

A Safer Schools Update

From Superintendent Marcus Chambers and Sheriff Larry Ashley

The Holiday Season is a time for faith, family and celebration and for reflection on all the blessings that we share. Okaloosa County is a wonderful place to live, learn and work, and we are both honored to be part of a community that places such value in its school system. Over the past year, our schools have undergone significant changes to improve safety, with still more to do. We want to share with our parents and the public the extent to which the many measures put in place have enhanced student and employee safety while keeping the focus on teaching and learning.

We live in a day and age that is quite different from when many of us attended school. Social media has impacted education in some unfortunate ways, not the least of which is how it is used to make threats or sensationalize the acts of those who commit heinous crimes. In doing so, as it pertains to school violence, this can lead to numerous false threats and/or copycat acts. The strong partnership that exists between the School District and the Sheriff's Office ensures that every threat will be fully investigated with one goal - keeping our students safe. If we can't keep our students safe, then nothing else matters.

A major consideration in improving safety across the District is the challenge of implementing today's technology and construction solutions on yesterday's schoolhouses. 75% of our buildings are forty-five years of age or older with 61% of our buildings are over a half century old. Schools were not built fifty years ago with today's safety challenges in mind. As a result, the School District and the Sheriff's Office, in partnership, have implemented multiple measures of school safety in order to modernize our facilities.

Throughout the School District, we are moving and remodeling entrances to create single points of entry, erecting fences, and enhancing both internal and external school campus communication systems in ways that will minimize response time of first responders in the event of a crisis. These are critical enhancements, and there is much more being done.

Our School Resource Officer program has been twice recognized as the best in Florida and is a model for the nation. These officers receive hundreds of hours of tactical training along with upgraded equipment to deter and respond to potential threats. In Okaloosa County, the School Resource Officer program is supplemented by the Guardian Program. Recall that the Guardian Program is a volunteer program for employees of the School District that was recommended by Superintendent Chambers and adopted by our School Board last spring. It was implemented in accordance with the Marjorie Stoneman Douglas Public Safety Act and Governor DeSantis' Executive Order 19-45. Employees who are selected for this volunteer program to be armed guardians must pass stringent evaluation and training requirements in order to be considered for certification by the Sheriff's Office as outlined below:

1. Hold a valid concealed carry license issued under FSS. 790.06.

2. Complete 132 total hours of comprehensive firearm safety and proficiency training conducted by Criminal Justice Standards and Training Commission-certified instructors, which must include:
 - a. Eighty hours of firearms instruction based on the Criminal Justice Standards and Training Commission's Law Enforcement Academy training model, which must include at least 10 percent but no more than 20 percent more rounds fired than associated with academy training. Program participants must achieve an 85 percent pass rate on the firearms training.
 - b. Sixteen hours of instruction in precision pistol.
 - c. Eight hours of discretionary shooting instruction using state-of-the-art simulator exercises.
 - d. Eight hours of instruction in active shooter or assailant scenarios.
 - e. Eight hours of instruction in defensive tactics
 - f. Twelve hours of instruction in legal issues.
3. Pass a psychological evaluation administered by a psychologist licensed under chapter 490 and designated by the Department of Law Enforcement and submit the results of the evaluation to the Sheriff's Office. The Department of Law Enforcement is authorized to provide the Sheriff's Office with mental health and substance abuse data for compliance with this paragraph.
4. Submit to and pass an initial drug test and subsequent random drug tests in accordance with the requirements of FSS. 112.0455 and the Sheriff's Office.
5. Successfully complete ongoing training, weapon inspection, and firearm qualification on at least an annual basis.
6. Successfully complete at least 12 hours of a certified nationally recognized diversity training program.

The program generated many questions and commentary when it was approved. Today, we are proud to say that the Guardian Program has been implemented successfully and continues to grow. While we will never give an assailant any kind of tactical advantage by identifying the number or locations of our Guardians, rest assured that if an active assailant event were to occur, our School Resource Officers and Guardians stand ready to protect our students and teachers.

As important as the layers of physical security that have been added, it is equally important that we focus on identifying and working with students before a serious issue arises. To that end, we have licensed Mental Health Counselors assigned to every school. Every school has a team that consists of professionals in the area of mental health, law enforcement and academics that meet regularly to identify students in need of support and to align resources to those students. This could be in the form of counseling, mentoring or other services. Students that have a positive relationship with an adult role model are far less likely to have serious issues at school, and we are actively working with both the military and local churches and organizations to expand our mentoring programs in the district. In addition to these teams, all school personnel are receiving training in mental health "first aid" through a nationally accredited program to be able to identify students who may need assistance and get them to the appropriate resources

within the school.

These are just a few of the many measures or layers that are being implemented in the overarching vision of school safety. The School District is fortunate to have the support of the Sheriff's Office as we transition into this "New Normal" of education. While we face many challenges, we will not waver from our commitment to make our schools the safest in Florida.

Marcus Chambers

Superintendent of Okaloosa County Schools

