

WASHOUGAL SCHOOL DISTRICT

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I would like to express my appreciation to our Washougal School District parents for your patience and courage yesterday as most district schools went into lockdown for the day. I wish to acknowledge the stress, frustration, and fear that resulted from the community crisis that occurred. I recognize that our limited ability to communicate directly with parents, the inadequate capacity of our landline phone system, and the decision not to allow children to be “checked out” by parents during the lockdown added to parental stress and frustration.

The district was contacted through a 911 call yesterday at approximately 8:25 a.m. The police dispatch requested that we place Hathaway Elementary, Gause Elementary, Washougal High School and Excelsior High School into immediate lockdown because of a house fire in the neighborhood that was burning out of control and because gun shots had been fired by an armed man who was at large in the neighborhood. I remained in contact with the Washougal Police Department throughout the day – monitoring the threat of danger as it related to the need to keep our schools in lockdown. The district was not privy to any specific information regarding law enforcement’s actions or facts regarding their efforts to secure the safety of the neighborhood. The school district deeply appreciates the Washougal Police Department’s quick action to contact the school district and the commitment to communicate often, knowing the level of concern that parents would have for the safety of their children in our care.

A further complication to yesterday’s events was that some students were en route to school when the lockdowns went into effect. Those students on school buses were transported to the Washougal School District transportation office and held until it was safe for parents to pick them up.

Local jurisdictions, municipalities, and school districts have developed a partnership to create countywide crisis management protocols to help prepare our agencies for an unpredictable crisis. The goal of this work is to provide for the safety of our citizens and to capitalize on the resources we have. The Washougal community witnessed the partnering of our agencies yesterday as we worked together to keep children who were in school safe during the long day. The district’s lockdown protocol requires that we keep staff and children inside of locked buildings and that we do not allow for parents or community members to enter those schools or staff and students to leave during the lockdown. Depending on the type of crisis, shades can be drawn, internal doors locked, etc. Because we had an unknown armed and dangerous person at large, the requirement that no one enter a lockdown school was critical. We were concerned for parents who put themselves in danger by approaching a school that was in lockdown and we hope that we can work together in the future to assure that parents do not put themselves in danger.

In addition, our school buses were not allowed on the road. Because of the location of the police secured neighborhood, our school bus routes would have “crisscrossed” the dangerous areas.

During the event, the district worked to communicate with parents and the community in several ways:

- Automated calls were placed to parents using the phone numbers on file.
- Parents with students on buses rerouted to the transportation office were notified by personal phone call.
- Updates were posted on the WSD web site.
- Updates were posted on FlashNews, which is disseminated to all news media in the area.
- Updates were posted on the WSD Facebook page and via Twitter.

While I hope that we do not experience a crisis of this nature ever again, we would like to refine our process to better support our parents in the future. Please help us to learn how we can improve our communications in the future.

Many parents have communicated the following recommendations:

- Increase the capacity of the district phone system – we could not get through to talk to anyone.
- Communicate more frequently – it was hard to know whether or not anything had changed between the communications generated by the district.

For parents who did not receive the automated calls on their phone: I would ask you to please contact your child’s school, and share all of your current phone numbers with the school secretary. The secretary can make sure they are included them in our auto-dialing system. This will help us notify you if another crisis like this develops.

Finally, I would ask that you continue to check in with your child(ren) regarding their feelings and emotions about the experience. A crisis, like the one experienced by children yesterday, can elicit memories of other events in the past and raise feelings of insecurity and anxiety. Please let your child’s teacher or principal know if you would like support in helping your child deal with their feelings as a result of yesterday’s events.

Again, please accept my apologies for the very difficult day experienced yesterday. Your child’s safety is our highest priority and all decisions made put their safety first. I appreciate your understanding and support and we will work to improve our systems of support should an event like this happen in the future.