

School Safety – We Plan and Prepare

Greetings, fellow citizens:

At the North Mason School District we have in our care the well-being of our children. Our foremost job is to educate our students, but along with that paramount duty, we also have them in our physical care for a significant part of each school day. We must ensure that the schools are safe places to learn at all times that students (and members of the community) are using our buildings and facilities.

To that end, the NMSD has developed safety procedures for a range of possible emergencies, and must constantly keep abreast of potential emergency situations and disasters that can occur. While it is not possible to anticipate what will be the next disaster or emergency to confront us, we can plan for as many as we can reasonably foresee, and this includes occasional practices of some of our emergency procedures.

Conducting drills, such as “how to get out of a school bus” which we have our kids practice periodically, is one way to ensure that they have some familiarity with how to help themselves in that situation. Emergency fire evacuation drills are another such example. In the past year, we had a bomb threat made in the new construction areas of our high school, which caused the entire Hawkins Middle School and NMHS campus to evacuate as quickly and efficiently as possible. While the bomb scare ultimately turned out to be a false threat, the evacuation that was conducted was a real-life response to a potentially real emergency, and hence more than a practice. Evaluating how this event turned out has given the district useful information which we are using to refine and improve for any future emergencies.

To wit, we learned that there is stress for everyone in an evacuation scenario, and people react differently. We learned that coordination of responses and procedures between buildings is an area to improve upon, and confusion plus stress to families must be figured in to our response plan. We have now streamlined the procedures for HMS and NMHS so they are the same. We are working on improving communication procedures to parents during an evacuation, knowing that there are sometimes going to be blackouts of regular communication lines that we cannot anticipate.

We learned on the positive side that the sheriff and fire department responders are aware of and supportive of our efforts, and that their expertise is real; they are experienced in effective emergency communications and responses, and are helpful with a range of additional tools that will be useful - such as Rapid Responder, a web-based school mapping tool for coordinating efforts.

We have learned the value of having our administrators and staff regularly review our safety procedures as well as the performance of all after-practice drills, and in particular this bomb threat situation, to improve student safety. Experience often teaches best at times like these. We have used the practices and this bomb threat to help us determine what safety measures to include in our buildings, such as lock systems, cameras, screening of volunteers and school personnel, and other measures.

Ultimately, no one can predict when and where the next possible crisis will occur, but by evaluating our facilities, procedures, and practices regularly, we can be better prepared for whatever crisis might happen.

--Art Wightman, NMSD Director, District 1