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Prevention and Preparation Key to Keeping Students and Staff Safe in Schools

FCPS Schools Superintendent: The time for action is now

Fayette County Public Schools Superintendent Manny Caulk joined the national conversation on school safety Thursday, outlining additional district actions to enhance existing school safety protocols, appointing an interim school police chief, and announcing the establishment of a safety advisory panel.

“As a father and as your servant superintendent, I join you in grief and outrage regarding the unspeakable acts of violence against students and school employees these past few weeks,” Caulk said. “Our hearts are broken as we unite with compassion for those directly impacted, but thoughts and prayers are not enough. The time for action is now.”

On January 23rd, a shooting at Marshall County High School in Benton, Kentucky killed two students and wounded 17 others. On February 14th, 17 students and staff members were shot and killed at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. Sixteen others were wounded. High profile mass shooting incidents have also happened in churches, movie theaters and outdoor concert venues in recent years.

Since the most recent school shootings, students, staff and families in our community have expressed widespread anxiety and concern. Many have reached out to district leaders to ask about existing safeguards and suggest additional steps.

“We remain committed to ensuring that our schools are the safest places in our community. I promise that we will continue to be vigilant and proactive because no child should go to school in fear, and every family should welcome their children home at the end of the day,” Caulk said. “We are extremely fortunate in our school district to have our own Department of Law Enforcement, as well as support from the Lexington Police and Fire Departments.”

AN EQUAL OPPORTUNITY SCHOOL DISTRICT

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FCPS has had a dedicated law enforcement division since 1971. Fully sworn officers with the same training and authority as state or city police, FCPS law enforcement officers have primary jurisdiction on all school campuses and district owned sites. The department has 35 officers, with teams stationed in each high school and assigned to regularly patrol elementary and middle schools in order to provide a strengthened police presence on all of our campuses.

Two weeks ago, Lexington Mayor Jim Gray announced that Fayette County Public Schools Department of Law Enforcement Director Lawrence Weathers would be the next Lexington Police Chief.

Congratulating Weathers on his selection, Caulk took the opportunity Thursday to officially appoint Martin Schafer as Interim Chief of the Fayette County Public Schools Department of Law Enforcement.

“Martin has played an important role in many of the positive changes that have taken place under the leadership of Chief Weathers and I believe he is the right champion to carry this work forward and provide continuity to our schools and community,” Caulk said. “He understands and embraces the many unique roles our officers play as mentors, counselors and confidants who contribute to a climate of trust in addition to enforcing the law and reinforcing safety and security procedures.”

Schafer joined the Fayette County Public Schools Department of Law Enforcement in 2012 and has served at both Bryan Station and Paul Laurence Dunbar high schools. Prior to joining the district he spent roughly four years as a Kentucky State Police Trooper. Since 1993, he has been a member of the Kentucky Army National Guard and has done two tours of duty in Iraq.

Schafer shared his vision for the department Thursday.

“As interim chief I receive a department that is established, experienced and trained. We will continue to examine tactics, techniques and procedures as we strive to be better today than we were yesterday,” Schafer said. “We take safety to heart and will continue to grow upon the great work and accomplishments of Chief Weathers. As we interact daily with students, staff and families on campuses, we are building the relationships that fortify our sacred role as school protectors. The best part of our work is that it allows us to be servant leaders, helping to shape our community.”

In August, the FBI will be training Fayette County Department of Law Enforcement officers and other community partners in the federally approved “Run, Hide, Fight” techniques. District officers will in turn train school administrators and employees and then those strategies will be implemented with students.

Schafer also reminded the community that Fayette County Public Schools Department of Law Enforcement dispatchers are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. He encouraged people to call 859-381-4200 to report anything suspicious, whether it’s a comment or post on social media, a conversation overheard, or a child’s remark at the dinner table about something another student said at school.

Law enforcement is just one piece of Fayette County’s five-prong approach to school safety and security through prevention and deterrence. Each member of our school community – including

students, families, employees and community members – plays an important role because protecting our students is a goal we all share.

“I can say with confidence that each of our Fayette County Public Schools has excellent safety and security procedures that include specific steps to be taken in response to an active shooter,” Caulk said.

Every school and special program in the district has developed detailed emergency plans that include regularly practicing safety drills such as lockdowns, which is what would be employed in the event of an intruder. FCPS has also invested in enhanced security measures, including anonymous tip lines, additional cameras, hand-held metal detectors and surveillance at the high schools.

During the school day, exterior school doors are locked and visitors are screened visually before they are buzzed into the building. Access to the building is granted through controlled points of entry and all visitors entering the school must show identification that allows us to know who is in the building at all times.

Caulk said the district will take the following immediate steps to strengthen existing efforts:

- Anonymous tip lines will be expanded to include elementary schools and the district overall. Links for all schools and the district will be featured prominently on corresponding websites in a consistent location.
- Hand held metal detector wands will be provided to all special programs and middle schools. All secondary schools will be required to use these wands more frequently.
- Schools will reinforce the importance of locking all exterior doors and work with students, staff and volunteers to ensure that doors are not propped open or opened for visitors.
- Middle and high schools without secured vestibules will be provided an additional staff member to monitor school entrances and support the school safety plan.
- Law enforcement schedules will be adjusted to provide additional presence in our special programs and middle schools.
- All district level staff providing services in schools will wear picture identification tags.
- Emergency drills will be expanded to ensure students and staff are prepared to go into lockdown throughout the school day, including lunch, recess, between classes, and at the beginning and end of the school day.
- Within the next two weeks we will implement an enhanced emergency notification system for families, staff and students.

“These are just the first changes you will see. We also have to be forward-thinking and proactive about next steps,” Caulk said, announcing the creation of a District School Safety Advisory Council to tackle this complex issue immediately.

“We have taken precautions and developed plans, but it is time to have some honest and open dialogue about what else we can do,” he said. “We have to be willing to do what’s uncomfortable.”

This council will be comprised of students, teacher, parents, principals, district officials, Lexington-Fayette Urban County representatives and community, business and faith leaders.

Lexington Mayor Jim Gray pledged the city's full support.

"There is outstanding leadership in our schools and a great deal is being done to keep students safe. The members of our law enforcement community are good at working together; they have longstanding relationships and have done a great job of keeping our children safe," Gray said. "Even so, they are aware that in light of recent events it's appropriate to re-examine those relationships and look for ways to improve. Whatever the Advisory Council recommends, the City is ready to assist."

Over the next five weeks, the group will act with urgency, prudence, and foresight in order to develop specific and actionable recommendations, Caulk said. Knowing that some recommendations may require legislative change, the group will conclude its work the first week of April in order to give members of the General Assembly time to review and act upon those before they go home on April 13th.

"With the winter Olympics happening as we speak, perhaps we can draw some wisdom from Ralph Waldo Emerson, who said, 'When skating over thin ice, our safety is in our speed,' " Caulk said, noting that Kentucky Governor Matt Bevin is scheduled to attend the National Governors Association meeting in Washington this weekend.

"Given the heightened attention to these issues across our nation, I would anticipate he might have the opportunity to confer with colleagues about action needed," Caulk said. "There are reasons that school shootings are an American problem and we need lawmakers at the state and national level to address the root causes and contributing factors."

Five bills related to school safety have already been introduced in the Kentucky General Assembly – three in the Senate and two in the house. They include proposals to create a statewide school safety and crisis hotline, establish a less than lethal safety response program, add armed marshals in schools, and expand carry and conceal laws to enable teachers and other school employees to carry personal firearms while at work.

Those discussions are taking place against a backdrop of a looming pension crisis and significant budget deficit, on top of the fact that school districts across the state are already reeling from consecutive years of funding cuts that have not been restored and mid-year budget reductions.

Though a draft spending plan has not been released by either the Senate or the House, in his state of the Commonwealth and Budget address, Governor Bevin said, "the reality is we don't have enough money to meet the obligations that this state has."

The Governor's draft budget includes increased funding for social workers and reforms in the adoption and foster care systems that will help provide stability for children, Caulk noted.

"Those investments go hand in hand with strengthening families, which in turn will bolster safety and security in our communities and I applaud him for those efforts," he said. "Additionally, we need to fully fund public education, and increase investments in school safety and security and mental health services."

“This issue is bigger than Fayette County.” Caulk said. “It shouldn’t depend on where you live when it comes to safety. All children across the Commonwealth deserve a safe learning environment.”

Caulk noted several national reports spotlighting Kentucky’s dismal ratings in school funding:

- In December, the nonpartisan Center on Budget and Policy Priorities released findings that Kentucky is one of the states that has cut general funding for K-12 education most deeply. From fiscal years 2008-2018, Kentucky spent 15.8 percent less in state formula funding per student, which is the primary form of state K-12 funding and other related expenses such as bus transportation.
- Kentucky received an “F” in Education Week’s 2017 Quality Counts report for education spending.
- A 2014 study concluded that state funding for education was inadequate and suggested a new funding model.
- A 2003 report commissioned by the Kentucky Department of Education estimated that an immediate increase of \$740 million was required to help all students reach state proficiency levels.

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