



HOWARD COUNTY
PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM

Joint Task Force on **SCHOOL SAFETY**



FINAL REPORT

Presented to the Howard County Executive
and Superintendent of Schools

March 2013

Joint Task Force on **SCHOOL SAFETY**

FINAL REPORT

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Introduction

In the wake of the tragic school shootings that occurred on December 14, 2012, at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, Howard County Executive, Ken Ulman, and Howard County Public School System (HCPSS) Superintendent, Dr. Renee Foose, committed to minimizing the chances that such a horrific event will ever occur in Howard County. They commissioned a joint task force to review the state of school safety in Howard County and develop recommendations for maximizing the safety and security of students in HCPSS schools.

Keeping schools safe and secure is a community-wide collaborative effort. The Joint Task Force on School Safety was chaired by Chief of Police, William McMahon, HCPSS Executive Director of School Improvement and Administration, William Ryan, and HCPSS Acting Chief of Operations and Finance, Ken Roey. The twenty-one task force members included students, parents, school staff, law enforcement personnel, community services organizations, social service agencies, businesses, local government, and other concerned citizens.

Task force members worked diligently over a short period of time to solicit feedback from school system staff, county government, parents, students and community members. The collaborative efforts in the creation of this report by the Howard County Government, Howard County Police, and the Howard County Public School System underscore the commitment of each of these organizations to keep schools safe. Each organization applauds the involvement of the community in both providing feedback and involvement on the task force subcommittees. Together we are committed to keeping our most important resources, our students, safe.

The task force was divided into three subcommittees that studied the three different components of school safety. These components are:

- Physical security and security protocols.
- Emergency response planning.
- Safe and nurturing schools and community.

The task force found that schools, law enforcement, community leaders, and school safety partners have established many effective practices and protocols that keep our schools safe. They developed short and long-term recommendations for continuing and expanding effective practices. The recommendations are in the following areas:

- Using research-based practices and model programs.
- Improving the relationships between the school system and its safety partners.
- Expanding safe school planning efforts.
- Increasing professional development training of educators, school staff and school safety partners.
- Establishing strong accountability measures.
- Promoting positive youth development.
- Helping students cultivate positive adult and peer relationships.

Physical Security and Security Protocols

The Physical Security and Security Protocols subcommittee was tasked with reviewing the current strategies that are in place in our schools and community to create safe school buildings for our students and staff. Once these strategies were reviewed and feedback was provided from the community, the committee was charged with making recommendations for improvement. The membership of the committee had broad representation from the school system, county government, parents, students and community. Members had their own perspectives and their participation added great value to the subcommittee and its recommendations. The subcommittee met in person four times. The members are listed in Appendix A. They should be acknowledged for the passion and diligence they exhibited throughout this process.

Review of the Current State

The HCPSS Department of School Facilities assessed the physical security of all facilities in the weeks following the shootings in Connecticut. Notable findings were that all buildings have a minimum of four security cameras, and most have many more. Several schools have magnetic swipe card systems for staff. Renovations completed throughout the last five years include security enhancements requiring entry through the administrative offices.

Weaknesses noted in some schools included incomplete camera and magnetic card coverage of portable classrooms, open classroom designs in older schools, and distance and/or visibility gaps between administrative offices and the main entrances of schools. Feedback from the community confirmed these areas of concern.

A second broad area of concern was visitor management control and the inconsistent approach found among different schools. About half of the elementary schools have the hardware to support the “Ident-A Kid” badging system. However, practices vary widely from school to school, partly because standard protocols have not been formalized in writing at the system level.

School Resource Officers (SRO) are important assets, which the community strongly supported. The consensus of the committee was that the SROs’ primary function today is less about enforcement and more about building positive relationships with students and maintaining a close partnership with school administrators in order to provide for a safe school environment. If the primary goal were to provide armed defense against intruders, the law enforcement officials on the committee felt strongly that they would supplement countywide first response resources prior to expanding the SRO program.

Presently, community users of our school facilities operate almost independently of school administration. The committee chose to focus its efforts during the period of the day when staff and students are present, including before and after school care programs. Both the Columbia Association and Howard County Recreation and Parks representatives felt strongly that their staff and students who use school buildings during the day should be protected under the same set of physical security and emergency protocols that the school system uses. We recognize that a multitude of community members use our buildings well after



school activities are complete and we understand that a different type of security posture is necessary during those times.

Recommendation 1

Improve the physical security features of schools across the county.

Strategies:

- Provide all elementary and middle schools with the ability to control visitor access. For elementary schools that are not configured to direct visitors through the administrative office, provide an integrated buzzer, camera and communications system.
- Ensure all schools will have the ability to secure exterior entrance points.
- Upgrade all security for portable classrooms to include camera surveillance and magnetic card access to the main building.
- Provide Howard County Police with access to school cameras during emergency situations.
- Ensure that before and after school care program spaces can be secured when staff is not in the building.
- Make systemic improvements over time to identify methods to secure the interior of school buildings during lockdowns. Improvements will focus on administrative office and main entrance area improvements, as well as providing additional secured areas in open space classroom schools.

Recommendation 2

Strengthen school security practices at all schools and ensure consistency across the school system.

Strategies:

- Implement a visitor control (badging) system at all schools.
- Create an administrator's guide to school security, which formalizes a consistent set of protocols for all schools to use and train staff to enforce.
- Protocols should include classroom locking procedures and key control to include a plan for substitute teachers.
- Complete staff awareness training and required professional development to implement security protocols in upcoming academic year.

Additional Areas to Be Addressed

Other areas that the committee did not address but are part of the school system's follow-up actions include studying the implementation of cameras on school buses; creating an additional safety specialist position within the Risk Management Office to assist with school-based reviews of the ability to execute emergency plans; and tasking the Executive Director of Facilities Planning and Management to provide an update on the status of implementation of these actions every six months.

These collective improvements to our physical security posture will provide assurance to our students, staff and community that we are taking a sensible and proactive approach to our children's safety. Our greatest challenge will be to ensure that we maintain the same level of concern and awareness six months from now. A robust security system can be easily nullified by stakeholders who are weary of the inconvenience. Frequent and unannounced assessments of our schools with prompt feedback and follow up are necessary.



Emergency Response Planning

The Emergency Response Planning subcommittee was tasked with looking at the current state of the school system's response plans for active shooters or other similar events and to identify any needed improvements. Those improvements were to be divided into two categories: (1) issues that needed immediate attention, and (2) those that may need more research and further deliberation.

The original membership was expanded to ensure that a broader community voice was heard. Among the additions were members representing students, teachers, parents and community organizations that utilize the schools. A representative also was recruited to provide the point of view of private schools in the county. These members had their own perspectives on emergency planning and their participation added great value to the subcommittee and its recommendations. The subcommittee members met in person four times and are listed in Appendix A. They should be acknowledged for the passion and diligence they exhibited throughout this process.

Individual members of the committee were able to attend various seminars sponsored by professional organizations, dealing with active shooters and school-based violence. Members also attended a number of forums held throughout the county covering various aspects of school violence. Information from these events was discussed at committee meetings.

Review of the current state

The Howard County Public School System has an excellent, comprehensive template in place for active shooters and other emergencies. Each school uses that template to develop its individual school specific plan. These plans are reviewed by central administration on an annual basis.

An awareness of the plan, and the degree of emphasis placed upon it, along with training and the comfort level of users, varies greatly among the schools.

There was further concern about how infrequently these plans are tested. A lack of sufficient exercising of the plans was noted. Student representatives did express comfort and confidence with "lock down" drills and other components of the plans.

There are many non-school organizations that utilize the school system facilities for their programs, among them are the Columbia Association, Howard County Department of Recreation and Parks, religious institutions and others. Additionally, school-sponsored activities take place throughout the evenings and on weekends. A subgroup reviewed these "non-school day" activities and grouped them as:

- A.M. Childcare Program – operates from 7 a.m. until the beginning of the school day.
- Recreation and Parks programs and activities offered during school hours in school activity rooms. A majority of these are preschool programs and a few fitness programs.
- Programs conducted as Afterschool Licensed Childcare or Grant programs. (Some grant programs are affiliated with the school.) These programs start immediately after school and end at 6 p.m.



- Programs held after school in all program content areas of sports, arts, music, drama, etc., as well as PTA programs or other community permitted groups. These programs may be 45-minutes to several hours long and traditionally run 6-10 weeks. On occasion there may be just one occurrence.
- Programs held in the schools between 6-11 p.m. – offered by Recreation and Parks or other community-permitted groups. These programs are for all ages and include classes, meetings, and practices in gyms. For example, leagues, fitness programs, cooking classes, arts and crafts, etc. meet for one to three hours based on the program need. Some are one-time events or programs that last an entire season, meeting once or twice a week.
- Programs and Camps – held in the summer as Licensed Childcare Camps. Recreation and Parks offers more than 300 camps alone. Several summer camps are held in schools where summer school is in session with the remainder utilizing available schools.

There is significant concern that the many users of the facilities are not familiar with the school system's emergency plans and, aside from the before and after school care programs, have not developed their own.

Additionally, there are several private schools in Howard County, many of which do not have emergency plans. Their administrators recognize the issue, but do not feel they have the staff, expertise or support to develop a plan. Task force members heard similar concerns from private day care facility representatives.

Recommendation 3

Each school will ensure that all personnel are trained at least annually on its specific emergency response plan. Each staff member must know his/her respective role and responsibility. Each school will ensure that staff and students are properly trained in their roles in the emergency plans.

Strategies:

- Continue to provide professional learning so that each school staff member understands his or her specific role in executing the school emergency plan.
- Continue to have central office staff identify any deficiencies in school plans.
- Inform staff, students and families of the school's emergency plan to increase awareness and confidence.
- Regular drills and exercises should be conducted to ensure staff readiness. Consider the following when developing exercises:
 - Exercise plans should be progressive, starting with tabletop exercises, then moving through functional exercises to a full-scale scenario.
 - Partner organizations need to be included in all exercises. This would include the Department of Police, the Department of Fire and Rescue Services, the Office of Emergency Management and other affected parties.
 - Exercises should include a communication piece involving information sharing with parents, the community and the media. Again, multiple agencies should be involved.
 - Since full-scale practice scenarios will not be possible for every school, consideration should be given to producing a video of a full-scale exercise that could be shared with the other schools.



Recommendation 4

Non-school users of the school facilities must be familiar with each school's emergency plan.

Strategies:

- Create place cards with brief descriptive emergency information in areas used by non-school groups in the schools. This information should also be distributed with permit approval paperwork.
- Allow non-school users of the facilities to modify the plans as appropriate for their activities.
- Add activities that have emergency plans as an annex to the school's emergency plan.

Recommendation 5

Non-public schools need to have effective emergency response plans for their schools. As with the public schools, the responsible parties must be trained on the plans and the plans must be exercised.

Strategy:

- Offer emergency preparation information and assistance to interested private schools, day care providers, etc. This could be done in the form of a half-day seminar in which the HCPSS emergency plan template is presented and subject matter experts are available to offer guidance on developing emergency response plans.

Recommendation 6

Ensure post-incident resources are available for survivors, victims' family members, police and emergency staff.

(The investigation into an incident will take time. Ensuring the safety of survivors, processing crime scenes, identifying bodies, notifying families and other activities associated with a criminal investigation are part of the process. Though necessary, these activities can be time consuming and frustrating for family members, community leaders and elected officials.)

Strategies: Immediately after the incident ensure the following are in place:

- Assign sufficient investigative resources immediately after an incident.
- Mobilize sufficient victim assistance and mental health professionals.
- Assign a law enforcement liaison to each family member.
- Provide timely and accurate information to families and the media.
- Maintain adequate resources for potential additional incidents.



Recommendation 7

Ensure community recovery is considered in developing community emergency response plans.

(It is important to note that an emergency incident has long lasting repercussions. Questions about reopening schools, creating memorials, dealing with the emotional well being of the community at large, and other issues will arise.)

Strategies:

- Consider community recovery in emergency response planning. Community leaders are encouraged to consider these ongoing concerns as they develop emergency response plans:
 - There is a need for all agencies to use consistent terminology in responding to a crisis.
 - School administrators and staff may benefit from appropriate Incident Command Training, which can be presented both online and in traditional classroom settings.
 - The federal government offers several training programs on school-based violence that involves school staff, public safety officials and other appropriate agency members.
 - Training programs on bullying, school violence and other related issues are being offered by for-profit and non-profit organizations. Agencies have taken advantage of these since the creation of the task force and should continue to do so. When possible, county organizations should coordinate attendance and, when possible and appropriate, send multi-agency teams to such training. This will assist in continued collaboration.
 - There has been attention given to programs such as “Run, Hide, Fight” that discuss options that could be taken during an incident. Such programs have been presented to businesses and colleges. Schools may want to evaluate the usefulness of providing this information to staff. If done, it should be given within the proper context and school system expectations should be clarified.



Safe and Nurturing Schools and Community

The Safe and Nurturing Schools and Community subcommittee was tasked with reviewing the current strategies that are in place in our schools and community to create safe and nurturing environments. They also were asked to review the mental health access and supports available for students. Once these strategies were reviewed and feedback was provided from the community, the committee was charged with making recommendations for improvement. The membership of the committee had broad representation from the school system, county government, parents, students and community. Members had their own perspectives and their participation added great value to the subcommittee and its recommendations. The subcommittee met in person four times and the members are listed in Appendix A. They should be acknowledged for the passion and diligence they exhibited throughout this process.

Review of the current state

The foundation for safe and nurturing schools and community in Howard County requires the creation of a positive school and community culture. This culture allows all students, school staff, parents, community service agencies, local government, businesses and all community members to work together and make their school and community a safe environment. The goal is to create an environment that is welcoming, free from bullying, supports positive social-emotional growth and development, and provides ready access to mental health support.

HCPSS Goal 2 indicates that each school will provide a safe and nurturing school environment that values our diversity and commonality. To implement this goal, HCPSS uses a prevention framework and provides a continuum of supports and services to address students' social-emotional well-being. The universal/primary prevention strategies that are in place for all students, staff and community include the Health Education (K-9) and School Counseling Core Curriculum, which address personal, social and emotional health objectives; Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS) at fifty-three schools; and Character Education and/or Developmental Assets to support the positive social-emotional development of all students. In addition, bully prevention efforts—including the Bully Prevention Tip of the Month for school staff and resources and programs for parents, use of research-based instructional and classroom management practices, and professional development, such as the annual Suicide Prevention Overview for all school staff—are universal/primary prevention strategies that support the creation of a positive school and community culture.

Universal/primary prevention strategies are typically effective in supporting the social-emotional well being for approximately eighty percent of the student population. In turn, the next step on the continuum is the provision of supports and services for students demonstrating at-risk behaviors. These students typically are referred to the Instructional Intervention Team or Student Support Team to design and implement interventions that support identified academic



and/or social-emotional needs. Interventions may include, but are not limited to counseling groups with the school counselor and/or school psychologist for development of appropriate social skills or coping strategies to manage anger and/or anxiety, direct academic instruction, in-school alternative education, and Check In/Check Out (for PBIS Schools). Approximately five percent of the student population will require more intensive, individualized support to attain social-emotional success. These supports and services may include individual services with a school counselor and/or school psychologist, a Functional Behavioral Assessment/ Behavior Intervention Plan, or implementation of the Suicide Intervention Procedures or Threat Management Process. In some cases, a referral to County-Wide Elementary Alternative Learning, Homewood Center, Special Education, or Connection Center, may be needed to secure a higher intensity of school services for the student.

At times a family may pursue additional services from the community to support positive social-emotional growth and development for their child. These services may be available via the public mental health system and/or health department or from private mental health providers. In Howard County, the Mental Health Authority supports the Grassroots Hotline (available 24/7), along with the Mobile Crisis Team (MCT) that responds with the police department and provides mental health assessments and crisis intervention services. Way-Station further offers mental health outreach and engagement to services for families and youth, the foreign-born outreach grant secures mental health services in various languages, and a pharmacy grant covers the cost of psychiatric medications for uninsured, low income individuals (youth and adults). In addition, substance abuse services are available through the Howard County Health Department. Challenges for families in securing community mental health supports and services include costs, transportation, limited coordination across agencies and providers, and the social stigma of raising a child with mental health concerns.

Several concerns emerged after reviewing feedback from the community and subcommittee discussions. Many community members were unaware of the many initiatives and programs that focused on creating safe and nurturing environments in our schools. It also became apparent that there was limited data available to measure schools' effectiveness at creating this positive environment.

In the area of mental health access and supports, concerns centered on the lack of knowledge and availability of information related to mental health access and supports. A need for continued professional learning opportunities for school staff was identified. Lastly, a need for continued collaboration among the school system staff, county health officials, and the mental health practitioners was identified.



Recommendation 8

Improve communication to ensure parents, students and the community are aware of the school system efforts to create positive school cultures in each building.

Strategies:

- Develop online resources on the HCPSS website to include what is currently being done to create positive school cultures across the school system. (For example, create a library of video examples demonstrating various Goal 2 initiatives such as PBIS, bully prevention, Crisis Team Training, etc.)
- Disseminate information about positive school culture programs/resources to parents, students and community through blogs and/or social media.
- Provide information about positive school culture programs/resources in the HCPSS Student/Parent Handbook.
- Create a theme around building trusting relationships that is consistent across schools and the county.
- Continue the work of the Anti-Bullying Task Force in creating a common language within schools and community that is shared in presentations, webinars, etc., for school staff and the community.
- Involve the Department of Student, Family and Community Services in communicating the message regarding the school system's progress in creating a positive school culture.
- Increase collaboration with branch libraries, community centers, churches, and social groups, such as sororities and fraternities, to support the development of positive community cultures. Provide school system resources to these groups, as needed.
- Increase awareness of how to report concerns regarding student behaviors to appropriate school personnel. Efforts to reduce any existing barriers to reporting should include the exploration of on-line and other reporting mechanisms.

Recommendation 9

Incorporate a school climate focus area into each school's improvement planning process.

Strategies:

- Create systemwide school improvement targets that address school climate. These may include bully prevention, climate surveys, etc.
- Implement more meaningful surveys of students, staff and parents to better understand engagement and well-being.
- Require schools to develop and implement high leverage strategies to address areas of need identified in climate survey data.
- Develop and implement systemwide strategies to address countywide areas of need identified across all climate survey data.

Recommendation 10

Increase communication to staff, parents, students and the community regarding mental health access and supports available both in the schools and in the community.



Strategies:

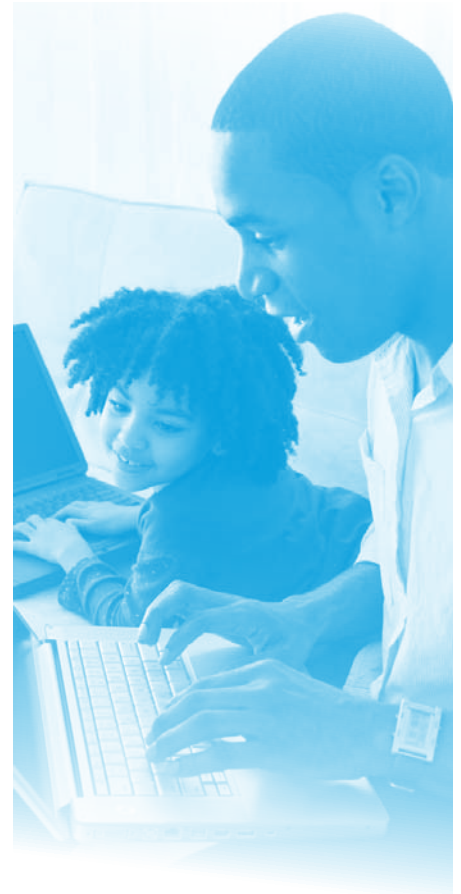
- Create online resources, including links to existing websites and other resources, which connect parents and community members to local mental health agencies and providers.
- Disseminate information about mental health access and supports to parents and community through blogs and/or social media.
- Educate parents of the importance of providing school staff with mental health information regarding their children, including the benefits of allowing regular communication between school staff and their child's mental health provider.
- Develop a consistent process for school staff to be notified of the interventions and supports in place for students via the Instructional Intervention Team, Student Support Team, other school-based services or community agencies/providers.
- Hold quarterly meetings between school system staff (Student Services leadership) and local mental health agencies to share resources, identify areas of need, and determine steps to address the concerns.
- Continue the work of the Mental Health Task Force in conducting a needs assessment and gap analysis of the mental health supports and services, including staff training and resources, available in the HCPSS. Share the recommendations of the Joint Task Force on School Safety with the HCPSS Mental Health Task Force.

Recommendation 11

Provide professional learning to school staff that supports students' social-emotional well-being, demystifies mental health concerns, and identifies available school and community resources.

Strategies:

- Provide professional learning to all school staff on identifying warning signs of mental health concerns and with whom to share this information.
- Improve the identification of low-level threats via the Threat Management Process and provide earlier intervention to reduce the exacerbation of a higher-level threat to harm to others.
- Develop a "Mental Health 101" course for school staff, parents and community members that provides an overview of mental health disorders, such as depression, mood disorders and anxiety disorders. This course also would provide guidance on how to navigate the supports and services available in both the school and community to support students with these disorders. Offer this course for Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and/or Continuing Education Units (CEU) to support the professional development requirements of teachers and/or mental health providers.



Next Steps

The recommendations outlined in this report will be presented to the County Executive and Superintendent of Schools for consideration in developing future plans. Plans for resource allocation and implementation will be made after they have reviewed the recommendations and determined a plan for moving forward.

Appendix A – Task Force and Subcommittees

Joint Task Force on School Safety

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Appendix B

Joint Task Force on School Safety Timeline

Creation of Task Force	December 2012
Organization of Task Force	December 2012
Community Input	
• Community Input via Board Website	January 2013
• Community Forums	January 2013
• Meetings with Community Groups	
– Howard County PTA Council	January 7, 2013
– Community Advisory Council of Howard County Public Schools	February 19, 2013
Subcommittee Meetings	January – March 2013
Report to Superintendent and County Executive	March 2013
Report to Howard County Council and Board of Education	March 2013

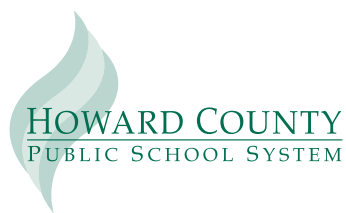
Appendix C

Community Forums – Responses by Subcommittee

Physical Security and Protocol – Feedback Counts		
January 8 and January 14, 2013 Community Forums		
Topic	What is Working	What Needs Improvement
Before/After School Care	3	16
Buzzers	4	17
Cameras	17	19
Lock Doors/Access	20	41
Portables	2	21
Safe to School	2	6
Security Guards/SRO	18	20
Staff/Student/Drills	11	26
Text Alerts	8	3
Volunteers/Visitors	34	40

Safe and Nurturing Environment – Feedback Counts		
January 8 and January 14, 2013 Community Forums		
Topic	What is Working	What Needs Improvement
PBIS	9	0
Anti-bullying	9	5
Communication	10	14
Education/Curriculum/Training	8	11
Guidance Counselors	6	0
SROs	5	1
Crisis Team	4	1
Buses/Cameras/Monitors	0	3
Mental Health	0	6

Emergency Response Planning – Feedback Counts		
January 8 and January 14, 2013 Community Forums		
Topic	What is Working	What Needs Improvement
Thorough EOP Plan	15	19
Training	6	15
Practice real situation drills	13	21
Communication	9	28
Procedures	5	11
Resources	11	19
Hotline to report threats	0	4



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