets adults and students that was developed following the mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School. The group provides programs and practices that protect children from gun violence and also includes the Say Something app which is an anonymous reporting system.

When asked how parents and guardians could help support the district’s safety training, Dr. Freeman noted that it is important that parents share with their children that, in any crisis situation, the students should listen to an adult. “There’s no script, because every situation is going to be different. I think... what I would say... is that if you’re with an adult, listen to that adult. Listen to that adult and what they’re telling you to do.”

In addition, the district has established confidential telephone, email, and website tip lines so that students and parents can report safety issues. The entire safety meeting is also posted on the district’s YouTube channel at <https://youtu.be/KVLPEXYxprQ> and the link can be found on the district’s website.

Fox Chapel Area School District CONFIDENTIAL SAFETY TIP LINE

CALL

412-696-1420

EMAIL

tip@fcasd.edu



www.fcasd.edu/contact/tip-line

If you have a concern about someone or something, please let us know. Include as much information as possible, including the associated school, so that concerns may properly be addressed.