

SCHOOL SAFETY WORKING GROUP

Minutes of the 3rd Meeting of the 2018 Interim

July 9, 2018

Call to Order and Roll Call

The 3rd meeting of the School Safety Working Group was held on Monday, July 9, 2018, at 2:50 p.m. CDT, at Trigg County High School. Representative John Carney, Co-Chair, called the meeting to order, and the secretary called the roll.

Present were:

Members: Senator Max Wise, Co-Chair; Representative John Carney, Co-Chair; Senators Danny Carroll, and Alice Forgy Kerr; Representatives George Brown Jr, Will Coursey, and Brandon Reed.

Ex-Officio Members and Consultants: Dr. Joe Bargione, Keith Griesser, Nasim Mohammad Zadeh, Commissioner Alex Payne, Dr. Jon Akers, and Major General Jerry Humble.

LRC Staff: Jo Carole Ellis, Yvette Perry, and Maurya Allen.

Approval of Minutes

Senator Kerr moved to approve the minutes of the June 4, 2018 and the June 11, 2018 meetings, which was seconded by Representative Reed. The motion passed by voice vote.

Thoughts From Those Impacted

Trent Lovett, Superintendent, Marshall County School District, Jasen and Secret Holt, parents of Bailey Holt, and Brian and Teresa Cope, parents of Preston Cope, shared their experiences about the tragedy in Marshall County High School on January 23, 2018. On that day, a 15-year-old student shot his classmates, wounding several and fatally injuring Bailey Holt and Preston Cope.

Mr. Lovett said there was a need to do something immediately after the shooting in order to ensure students safety and calm their fears. The school closed for two days; when it reopened, parents were encouraged to attend with their students and take them home if they believed it was necessary. The community and students wanted increased security

measures. Students requested backpack checks and metal detector wands to be used when they entered the building. Mr. Lovett said he fulfilled these requests as soon as possible because he wanted the students to feel safe again and it met their psychological safety needs. He knows that these are not final measures or even long-term sustainable measures for safety, because he knows that these do not deter or prevent those who are committed to causing harm. A committee formed at the end of the school year to provide advice and propose long-term solutions, and Mr. Holt and Mr. Cope serve on that committee. The first recommendations that the committee has made, and which will be implemented next year, are walk-through metal detectors at school entrances, a no-backpack policy for middle and high schools, and clear backpacks for elementary school students.

Mr. Lovett said increased mental health services will be essential, not only in preventing future tragedy but in helping students and staff heal from the recent trauma. The school is negotiating to hire more mental health care providers and School Resource Officers (SROs) to provide the long-term care and support the school needs. There has been some resistance from the community concerning the change to backpack policy, but in general, everyone has been overwhelmingly supportive in trying to help Marshall County heal and move forward. While early identification of threats and mental health concerns is essential, there is a high cost to hiring mental health professionals, and the school does not know how to cover the cost at this time. “Hardening the target” through the use of exterior security is a necessary and achievable first step.

In response to a question from Representative Carney regarding communication during a school safety event, Mr. Lovett said teachers and staff were already responding to the needs of the injured by the time that Mr. Lovett was notified and arrived on the scene. They had begun taking action before an all-clear was announced and he commended them for their actions. He also said that even if an SRO had been in the room, he or she would not have been able to stop the shooter without risking others. The first responders did an excellent job reporting to the Special Law Enforcement Officer (SLEO) who was likely the first individual to report the shooting to outside law enforcement authorities.

Responding to a question from Senator Carroll, Mr. Lovett said Special Law Enforcement Officers (SLEOs) function as a school police force. He said that he does not want the responsibility of being a police chief in addition to his duties as an educator. He preferred to partner with those who had experience and training in law enforcement, thus the decision to hire a School Resource Officer (SRO). Legislative changes to insurance for retired law enforcement returning to service as SLEOs and SROs was a big support because he really preferred not to place a rookie in the position of facing a student shooter in a room full of students. Senator Carroll added that it was necessary to ensure the law enforcement officer also has a good rapport with students. Mr. Lovett said he was going to be sitting in on the interviews later in the week to make certain any hired individuals fit with the school culture.

Senator Carroll said proper information about and access to state level mental health support services are essential to ongoing school safety. Mr. Lovett agreed but said he is not as knowledgeable about daily school operations as school principals. Even if funding is available for each school to hire a dedicated mental health professional, there are not enough trained individuals to meet the demand.

Representative Coursey asked if the parents would share what their children were like so that they could be reminded why this was such an important topic. The parents gave moving testimony about their children. Both were said to be good students, “old-souls,” loving and giving to family and friends, who will be greatly missed by everyone. Ms. Holt said it had been a real struggle for her youngest daughter to adjust to the loss of her sister, Bailey, who had such a bright future. Mr. Cope reminisced about a family trip to Gettysburg that had been a highlight for Preston. He said that, while the state is moving forward in regards to school safety, especially in the wake of this tragedy, they need to continue setting an example.

Responding to a question from Co-Chair Carney, Mr. Cope said parents must keep their guns secured. This is a key part of being a responsible gun owner, and legislation should hold gun owners accountable for their part in facilitating tragedies. He said that guns are not the source of the problem. Mr. Holt said that parents need to also know what their students are doing and watch for red flags. If someone sees something, they should say something. Mr. Cope said that the entire culture has been desensitized to violence through media and news outlets glamorizing killing, so this is not a problem that can be solved overnight.

In response to a question from General Humble, Mr. Lovett said they had received overwhelming emotional and financial support from the community, but while that made sense for Marshall County, that would not be an option for many smaller communities or in communities that have not experienced such an immediate tragedy. While there is more likely going to be support in the current climate, this will not always be the case.

Responding to questions from Dr. Bargione, Mr. Lovett said the staff at Marshall County have done an amazing job providing support and emotional outlets for students to cope with the tragedy. With school starting soon, there is an urgency to put in place programs that are proven to work. He is looking for seamless adoption of services, including wrap-around supports from community groups, but there is still uncertainty about who will coordinate the programs and what kinds of “upstream prevention” programs can be adopted.

Dr. Akers said that the Center for School Safety would be performing a debriefing assessment with Marshall County soon to understand what went well and what could have gone better in the emergency response effort. Mr. Lovett said there was an overwhelming and confusing use of acronyms in communication with various agencies. There should be

greater parental involvement. He would like to see relationships formed between teachers and students and staff and parents so that warning signs can be seen much sooner.

Responding to questions from Senator Kerr, Senator Carroll said that much of the information regarding the shooter was still being limited because it is an active investigation. Mr. Lovett said that he did not want to glorify the shooter in any way or focus any more attention than necessary on him. There has been no evidence that he had been bullied or was retaliating against treatment at school. Rather, it appeared that he had a psychopathic personality and possibly suicidal ideation. There did not seem to be any trouble at home and he does not fit any “profile” of a school shooter, but perhaps there was a small sign that was overlooked.

Dr. Bargione said that there is rarely a “profile” for a school shooter. While everyone wants to know why something happened, often that is not available or there is no simple answer. His biggest concern is that there is such a large population of individuals with undiagnosed and untreated mental health concerns. Because the population is so large, it is far more likely that someone with a mental health disorder will be a victim rather than a perpetrator of violence. Screening for mental health disorders should be equally as important as screening for dental, vision, and hearing impairments.

Co-Chair Carney agreed, saying that this was indicative of larger societal problems and that schools cannot work in isolation to solve them.

Responding to a question from Senator Kerr, Ms. Cope said she works in the school system as an elementary teacher and sees many students who live without their parents. She spends at least as much time teaching basic life skills, such as personal hygiene and organization, to students as she does academic skills. These students are missing out on relationships and she worries a great deal about them over the summer. School should always be a safe place; in the wake of a tragedy like the shooting, it makes it just another place where students feel insecure. Ms. Holt said parental relationships are vital. High school and middle school are tough years for students, but foundation of trust and security at home helps. Really listening to children and creating a plan that ensures their safety and happiness should be something every parent should seek.

Commissioner Payne said he often meets extraordinary people on their worst days. He commended the parents on their strength. In the history of Kentucky school shootings, all the weapons had been brought into schools in backpacks. However, the violence attributed to video games and movies is not limited to that. The first school shooter in Kentucky found his motivation in a novel.

Mr. Cope said there is a need to harden all the soft targets, not just schools. If that means raising taxes, then he believes that people will support it. The time for talking is over; it is time for action or it will happen again.

Ms. Mohammed Zadeh asked if closing the communication gap between students and administration would help in terms of reporting, especially reporting things that happen on social media. Mr. Lovett said the school has a tip line, and it has been used much more since the shooting. He said that a tip line that would be available on student phones would be particularly useful because it can be used anytime and anywhere.

Representative Brown thanked the panel for their insights and for making the matter personal. He said that there has been an erosion of societal values over the last 40 years, and it is hard if not impossible to legislate morality, values, and discipline. He said that Fayette County had released a ten-point safety plan on July 2nd that includes raising taxes. The money will be used to secure schools and assess future security needs. He said they may be asked to present the plan to the committee at a later meeting.

Other Business

On the topic of future meeting topics, in addition to the Fayette County ten-point plan, members suggested:

- A panel of teachers discussing their role as first responders;
- Ways to raise funding for school security measures;
- Daviess County Training Exercise on July 31;
- Communities with comprehensive approaches, including rural, suburban, and urban perspectives;
- How information is coordinated and disseminated;
- A student panel reflecting all state regions;
- Backpack recommendations; and
- Lockdown procedures.

Co-Chair Carney announced that the next meeting will be Monday, August 13, 2018 at the Capitol Annex in Frankfort. Details for that meeting will be sent to members when available. With no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 4:40 p.m. CDT.