

## Value of school safety drills is scrutinized

### Report says lockdown exercises may be detrimental

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In less than two minutes on Jan. 10, about 1,700 students, faculty and teachers in the Sleepy Hollow Middle/ High School were locked away in dozens of rooms throughout the building.

It wasn't a drill or an exercise, but a reaction to a message scrawled on a whiteboard that was believed to be a legitimate and imminent threat: "School shooting can occur today."

"In all honesty, that day, I was really scared," said Tarrytowns schools Superintendent Chris Borsari, who initiated the lockdown.

"We do a lot of drills and a lot of practice, but when you add the anxiety and the fear and the unknown elements to it, it changes the whole dynamic," he said.

While schools have made security a top priority for years, following numerous high-profile school shootings around the country, there is a growing movement calling for a reassessment of school safety drills. The nation's largest teacher unions, the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers, just released a report with the advocacy group Everytown For Gun Safety contending that realistic lockdown drills frighten students and may be detrimental

at a time when school shootings remain relatively rare.

But Borsari believes that his school's swift response on Jan. 10, as difficult as the 2 1 / 2-hour lockdown was for students and staff, proved that drills and safety protocols are effective.

A Sleepy Hollow High School student was arrested for making the threat. It was one of three incidents in less than a month that triggered different safety protocols at one of the Tarrytowns schools.

One resulted in a "hold in place," which is issued during a non-threatening emergency to keep students in their classrooms while hallways are cleared. Another resulted in a lockout, which blocks visitors from entering the school because of outside concerns.

Police ultimately found the three threats not to be credible, Borsari said. They did not appear to be linked.



**Students take part in an active-shooter drill in 2017 at Fountain Middle School in Fountain, Colo. The nation's two largest teachers unions want schools to revise or eliminate such drills, asserting that they can harm students' mental health and that there are better ways to prepare for the possibility of a school shooting.** DOUGAL

BROWNLIE/THE GAZETTE VIA AP FILE

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*Chris Borsari*

*Tarrytowns schools superintendent*



The ongoing challenges faced by Borsari and his Tarrytowns colleagues are faced by other school districts in the region, and around the country. Incidents that may have been investigated by one staffer in the past, or simply ignored, now trigger automatic, schoolwide responses, as school districts have decided to err on the side of caution.

A few weeks after the lockdown at Sleepy Hollow, district administrators met with the community to discuss the recent events, explain how they deal with safety issues, and to try to ease the community’s angst.

Borsari and others — principals, a school psychologist, the district’s safety consultant, the school resource officer, and the Sleepy Hollow and Tarrytown police chiefs — explained that the district had adopted 23 safety measures between 2014 and 2020. These included adding an SRO in 2016, adding security guards in all buildings, hiring the Altaris Consulting Group, and doing new threat assessments and team training.

The school district does 12 drills a year in each school, including lockdown drills and evacuation drills, which used to be called fire drills. The lockdown drills are done with first responders.

“The PD comes to all the lockdown drills,” Sleepy Hollow Police Chief Anthony Buetti said. “We walk the hallways with other faculty members to ensure the students are complying with what we need them to do in the event of a real situation. And we’re always planning. We ~~meet regularly with schools and their planning~~

“Unfortunately, that never happens,” LaPlaca said. “Now they’re having two-way communication. Their phones aren’t on silent, so their phones are chiming; phones are ringing. And now we have a situation where they’re identified as someone in this particular room. And one of the purposes of the lockdown is to make the appearance that the room is unoccupied.”

LaPlaca said that students’ posting of pictures or videos on social media can create community-wide panic and add another layer of chaos to an already stressful scene.

“It serves no purpose other than to speculate and create rumor mills that go viral,” LaPlaca said. “And then what does that make you do? Your first knee-jerk reaction is go to the school.”

LaPlaca said that when parents and community members rush to a school, it makes it more difficult for first responders to get there and do their jobs. He said the best thing for parents to do is stay home and wait for official updates from the police and school district, as difficult as that might be. Information that students text or post is often wrong.

“The first information you’re getting is likely not factual and speculation,” LaPlaca said. “Then the telephone game gets worse and worse.”

**All those drills**

At a time when many schools have gone through lengthy, frightening drills or false alarms, it’s no surprise that some are asking

for our students who attend and staff who educate them.”

Weingarten said that school drills should be “trauma- informed, planned, age-appropriate and hopefully, a practice for educator preparedness, not a source of student distress.”

While not speaking directly to this statement, Borsari said essentially the same thing — that schools have to be welcoming and nurturing while erring on the side of caution.

That’s why drills are mandated by the state, Borsari said.

Westchester County District Attorney Anthony Scarpino Jr. said he agreed with the unions’ report and said it’s up to each district to decide how to handle drills.

“I believe it raises serious questions about the impact unannounced active shooter drills in schools can have on children,” Scarpino said in an email. “It is up to each school district to determine how best to prepare in coordination with their local law enforcement agencies. I would hope they would consider these findings when making a determination on how best to prepare and follow the guidelines suggested.”

The National Education Association, American Federation of Teachers and Everytown For Gun Safety issued six recommendations for schools that conduct drills: 1

Drillsshouldnotincludesimulationsthatmimic an actual incident; 2

Parentsshouldhaveadvancednoticeofdrills; 3

Drillsshouldbeannouncedtostudentsandeducators prior to the start; 4 Schools should create age-

teams. An important thing to note is planning is actually a drill. We're learning as we plan."

**Lessons learned**

Borsari and other Tarrytowns officials had a lot to process after the Jan. 10 lockdown.

A diabetic child needed food and drink and couldn't get it. Children couldn't go to the bathroom. Some parents said that communication could've been better.

"There's always something we could've done differently," Borsari said. "We learn stuff every time we have a drill and every time an event happens that's not a drill, and we're reacting with anxiety, fear and concern that accompanies that."

Another concern — one that all school districts face during drills or real emergencies — is that students continue to use their cellphones to text and post to social media.

John LaPlaca, CEO of the Altaris Consulting Group, said at the Tarrytowns community forum that students are now taught to silence their phones, get into their "safe zones" and refrain from using their phones.

whether schools have gone too far. The two national teachers unions, in their report, said that drills can have a negative psychological effect on children. The unions recommended that schools refrain from doing unannounced active shooter drills.

The report identified 549 incidents of gunfire on school grounds between 2013 and 2019. Of these, 347 occurred on the grounds of an elementary, middle or high school, resulting in 129 deaths and 270 people wounded. At least 208 of the victims were students.

But the report also noted that school shootings represent "a small proportion of the nearly 2,900 children and teens (up to age 19) shot and killed, and nearly 15,600 shot and wounded, annually."

"Our students are already experiencing record levels of trauma and anxiety – first, because of the threat of shootings in schools, and now with the way these active shooter drills have been done," Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, said in a statement. "Our focus must always be on what will make our public schools safe and welcoming environments

and developmentally appropriate drill content with the involvement of school personnel, including school-based mental health professionals; 5 Schools should couple drills with trauma-informed approaches to address students and educators well-being; and 6 Track information about the efficacy and effects of drills.

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**Police at White Plains High School after the school imposed a lockdown following an alarm this past October. It appeared to be a false alarm.** CHRISTOPHER EBERHART/THE JOURNAL NEWS