Protecting Students and Teachers: A Discussion on School Safety

Written Statement from Frederick E. Ellis

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As the director of the office of safety and security with the Fairfax County Public Schools, school safety and security have been my professional and personal focus for the last twelve and one half years.

Fairfax County Public Schools, in Fairfax County, Virginia, is the eleventh largest school system in the country with more than 181,000 students, 23,000 employees, over 200 facilities comprising more than 25 million square feet and a budget of approximately $2.5 billion. It is a very large school system in a diverse and urbanizing suburb of Washington, D.C.

While school security encompasses many topics, my intent today is to provide insight into how a school division addresses the many challenges that we face by examining the emergency management processes and briefly describing some of the security measures we have in place.

A school-centered emergency management program examines potential emergencies and disasters based on the risk posed by likely hazards; develops and implements programs and actions aimed toward reducing the impact of these events on the individual school; prepares for those risks that cannot be eliminated; prescribes the actions required to deal with the consequences of the events and takes action to quickly recover from the event. Emergency planning focuses on the four phases of emergency management:

1. Mitigation/Prevention
2. Preparedness
3. Response
4. Recovery

Hazards can be classified into three categories: natural, technological, and school specific-hazards. Natural hazards include severe weather events. Technological hazards may involve hazardous materials or infrastructure failures, while school specific hazards address issues that could occur on or near a school, such as a bomb threat, a reported weapon or police activity near the school.

Mitigation is any sustained activity that schools take to reduce the loss of life and damage related to events that cannot be prevented, while prevention is any step that schools can take to decrease the likelihood that an incident will occur.

School safety audits, security and school climate surveys, neighborhood crime data review, hazard and vulnerability analysis efforts all play a role in the development of mitigation and prevention strategies. Issues identified from these initiatives are used to address physical and programmatic remediation.

The preparedness phase readies schools to respond in a rapid, coordinated and effective manner to an emergency. Because it is not possible to completely prevent every hazard that poses a risk, preparedness measures can help to reduce the impact of hazards by taking

specific actions before an emergency occurs. An important aspect of preparedness is plan development.

In the Fairfax County Public Schools, each school has an individual, site specific plan that is updated each year and is reviewed by staff in the office of safety and security. These plans include such things as the identification of the school crisis management team and their respective roles, standard language and response protocols for emergency actions, integration of students with disabilities and special needs into the response planning, detailed floor plans identifying the location of utility cutoffs, communications protocols, drills and training schedules and the identification of staff with specific, relevant skills. The school plan also addresses tactical considerations for command post locations, designated off-site evacuation locations, bus staging areas and parent-student reunification procedures.

A critical component of preparation is training. Training can take many forms and in school divisions, these are typically drills and tabletop exercises. Drills test a specific operation or function of crisis and emergency plans. In Fairfax County, schools regularly conduct a variety of drills to demonstrate the steps they should take in an emergency. These drills include fire and bus evacuations, lockdown and tornado drills. Tabletop exercises analyze an emergency event in an informal environment. They provide participants with an emergency scenario to analyze and increase their awareness of their roles and responsibilities. The exercises are designed to prompt a constructive discussion about existing emergency response plans as participants identify, investigate and resolve issues. In Fairfax County, the office of safety and security provides facilitated tabletop exercises to schools on a rotating basis; high and middle schools receive them every other year, while elementary schools are provided one every three years.

When emergencies arise, schools must quickly implement the policies and procedures developed in the prevention-mitigation and preparedness phases to effectively manage the crisis and protect the school community. Throughout the response phase, efforts focus on de-escalating the emergency and taking accelerated steps toward recovery. The response phase is often the effort to bring order to chaos and is predictably unique to each incident.

The response phase activities include activating the school's crisis management team, delegating responsibilities, establishing an incident command post, activating communication and response procedures, accounting for all students and staff, liaison with public safety agencies and documenting actions. In Fairfax County Public Schools, there are five universal responses: Lockdown, Secure the Building, Shelter-in-Place, Stay Put-Stay Tuned, and Evacuation. A lockdown is used to describe enhanced security measures taken to protect against potentially violent intruders that may be inside the building. Secure the building is used to prevent unauthorized entry if the threat is outside. Shelter-in-Place procedures are used to temporarily separate people from a hazardous outdoor atmosphere, such as in a hazmat situation. Stay Put-Stay Tuned is implemented at the request of public safety officials to limit the impact on the transportation infrastructure. An Evacuation is used when locations outside of the school building are safer than inside the school.

The recovery phase is designed to assist students, staff, and their families in the healing process and to restore educational operations in schools. Recovery is an ongoing process that includes not only the mental, emotional and physical healing process of students, faculty and staff, but a school's physical (buildings and grounds), fiscal (daily business operations) and academic (a return to classroom learning) recuperation. A timely return to normalcy is considered a significant goal, for both the school and the community.

In addition to the individual school crisis plans, the Fairfax County Public Schools maintain a divisionwide emergency operations plan. This plan is implemented when an incident overwhelms a school's ability to deal with an emergency, an incident that involves multiple sites or when the Fairfax County government requests the school system to fulfill its pre-designated obligations within the Fairfax County Emergency Operations Plan. The purpose of the divisionwide plan is to use school system resources to assist in the resolution of an incident. Like the school plan, the divisionwide plan establishes a command structure and roles, identifies lines of succession and details provisions for staffing the inter-government agency emergency operations center, as well as the Fairfax County Public School's department operations center. Examples of an activation of this plan include the response for 9-11, the sniper incidents of 2002 and large storm incidents.

Fairfax County Public Schools has implemented many security measures over the past several years. These include the use of exit door numbers, access control devices at all elementary and middle schools, an anonymous Tip Line system, interoperable radio communications with public safety, visitor screening and School Resource Officers in all high and middle schools.

Much of the efforts of my office also involve the establishment and maintenance of relationships with agencies that we work with during an incident, such as the police, the fire and rescue department, the health department, etc. In emergencies, relationships are currency. Having them facilitates communications and understanding of needs and roles. They have to be established prior to an incident and they require an ongoing effort. An excellent example of this is our School Liaison Commander position. This individual is a Fairfax County Police Lieutenant who is assigned to the office of safety and security and is funded by the Fairfax County Public Schools. The position provides a conduit for information exchange, oversees the School Resource Officer program, participates in tabletop exercises and is a piece of our on-scene incident command system staffing.

Today, schools are challenged with a variety of tasks, many of which are beyond historical expectations, but are now commonplace. Educators are individuals committed to teaching and making the difference in the life of a child. Their primary mission is education. They are not public safety officials but accept the roles they are given in today's society. Likewise, public safety officials are not always familiar with school operations and needs. School administrators and staff require training, assistance and support for the emergency management and security responsibilities they are charged with and embrace.

I'm often asked whether schools need more security measures. My answer is that, ultimately, communities play a large role in determining the nature and extent of school security measures they are willing to accept and to fund. Expectations need to be clearly understood and they need to be reasonable. Statistically, schools remain incredibly safe places for children to be. Perspective, reasonableness and cost are necessary criteria for communities to use in their deliberations. I know of no school system that guarantees safety and security, but I do know that the professionals in the education community will do all that they can reasonably do to maintain a safe and secure educational environment.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you about this important topic.