

## #WeAreCarmelUnified

# A Focus on School Safety

By Barb Dill-Varga, Ed.D, Superintendent

### Community Advisory Council

In late fall, I formed a Community Advisory Council (CAC) comprised of nearly 40 individuals who represent our 600 square mile district. Most are parents representing our seven K-12 campuses. Some are community members representing different types of businesses and organizations. Most wear multiple hats. As a new superintendent, I formed CAC because I know I need a reliable two-way communication network, representative of a majority of adult stakeholders in the CUSD district, in order to help me and my team:

- **Communicate** accurate, important, timely information to others
- **Listen** for widely held concerns
- **Gather** innovative ideas for consideration
- **Identify** local experts and resources to support student needs and passions, and
- **Build** understanding of and support for OUR STORY as we write the next chapter for this gem of a school district!

The goal is for us to meet quarterly. This year we met on December 4 to launch our work together and talk first about “Improving Communication and Safety.” On February 5, we engaged in a conversation with consultant David Jakes around our future focused educational vision for CUSD that can inform our Master Facilities Planning Process. Our last meeting for the year on April 2 focused once again on School Safety Issues. We will convene again next fall.

A note about our CAC members: They lead busy lives and so not everyone can make every meeting, but I want you to know who currently makes up CAC. ([roster](#)) As with any group who each have lives and competing demands, I suspect this roster will be fluid. If you have interest in participating

should a spot open up, please don’t hesitate to contact my office.

### A Focus on School Safety

Especially because of recent tragic events (e.g. Parkland School District where 17 individuals were murdered), issues around school safety have become a focus across the nation. Since the Sandy Hook school district tragedy in 2012, there have been 186 shootings on school campuses across the nation. It’s tempting to think that Carmel Unified and other area peninsula school districts are immune from these threats, but most today would agree that perspective is naive.

Because of this, our most recent CAC meeting focused on: **1) Acknowledging/addressing our collective current concerns and issues; 2) Sharing accurate information about our current preparedness; and 3) Seeking input on future plans, including a School Resource Officer (SRO).**

Let me take each of these and summarize what we talked about at CAC.

#### **1. Acknowledging/addressing our collective current concerns and issues**

Locally, amongst peninsula school districts we have seen an increase in bomb alerts or other threats—some real, some false alarms. It is human nature to want to lock onto a single reason as to why this is happening. Some will say gun laws are too lax. Others point to unchecked harassment and bullying or disenfranchised youth/adults or an uptick in undetected or untreated mental illness due to lack of social services and treatment programs. We want to know *why this is happening* because understandably, as parents and educators, we want a solution and we want it now. Our children’s safety is and should be our top priority.

Nationally, the conversation sometimes includes a call for: increasing emergency drills; building walls, fences and barricades around sites; adding metal detectors, checkpoints with security buzzers, surveillance systems; and adding safety personnel, such as School Resource Officers (SRO). *With this urgency to search for solutions, it should be acknowledged that some will work, but some may be undesirable or impractical.*

## **2. Sharing accurate information about our current preparedness**

CUSD has many safety protocols in place, but like our partner peninsula districts, we are reviewing them and working on improvements.

**First, let me share with you some accurate information about our current preparedness and plans that have begun.**

- For many years, the district has hired a consultant/liaison to help us complete our **required School Emergency plans** in partnership with our various local emergency agencies. Mounted on the wall of each classroom and/or office is what we call “the red book.” It is a red flip chart with bulleted steps to follow depending on what emergency is at hand. We use this to ensure consistency across the district in our drill protocols, whether it is a drill for an earthquake, fire, or active shooter.
- We have a **Master Emergency Drill Schedule** which lays out the monthly drills each site will practice. These drills include the typical fire and earthquake drills, but also include drills such as “shelter in place,” “emergency release,” and “lockdown.” We often do these drills with our emergency agency partners (police, fire) on site to provide us with feedback and new guidance. Most recently, at River Elementary, one of these on-site trainings occurred as students/staff practiced the drills under the watchful eyes of police and fire departments. We also had administrators from other sites there to observe and learn from the feedback our agency partners provided.

- Because CUSD has seven unique sites within our 600 square miles, and each has its own particular physical or environmental challenges, we continue to do **site assessments**. Some of these past assessments have led to changes in fencing, landscaping, etc. We currently are in the process of hiring an officer to walk our sites with our administration to give us an update on what are practical solutions for the kinds of threats schools are facing. Some of these recommendations will be included in our **Master Facilities Planning** process which began this year and will continue into next school year.
- One of our challenges in Carmel is **coordinating with the number of emergency agencies** that work with us. We are a district that exists in Monterey County and are the responsibility of the Monterey County Sheriff’s Department. None of our schools are technically within the jurisdiction of the one square mile of Carmel-by-the-Sea, yet Carmel police department may often be the first law enforcement on the scene. We have increased our communication this year with this network of first responders and are continuing to seek ways to get consensus around response protocols. They are working with each other to improve their joint response to our needs.
- We have put a priority on **improving our tech infrastructure for surveillance and broadcast purposes through Project 2020**. Project 2020, our network infrastructure improvement initiative, was approved by the school board this year. In addition to providing support for learning in classrooms, this project allocates resources for the design and upgrade of the infrastructure to support new and better systems for security and emergency preparedness. We are planning by 2020 to have these upgrades in place.
- Each campus has implemented a full range of **Social-Emotional programming**. We are working each day to reduce the alienation of individual students or finding better ways to

provide support for those who may be showing signs of depression or disenfranchisement. We have committed to stamping out bullying and harassment through consistent messaging, training, and addressing it when it occurs. Some of our tech tools provide anonymous tip lines for students to provide us with information to find and help those in need. Tools like *WeTip* and *GoGuardian* are useful and in place. *WeTip* ([www.wetip.com](http://www.wetip.com) or 800-78-CRIME) provides an anonymous tip line for students to provide us with information to find and help those in need. We use a web tracking tool called *GoGuardian* to monitor students' online behavior and alert us to possible threats of harm to self or others. We have recently hired our impactful consultant social worker as our own full time employee to better serve the needs of our students.

At our CAC meeting in April, each principal shared details about what had been regularly occurring on their school campuses relative to emergency preparedness. Many CAC members were surprised and pleased to hear this information. What I learned is that we need to do a better job of letting parents know about what is in place and what standard operating procedure is. Each site principal will be talking with their PTOs and other parent groups to improve this information exchange, too.

### **3. Seeking input on future plans**

The last part of the CAC meeting focused on the future. I want you to know that we are seriously considering adding a District School Resource Officer (SRO) and sought input from this group. We will also be holding an informational meeting for parents in the near future as well to talk about this. We will try to duplicate what we did at CAC in April. I have also recently learned that many years ago Carmel had a very successful SRO, but when the grant funding disappeared, the position was discontinued. Our preliminary talks with the county sheriff's office suggest we can enter into a cost sharing arrangement with them to help address the additional cost. If our Board makes the decision to approve this proposal, we would hope to add the SRO during the 18-19 school year.

At the April CAC meeting, I invited a panel of experts to talk with CAC about SROs. The panel included North Monterey County Superintendent Kari Yeater, Monterey County Sheriff Commander Keith Wingo, Deputy Humberto Coronado (SRO at North Monterey County HS District). Each panelist provided firsthand knowledge of the value of having an onsite first responder (SRO) to be the point person when threats to school safety occur.

Deputy Coronado shared with us that SROs have to be specially trained and certified beyond their regular officer training. The SRO advises the site on any necessary changes to the physical site and/or drills to prepare students. During any incident, the SRO is the person who alerts and organizes the many agencies who will eventually respond, but until they do, he/she is the person who is on scene and seeks to neutralize the threat. The SRO *does not* get involved in issues around student discipline; that is the job of the school administration. The SRO only becomes involved when illegal activities occur. The panel clearly underscored that it is very important to find and hire the right person, an individual who cares about students and can form great relationships with them. It is important that trust exists and students feel comfortable talking with the SRO about their worries, concerns, and feel comfortable sharing any advance knowledge they may have of possible threats to safety. In many ways having an SRO is like having another counselor/social worker on site for he/she often works to find help for students who may be having suicidal thoughts or who may feel disenfranchised. Many SROs get involved in the life of the school, running clubs or coaching, showing up at after school events, as well as providing more on site supervision.

When we began the meeting, I know there were a few CAC members with reservations about taking this step to add an SRO, but by the end of the meeting I was hearing nothing but positives about what this would add to our future preparedness. As one formerly hesitant parent said to me, "This is a no brainer. Let's do it."

### **Sandy Hook Promise**

The last part of our CAC meeting featured a brief introduction by two of our community

members/parents to The Sandy Hook Promise (SHP), a nonprofit organization founded by parents of the children murdered in the Sandy Hook School District in Connecticut. Allyson Kavner and Robin Casey provided us with this overview of what a partnership with SHP could provide us in terms of resources and we are seriously looking into this. Much of the focus is on preventative training and early identification tools. All extremely useful.

**And one last note about our Peninsula Task Force:**

The Monterey County Schools—Carmel Unified, Pacific Grove, North Monterey County, and Monterey Pacific Unified School District—are committed to working together on these issues and sharing best practices. We are working with MCOE (our Monterey County Office of Education) as well, but as a group of four districts, we can make some specific headway on the peninsula. Many of us were privileged to be part of a recent roundtable called by Congressman Jimmy Panetta who has pledged to take our concerns to legislative levels.

I have also recently met with my fellow superintendents and representatives from each of our districts and our first plan is to have a **countywide informational forum for parents on April 23, 6-8pm**. A free light dinner and childcare will be provided as well. The event will be held at the Monterey County fairgrounds. You will find a flyer attached here ([English/Spanish](#)) that provides details for the event. This is an opportunity to learn from each other, hear parental concerns, and identify some of you who would be willing to serve on a peninsula task force to addresses issues of school safety.

I hope that you have found the information in this edition to be helpful. I encourage you to talk with your site principal if you need additional information relative to your school. Please know that while we have much in place, we will continue to work together with you on improvements in the area of school safety!