



School Resource Officer Tricia Latour works at Stevenson High School through a partnership with the Sterling Heights Police Department and Utica Community Schools.
Photo by Deb Jacques

Teachers, students and parents navigate active shooter preparedness

By: Mary Beth Almond, Nick Mordowanec | C&G Newspapers | Published March 11, 2020

METRO DETROIT — Rochester Hills resident Corsu Moran said being a child today is vastly different than when she was in grade school.

“When I was a kid, I thought about what time I (was) going to go home and play or do homework,” she said. Preparing for an active shooter “was never on my mind.”

Now, active shooter response drills are commonplace — with children as young as preschoolers participating in lockdown drills.

Stephen and Corsu Moran have 10-year-old twin daughters, Kaitlyn and Cassidy, in the fifth grade in the Rochester Community Schools district. RCS students participate in a minimum of three lockdown, shelter-in-place drills annually.

Corsu Moran supports the district’s in-school training sessions and said they’re necessary for her children to be informed.

“It’s sad that they have to think about this,” she said. “I know some people panic and get anxious about it, but (Kaitlyn and Cassidy) aren’t like that, and neither was I. I’d rather (they) have had this conversation — because we are very open with them about everything.”

The couple have addressed the topic with their daughters through open conversations. They attended an active shooter awareness discussion with Oakland County Sheriff Mike Bouchard at the Royal Park Hotel in January.

The Oakland County Sheriff's Office provides active shooter training sessions for school districts, businesses and places of worship.

"A school district in Oakland County did an active shooter training and actually got complaints from some of the teachers that thought it was upsetting — which it is, I get that — but it's important that they understand this process and what they would do and think about it, because it's way more upsetting ... if they find themselves in that situation and have no clue where to go. ... If you haven't given it thought, you're frozen in place, and that's the worst thing you can do. You have to have some action," Bouchard said.

'I ... would not change professions due to the potential dangers in school'

Chippewa Valley Schools Superintendent Ron Roberts said his district's preparedness ramped up after the mass shooting in February 2018 at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida.

His district developed a plan that was empathetic to students' sensitivities; K-12 students were part of the drills.

"That was a challenge. The whole process of doing this can be traumatic for a person, regardless of age," Roberts said. "But the language you use for a kindergartner or first grader ... is just different, just because their experiences are different."

The district subscribes to the "run, hide, fight" theme.

All three approaches are practiced, whether it's leaving the building for a predetermined destination or convening at rendezvous points. Three drills take place during a school year.

In November 2018, about 61% of CVS voters approved a safety and security bond, supplying new door locks, secure entrances, new surveillance cameras, new public address systems and safety glass for classroom doorways.

Michael Johnson, a fifth grade teacher at Miami Elementary School in the CVS district, has been in the field for eight years.

Seven years ago, training experts were brought in to meet with staff and go through various danger scenarios, and it was "very high level" at the time, Johnson said.

Safety ramped up about three years ago, he said, starting with building visitors having to be escorted by school staff. Resource books were given to students — one titled "I'm Not Scared, I'm Prepared" — that were specialized for certain age groups.

In preplanned 10-minute situational drills, Johnson works with students on escape routes to the playground or a nearby safe spot.

The conversations surrounding the drills don't come up every day, he said; maybe every other week.

"I think that it's a lot different than what it used to be," he said. "Sad to say it, but it's our norm. ... It's just one more piece of the puzzle that we educate the whole child, constantly meeting their needs and giving them the resources to be successful."

Angela Stankrauff is in her 12th year at Clawson Public Schools, and her sixth at Clawson High School. She first got involved in gun safety training in 2018, when the district introduced new training. Before that, the district had conducted traditional "lockdown" drills.

While the experience made her a bit nervous and sad, "overall, I felt relieved to have a solid plan in place to help keep us safe," Stankrauff said.

She'd rather help her students than let the possibility of violence deter them or her.

"Personally, I love what I do and would not change professions due to the potential dangers in school. I love my students and focus on keeping them safe."

Utica Community Schools enacted a partnership several years ago with the Sterling Heights and Shelby Township police departments to help fund dedicated officers in the high schools. Superintendent Christine Johns said those officers help maintain a safe environment and have become like family.

Stevenson High School School Resource Officer Tricia Latour was an officer in Eastpointe for two years prior to becoming a Sterling Heights police officer in 1995, according to Sgt. Aaron Susalla. She grew up in Sterling Heights and has won numerous departmental awards.

"As a school resource officer, Latour understands that she's not only there to protect the students and assure a safe/crime-free environment, but to also be a mentor to the students," Susalla said in an email.

'People were crying, freaking out'

Bloomfield Hills Schools recently put its emergency training to the test at Bloomfield Hills High School — the first school in Michigan to install a BluePoint Alert System.

The system can be activated at 38 pull stations throughout the building, alerting occupants of danger via strobe lights and an audio system, as well as alerting police.

When the alert was activated at around noon Dec. 19, 2019, the school's more than 1,300 students either evacuated or locked down.

"We had an event where somebody thought they saw or heard something," explained Robin Igwe, a sophomore at Bloomfield Hills High School who serves on the Birmingham Bloomfield Community Coalition's Youth Action Board. "We have been trained to pull (the BluePoint alert) if we hear about a bomb or a gun, so that was pulled, and it set our school into lockdown mode. Some of us ran out, some hid. No one knew what was going on. We all thought it was real."

Igwe said they had never heard the sound of the BluePoint alert — pulling it for training would have summoned emergency responders.

"I didn't know what it was until it was going off for a minute," Igwe, 16, said.

The West Bloomfield resident elected to run — to the nearby Police Department.

"The BluePoint makes a noise. It's like a really, really quiet siren, and my teacher was like, 'Is that the BluePoint?' And he just told us, 'Run, run, run!' People at first went to the corners like we've trained, but he was like, 'Go, leave the school.' So I left. But some people did what we were trained to do, go in the corners and under the tables — but most people weren't going to do that," she said.

Those who opted to shelter in place had difficulty finding hidden areas in the open-concept, largely windowed school and were trapped in their cramped hideouts for hours because emergency responders reportedly didn't have access to the locked-down rooms, which were controlled automatically by the alarm system.

Over a dozen public safety agencies responded within minutes and gave the "all clear" at approximately 1:45 p.m.

Bloomfield Township Police Chief Phil Langmeyer said the incident, a false alarm, was "pretty tragic."

There was no shooter, but "in those first 12 minutes, we treated it as though there were, because we did get some indications that ... students had seen a gun — and we had to treat it like it was real until we determined that ... the school was safe," he said.

The incident wreaked emotional havoc, Igwe said.

“During (the false alarm), 50% of people were crying, freaking out or having panic attacks. I know people who literally couldn’t function — they couldn’t talk and they were freaking out,” she said. “I remember the next few days at school we had to have a circle chat, and some of our teachers were crying and some students didn’t want to go to school anymore and they were freaking out.”

Some are terrified of gun violence now, she said.

“I feel like people have a mentality of, ‘Oh, it’s not going to happen to us; we’re doing this just to be safe.’ I don’t think anyone thinks that far ahead, until we had our drill. I feel like that sparked anxiety for a lot of people.”

The district provided counselors and therapy for students and staff.

“I know people who did take that offer up,” Igwe said.

The false alarm sparked concerns about the safety of the building, constructed in 2015 and featuring an open design.

“The kids at that school don’t really have a place to go lock down to, because it is so open,” Langmeyer said.

“We have people coming to our school who are thinking about building their schools that way, but I don’t think the visual (design) should come before our safety,” Igwe added. “You could literally stand in the middle of our courtyard and see every single face inside of the windows.”

Igwe said most people want to think an active shooter situation will never happen to them.

“We really just came to the realization that maybe it could, and maybe we aren’t as safe as we think we are,” she said.

Langmeyer said the incident provided an unparalleled training opportunity and allowed the township and the district to test their response plans.

“I’ve never been more proud of the people in this Police Department ... the students and staff at that school, and the staff that are here,” Langmeyer told the Bloomfield Township Board of Trustees Jan. 13. He identified some challenges his department faced during the response, which will allow him to make changes to address those challenges.

“Depending on who you were, this was as real as real gets for 12 minutes,” Trustee David Buckley said. “And if you were a parent, it was as real as real gets for two hours.”

For information about preparedness or to request active shooter training, contact Lt. Russell Yeiser at (248) 858-5474 or at yeiserr@oakgov.com.