

Protocols come into play during school crises

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Del Norte High School students and families experienced a scare Tuesday afternoon when the school went into lockdown after students reported a possible gun on campus.

As law enforcement rushed to the scene, the four surrounding schools went on precautionary lockdown, and families and students were left wondering, “What happens now?”

Law enforcement and schools follow a standard plan of action in the event of a school shooting.

“The school district really is equipped to handle these situations, and we’re always getting better and better,” said Michael Hawkins, the district’s director of communications and outreach.

Police protocol

Over the years, the protocol that police follow has changed with the rising number of terrorist acts and mass shootings, according to Crescent City Police Sgt. Edward Wilson.

In the past, hostage situations usually meant the subject was demanding money in exchange for lives. Now, the motive has changed to killing until he or she is stopped, and police have adapted their response to that changing environment.

The phrase they follow now is “rapid response” - stop action as quickly as possible. The officers investigate the incident, gather all the information available, and search the school grounds for the subject.

The California Highway Patrol, the local police department and the sheriff’s department all listen to the same frequency on the police scanner, so in most cases they all respond to serious reports.

In the case of a larger incident, the law enforcement agency that has jurisdiction over the crime area takes charge and the other departments offer backup.

Looking ahead, the police department plans to have district-wide active-shooter training. While they have not set a date for that yet, almost every police officer has gone through active-shooter training individually, according to Wilson.

“Law enforcement in Del Norte County is ready to respond to a critical incident and is continuing to work on improving our capabilities and interagency coordination,” Wilson said.

School protocol

Schools follow the chain of command in active-shooter instances, from the superintendent down to support staff. Everyone has a role to play. For example, Hawkins manages the live updates on social media, calls news agencies, and sends robocalls and texts to update parents.

If there is any threat, schools will follow the suggestion of law enforcement to lock down and then endeavor to account for every student, according to Hawkins.

The difficulty that Tuesday’s false alarm presented was that the lockdown occurred during lunch, so not every student was on campus. However, the school was able to account for students and ensure their safety.

The schools do not follow a clear protocol for emergencies. Rather, they ensure they are structured, organized and trained enough to adapt to whatever situation occurs.

The school district has been working with the California Highway Patrol to provide active-shooter training to their staff district-wide. Additionally, all of the school’s principals will be participating in Community Emergency Response Team training that the Emergency Services Department is hosting.

Parental protocol

One of the issues with lockdowns is that misinformation spreads rapidly through texts and social media, often causing parents to get frightened and want to react.

Sometimes, parents may want to try to pick up their children. But that can pose difficulties, said Hawkins. He suggests parents let law enforcement handle the situation and try not to get involved, as that could potentially cause greater risk for both their children and the school staff.

“We have your kids’ best health in mind in these situations,” Hawkins said.