

School Security: Tips on Promoting Safety

By Thomas A. Parmalee

Eternal vigilance — and a coordinated approach by all stakeholders — is key to keeping schools safe



<https://www.njsba.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Secure-Vestibule.jpg>
An example of a secure vestibule.

The No. 1 task of any school district — even more important than promoting educational achievement — is to keep students and staff safe.

That means designing good school buildings, promoting a culture where students and staff feel compelled to report security lapses, cultivating a collaborative relationship with local police and keeping security top of mind.

When there are errors in carrying out security measures and protocols, the results can be devastating.

Take, for instance, the school shooting at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas, May 24, 2022. A former student at the school fatally shot 19 students and two teachers and wounded 17 others.

A U.S. Department of Justice report issued in January 2024 concluded that police responding to the school acted with “no urgency” in establishing a command post. There were “cascading failures” in law enforcement’s handling of the massacre, the report said.

It all started when the gunman gained access to the school through an unlocked door. Members of the U.S. Border Patrol Tactical Unit fatally shot the gunman — but not before he had been in the school for more than an hour, with law enforcement initially treating the situation as a barricaded subject instead of an active shooter.

Dr. Steven Forte, superintendent at Denville Township School District; Gerard Marinelli, director of facilities and security at Denville and a former chief with the Morris County Sheriff’s Office who also briefly led the Hackensack Police Department; and Michael J. Wozny, vice president of educational projects at El Associates, which is the architect of record for the Denville Township School District, recently sat down with School Leader to share some of their insights on how schools can promote and maintain school security.

Every single school district should be making school security a priority, they agreed.

“I think the days of pretending you don’t need to spend money on school security are over,” Forte said.

Class Three Special Law Enforcement Officers at Schools Denville, a preK-eighth grade school district in Morris County with two elementary schools and a middle school, has Class Three Special Law Enforcement Officers at its schools, which it began employing in 2017, largely in response to the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School, Forte said. Since it has four buildings including an annex to one of its elementary schools, it employs four officers.

“Officers of this class shall be authorized to exercise full powers and duties similar to those of a permanent, regularly appointed full-time police officer while providing security at a public or nonpublic school or a county college on the school or college premises during hours when the public or nonpublic school or county college is normally in session or when it is occupied by public or nonpublic school or county college students or their teachers or professors,” according to New Jersey statute. “While on duty in the jurisdiction of employment, an officer may respond to offenses or emergencies off school or college grounds if they occur in the officer’s presence while traveling to a school facility or county college, but an officer shall not otherwise be dispatched or dedicated to any assignment off school or college property.”



<https://www.njsba.org/wp>

“We worked pretty hard to get the legislation passed that allowed school districts to hire recently retired police officers through the police force at a much-reduced cost,” Forte said, referring to the legislation signed by former Gov. Chris Christie in November 2016, which established the new type of school security personnel at public or nonpublic schools and at the state’s county colleges.

The legislation, *P.L. 2016, c.68*, was a recommendation in the New Jersey School Boards Association’s “What Makes Schools Safe,” the 2014 report of the NJSBA School Security Task Force, as well as the state’s New Jersey School Security Task Force.

Without that legislation, the district would have had to spend about \$150,000 per officer on an annual basis when you include insurance and pension benefits. But the legislation allowed it to hire Class Three Officers for about \$35,000 per year. “Now, it’s about \$42,000, but it’s still reasonable,” Forte said. “We can get at least three for one.”

The hiring must be done through the police, and the officer is a sworn officer, Forte said. “They work for the police, not for me,” Forte explained. “We pay the police. We pay their salary, but not for their training, or their car, their gun, the uniform or any of those things. We only pay the actual hourly rate.”

The legislation has allowed the district to hire one retired officer at each of its three schools. “We are paying about \$160,000 to \$170,000 whereas otherwise, we’d be paying \$650,000,” he said.

Denville is not alone in making Class Three Officers and/or other security personnel a key component of their security plan.

<content/uploads/2024/03/class-3-oct-2023.jpg>

Left to right: Officer Steve Bode and Officer John Kerner are Class Three Special Law Enforcement Officers at Denville Township School District.

During a presentation they delivered at Workshop 2023 in Atlantic City, the three men shared that according to a January 2023 survey conducted by the New Jersey Association of School Administrators' School Safety and Security Subcommittee that garnered 262 responses, 42% reported having armed security personnel at their school buildings.

According to the report, "The number draws a clear line between the have and have-nots across the state as it relates to having an armed presence in schools to address armed intruders."

The report notes that almost 20% of districts in New Jersey have no security personnel – either armed or unarmed. "The responses point toward a scattershot approach to securing many of our schools that would, sadly, only be brought to light during an emergent situation," the report states.

One survey taker questioned why school districts alone must be solely responsible for paying to ensure its buildings and grounds are secure, noting, "In many instances our schools, specifically local high schools, are the largest gathering of citizens/taxpayer offspring of the township during any calendar day, often from as early as 7 a.m. to as late as 10 p.m. Why are the school districts solely financially responsible for protecting them?"

The report is available on the NJASA website. In it, the subcommittee offers a number of recommendations that could help schools better protect students and staff.

"If you have built a relationship of trust with the police and community, adding class three officers is a logical next step," Forte said. "It is a cost-effective way to get sworn officers into your buildings. In our town, this provides the community with a peace of mind."

Working with Law Enforcement While the onus of the blame for any tragedy must be reserved for the perpetrator, one cannot help but wonder if certain school shootings could have been less severe or averted altogether if the schools and police forces involved had a better working relationship or been more prepared.

That's something that Denville makes a priority.

But establishing such a relationship and engaging in such preparation takes work – and both parties have to stay in regular touch with each other, Forte said.

"The big thing is, when we have drills in our schools, every officer on duty reports for the drill if they are available," Forte said. "There may be seven police cars in front of the school."

Even with such a presence, however, it is rare for the school to hear from concerned community members. "It is embedded in the fabric of the town," Forte said of the drills.

The No. 1 way to build a solid relationship with the local police is simply to stay in touch. "Not having open communication is a recipe for disaster," Forte said.

It's also important for everyone to check their egos at the door, Forte said. Sometimes, it may be better for the vice principal and a lieutenant to steer the relationship, instead of relying on the superintendent and the chief of the local police, he observed.

Marinelli agreed, noting that the police chief has to be as committed to the relationship as school leaders. It's also important for the police department to pick the right staff to serve as Class Three Officers, he said. "The police chiefs know what officers they need to push further into the schools to make it a workable relationship," he said.

In Denville, local police stay involved even when there are no drills, Forte said. "They may come here at lunchtime and walk through the playground and give the kids high fives," he said.

The Class Three Officers stationed at the schools appreciate that not everything needs to be a police matter. "If a kid throws a bologna sandwich at another kid in the lunchroom, the teachers handle that," Forte said.

The community has embraced the idea of having Class Three Officers at the school.

"Since we introduced them to our schools, I've literally had two people question it, and neither of them complained – they just wanted more information," Forte said.

The district takes simple steps to ensure the good working relationship continues, Forte said.

For instance, if there ever is a police matter involving the school that the community must be informed about, the school and police department issue a joint communication, Forte said. That reiterates to the community that school security is a shared concern and that the school district and police are working together to ensure everyone's safety.

Tips to Succeed No school district wants students or staff to be in danger, but how can you minimize risk in a world where schools are so often the targets of violence?

The key is to change behaviors, and while that may be difficult, it doesn't cost anything in most cases, Forte observed.

"Have locks on the doors and lock them – make sure they are locked," he said. "Get everyone to buy into the mentality that you need to do the best you possibly can."

Some other measures can be implemented with minimal expense, such as an adhesive card on all doors stating that they must remain locked and closed.

"We all have to do it for each other," Forte said. "If someone from the community comes and says they were able to get in through this door, I want to know that."

Every school must review its procedures, especially those revolving around visitors, Forte said. "We require everyone to buzz in, and they must state their name and purpose for their visit," he said. "The reason for that is it gives our people at the desk a minute ... a little bit of time to evaluate the person. Do they need to be in the building or not?"

The district also has security vestibules, but even before those were in place, it required visitors to explain why they were there before entering a main building, Forte said.

A vestibule area buys everyone time to determine if someone you don't want at your school is trying to get into the building – or perhaps if it may be someone who is just at the wrong place, Marinelli said.

As an engineer, Wozny spends a lot of time ensuring vestibules are designed in a way that maximizes safety.

"A secure vestibule functions as a place for the school to process visitors prior to allowing access into the building," he said. "The vestibule should be located at an identifiable main entrance that is clearly apparent for visitors unfamiliar with the school. The best design for a secure vestibule will be building specific." He listed the following best practices, which may not always be easily achievable in existing schools:

- The main office should be adjacent to the secure vestibule. If this condition does not exist, it may be possible to relocate spaces to achieve this configuration.
- Ideally the secure vestibule is separate from the main entrance vestibule used by the occupants of the school.
- Depending on existing conditions, the secure vestibule can be a space subdivided within the school main entrance or configured as a fully separated visitors entrance. The goal is to avoid contact between the arrival or departure of day-to-day occupants and the visitors being processed for an appointment.
- If space allows, the best-case scenario is to provide a visitors center with access to a waiting area, restroom and small conference room without access to the remainder of the building.

"The secure vestibule and appropriate surrounding areas should be constructed of durable ballistic resistant materials," Wozny added. "Glass areas such as the transaction window between the vestibule and main office, the perimeter walls of the vestibule and any other easily accessible exterior window should be ballistic resistant. Solid walls can be made of masonry, concrete or conventional construction materials fortified with ballistic rated panels. Doors, windows, and panels should incorporate a layer of ballistic protection that blends seamlessly with the existing environment."

The goal is to provide the highest level of protection while providing a welcoming environment for students, faculty and visitors, Wozny said.

Whenever students are arriving or being dismissed, it can be a challenge to guard against threats, Wozny said. Likewise, athletic contests – particularly those involving intense school rivalries – can be problematic, he said. "You want checkpoints, ticket entrances and sometimes even metal detectors," he said. "Some districts have perimeter fencing."

Any discussion about school security should include a conversation about school climate and mental health, Forte said.

"I think if you are going to try to create the safest school and community possible, you have to tie in behavioral and mental health," he said. "You have to be proactive on that ... you have to be reactive and proactive."

First Impressions, Nametags and More When Wozny visits schools, he pays careful attention to the impression he gets on his approach.

For instance, if the school has good lighting and clear signage, that in itself can deter someone who may be thinking about committing a criminal act, he said.

"If the school seems to be organized and prepared ... I might think of finding a different target," he said, putting himself into the shoes of a criminal.

"If you have a light, make sure it works," Forte added. "To me, that would be a pretty good indicator of whether you are paying attention to what is going on. If someone comes into your building at night and they see there are five or six lights out ..."

Signage should clearly indicate where people should and should not be, Wozny said. "It should also be very clear where you should be going if you are a visitor," he said. That way, when someone is not where they are supposed to be, school staff can try to assess if they're dealing with someone who failed to pay attention to clear signage or if it may be someone with something nefarious in mind, he said.

Another simple best practice districts can implement is to give visitors nametags – and ones that they cannot get anywhere else and that won't fall off, Wozny said.

"It seems like a minor thing, but I have gone to some schools where there is a scroll of sticky badges out in the hallway outside the office where you might sign in," Wozny said. "And anyone can grab those stickers and use them out on the playground or around the building and look like someone who is supposed to be there."

Lanyards are a good option as they don't fall off, but schools must retrieve them from visitors before they leave school grounds, he said. "There should be a careful process of issuing and retrieving name badges," he said.

Mistakes happen – and when they do, it's OK for people to be inconvenienced if that means ensuring the safety of students and staff, Forte said.

"We once had a person who was working on a building, and the contractor said to go in Door A, but he went in Door B, and we put the building into lockdown," he said. "We have a system in place, and if you push a button, everything activates. So yes, that does happen ... but those are the kinds of things that help us see if the procedures we put into place work. People may get upset, but they have to realize that is a real test of if something works."

Everyone accepts those snafus when they happen, Marinelli said. "You get the police department saying everyone did the right thing," he said.

Final Thoughts When placing security cameras, it's important to get input from an array of stakeholders. "Include a lot of people in the discussion," Forte advised. "Where I think might be a good spot for a camera might be different than what a vice principal thinks."

In Denville, Class Three Special Law Enforcement Officers have access to camera footage at all times, he said.

"If there is a disconnect or falloff in the system, you need to get with IT and jump on that," Marinelli said, commenting on security cameras.

"If I am designing a new building, I am always thinking about sight lines, visibility and coverage," Wozny said. "You want to monitor areas and make sure there are no blind spots."

Consider the outside as well, including ancillary buildings, bleachers, field houses and restrooms.

"Think about the whole campus," Wozny said. "From the standpoint of outside the building, you want to discourage trespassing and vandalism. If the perimeter is really well lit, it can stop a lot." He added, "You also don't want glare from lighting blocking the visibility through a camera."

Sometimes, a district must go to the voters to raise money for a construction project, or to raise taxes to ensure security is bolstered.

"In our town, getting in front of voters would be very important, as well as being transparent and open," Forte said.

"Communicate early and often with the community," Wozny said. "A lot of times, the community wants to know what everyone else is doing," which is why it can be helpful to keep tabs on what other districts are doing to enhance school security.

Finally, when it comes to school security, it does not always revolve around preventing a mass shooting or violent attack – although such an event is always a concern.

"But a lot of times, it is just an agitated person," Wozny said. "Or someone acting aggressively, and it could be a parent or a student. I think everyone needs training on how to cope with people like that."

That may mean incorporating a quiet room or Zen den into each of your buildings – an area where students, visitors or anyone who needs to calm down can go to relax, he said.

At the end of the day, you want to know that you've done everything you can to prevent and respond to anything that threatens the safety of students, staff and visitors, they said.

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