Asking the Right Questions about School Safety

By Dr. Jerry Wilson, Superintendent of Schools

Following the horrific tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School, schools and school systems across the state and nation are reviewing their emergency plans and their security systems. What we once considered sufficient and normal must now be re-evaluated.

In order to effectively problem-solve, we must ask the right questions. In Worcester County Public Schools, the right question isn’t: Are our schools safe? Schools continue to be one of the safest places for our children – not only in Worcester County, but across Maryland and this great nation.

Our school system has an outstanding record with school safety, and our parents concur. On the 2012 Parent Survey collected in October, 54 percent of all respondents – and there were 4,304 in total – described “safe/orderly environment” as “excellent.” In fact, 97 percent of all respondents selected a positive descriptor (excellent, good, or satisfactory) when rating “safe/orderly environment” on the survey.

Instead, for our school system, the right question is: Can our schools be safer? We believe the answer is yes; our schools can be safer. That leads to the next question: How can we make them safer? We have developed a plan which we believe will achieve this outcome: Safer schools.

We have started by strengthening our current practices. Our safety committee reviewed our safety practices and provided recommendations. Those recommendations are now mandates that have been communicated to all school administrators. In turn, principals are in the process of sharing those requirements with their parents and staff.

Required safety practices affect everybody. The point is that schools cannot always predict who may want to harm school children and staff. National news over the years has showed us that unspeakable carnage can come from “insiders” and “outsiders.” To increase their effectiveness, rules must apply to everybody and allow children to learn and grow in positive environments.

In a rural close-knit community such as Worcester County, we are accustomed to permitting access to those we know into our schools. That is part of the charm of where we live.
However, the reality of our world has caused us to approach safety without exceptions. In addition to our security cameras and an increased police presence at our schools, the following safety practices are required in our schools:

- All visitors – including our students’ parents and relatives – must report to the front office upon entering the front doors of our schools in order to obtain a visitor ID name tag (specific to each school).
- All school and school system employees must wear system-administered photo-ID badges and must sign-in at the front office upon reporting to work or entering a school building.
- All schools must control access into the school facility and lock exterior doors as appropriate. The best practice is to lock all exterior doors, except for the front entrance. In schools where portable classrooms exist, increased monitoring of doors is required.
- All doors that must remain open are required to display safety practices, such as reporting to the front office.
- All schools are equipped with a portable radio system – linked with emergency services and having instant 911-access – which must be in operation at all times while the school building is open.
- As a school system and in cooperation with community agencies, all school staff will continue to refer students who exhibit emotional instability so that they may receive the necessary supports.

Although these practices have been adapted to varying degrees, they are now required and all violators are subject to disciplinary consequences. Some schools may impose even stricter practices; however, all schools must comply with the requirements above.

In addition to these, all schools are reviewing, revising, and updating emergency plans. Even though plans are school-specific, as each facility is different, all plans will include similar language and standardized procedures. Moreover, schools will be required to participate in mandatory, monitored, and standardized lockdown drills. To identify potential safety enhancements, each of our schools will be re-evaluated by an independent law enforcement agency. School administrative teams will also renew their emergency response training.
Additionally, we are reviewing further safety measures. We are looking at the possibility of having School Resource Officers (SROs) stationed at our schools. We are also looking at the possibility of structural alterations – such as redesigning our front entrances, as well as electronic entrance systems – such as a buzzer system to request entry.

By strengthening current practices and adding additional measures to enhance the safety of our schools, our confidence in school safety will increase. However, we can never rest. We must remain vigilant in our efforts to continually evaluate and improve school safety.

If you have any specific concerns about your child’s school or their practices, please contact your school principal immediately. Together, we have made our schools safe; and together, we will work to make them safer.