

Coventry school safety

Safety committee presents plans to parents

From additional lockdown drills to construction of elementary school office, steps toward safety taken

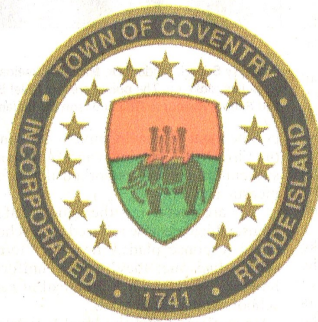
JESSICA BOISCLAIR
jboisclair@ricentral.com

COVENTRY— Dozens of parents gathered in the Coventry High School auditorium Wednesday night to learn about the various action plans put in place to keep students and schools safe throughout the district.

Numerous members of the District School Safety and Security Committee spoke to the audience about policies and procedures they developed after the tragic shooting late last year at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn.

Coventry Superintendent Dr. Michael Almeida explained that although the town had safety procedures in place already, committee members felt it was their responsibility to ensure the procedures were up to date and effective.

Currently all of Coventry's schools have panic buttons that notify police immediately during an incident, all buildings have secu-

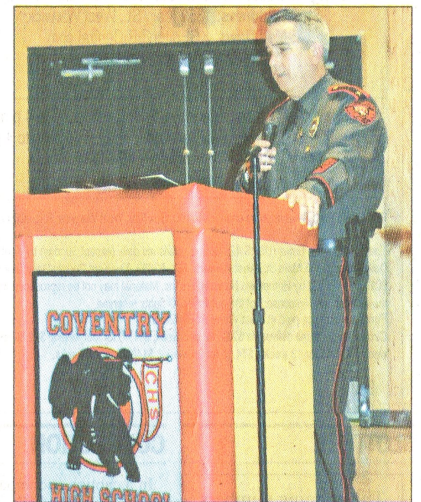


rity systems, and the middle and high school have surveillance systems. There are also procedures in place for fire drills, lockdowns and evacuations — each school practices 11 fire drills, two lockdown drills and two evacuations a year.

“The procedures are being reviewed by legislation,” he said. “There will probably be more lockdown procedures in place by law. I can tell you that all the schools, since the incident, have conducted two additional lockdown drills.”

Dr. Almeida explained that the district committee was broken down into three sub-committees: structures and systems, training; and fire drill, evacuation and lockdown. The structures and systems committee visited each school in the district and took note of items that needed to be changed.

He explained to the parents that the action plan to ensure the students are safer includes making it mandatory for all employees to have ID badges, having all visitors carry visitor badges, and uniforms for all custodians and maintenance staff that identifies them as employees of Coventry Public Schools; as well as constructing secured vestibules in front offices, creating buzz-in systems, installing new surveillance systems at all



Jessica Boisclair/Daily Times

Coventry Police Chief Bryan Volpe speaks to parents gathered at the CHS auditorium at Wednesday night's safety meeting.

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Parents get low-down on safety

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schools, increasing panic buttons and installing interior door locks on some common areas of the schools, like cafeterias, gymnasiums, and libraries.

He said the work at Western Coventry Elementary School will be greater than other schools because a front office needs to be constructed.

To make that happen, a classroom will be designated and re-designed as a front office/clerical/conference room.

"We'll be taking out a window, reconstructing bricks, putting in a doorway, building a wall inside that room, moving the teacher and putting a new intercom system into that space," he explained.

Most of the work, he said, would be done at the schools during February vacation.

One parent voiced her concerns about the openness of the Western Coventry Elementary playground and how vulnerable her children could be if an incident occurred.

Police Chief Bryan Volpe said although the building was looked at by one of the sub-committees, "exteriors of the school pose a difficult situation."

"We don't want the kids to feel like they're in a workout area at the ACI," he laughed. "There has to be some level of openness to them and our eyes and ears have to be the staff that is out there on the playground."

He said the committee has looked into purchasing two-way radios for teachers and aides in the event something does occur on the playground.

One man expressed his concerns about an incident taking place when students are walking into school or leaving school.

Officer Jason Burlingame, School Resource Officer at the high school, explained that this is an issue they discussed because many doors remain open during these times of day.

"There are almost 1,700 kids entering the building at the high school along with hundreds of staff members," he said.

He explained that CHS Principal Michael Hobin has ensured that staff members are posted at all of the building's exterior doors when students are arriving at school.

"We want to make sure our physical presence is known," he said. "We've also discussed what doors staff would be allowed to enter and exit to make sure doors do not remain unlocked and open."

Along with re-designing numerous tangible assets at the schools, Assistant Su-



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Coventry Superintendent Dr. Michael Almeida speaks at Wednesday's meeting as a panel of Coventry police looks on. The police are (l-r) Chief Bryan Volpe, Officer Richard Pendola, Lt. John Shields, and School Resource Officer Jason Burlingame.

perintendent Michael Convery explained the Fire Drill, Lockdown and Evacuation sub-committee has reworked the safety measures as well.

"We are reviewing the school safety plans, which are now referred to as school crisis response plans," he said. "Every school had one; they're very uniform; however, they weren't identical at each school, which is our goal."

He explained that the local legislators are currently looking over various sections of state law and the sub-committee is waiting for guidance from the government before they proceed. He said, however, that a one-page testimony will be created to inform teachers on the proper proce-

dures during an incident.

The last sub-committee, the Training Committee, will be working to train teachers, staff and students about the new procedures upon their completion.

Volpe explained that the police department has reviewed their policies on how they respond to tragic incidents such as Sandy Hook.

"We've looked at our initial response time, our active shooter response policies, and made sure the new policies gave us more visibility as to lockdown procedures that are taking place in the schools," he said.

He said the biggest focus of the action plan is to enhance early warning systems in the schools.

"The quicker the response or the notification to the police department, the quicker we can get there," he said. "We based a lot of our plans around the fact that we must get police to schools as soon as possible."

Many parents applauded the police for remaining at the schools for 30 days following the Connecticut tragedy.

One parent however, was curious why police were no longer in place while plans are being constructed.

"We did make a commitment when we had things up and rolling; specifically panic buttons — that'd be the point we start to tailor it back a little," Dr. Almeida said. "We do have a patrol officer in the area stopping periodically at the schools, checking outside and inside. We're doing a gradual transition as we start to build up the projects."

SCHOOL SAFETY

• After Newtown, Conn. shootings Coventry enacted a nine-point action plan to ensure safety in its schools. Wednesday night, members of the safety committee formed in the wake of the tragedy presented measures to concerned parents.

• Three subcommittees worked to improve safety — structures and systems, training, and fire drill, evacuation, and lockdown. They came up with the following measures:

- All employees must have ID badges
- All visitors must carry visitor badges
- Custodians and maintenance staff must wear uniforms identifying them as school employees
- Secured vestibules in front offices
- Buzz-in systems and new surveillance systems
- Panic buttons
- Interior door locks