

Somers Central School District Safety Task Force Report

Committee Report to the Board of Education and Superintendent

August 28, 2018



Contents

Formation of Task Force

Task Force Objectives

Schedule of Task Force

Process of Task Force

Findings of the Task Force

Recommendations of the Task Force

Formation of Task Force

- As part of its ongoing efforts to improve school safety, the Somers Central School District (“SCSD”) created the Safety Task Force. Correspondence was sent to the Somers community in mid-June soliciting applications.
- SCSD received approximately fifty applications, including but not limited to volunteers from law enforcement agencies, mental health professionals, the Somers Youth Sports Organization, the PTA, and Somers Town Council members. Due to the broad set of skills and talents of the applicants, SCSD expanded the Task Force volunteer size from ten members to fifteen volunteer members. The Task Force also included multiple faculty, administrators and support staff of the SCSD, law enforcement and BOCES safety representatives.
- In addition, SCSD previously engaged Altaris Consulting Group to provide a safety audit of our schools. Altaris representatives summarized their findings to the Task Force and participated in all meetings.

Task Force Objectives

The objectives of the Task Force were as follows:

- Gain an understanding of the current school safety status in SCSD;
- Discover best practices in school safety from safety experts;
- Explore best mental health practices for school-aged children; and
- Identify and prioritize recommendations and provide a summary report to the Superintendent and Board of Education.

Schedule of Task Force

- The Task Force met four times over the months of July and August. Representatives of Altaris and the police department attended and participated in each meeting.
- SCSD also hosted a School Safety and Information Night on August 15, 2018 for parents, in which questions were solicited from the community in advance and then addressed by the Superintendent and SCSD staff, Altaris Consulting, and the Westchester County Police Department.

Process of Task Force

The process of the Task Force was as follows:

- Altaris summarized its findings regarding the current safety practices of SCSD, and provided six areas of focus for opportunities for improvement;
- The Task Force was divided into building-level groups to identify and discuss specific opportunities for improvement at each school;
- The findings of each group were reported to the entire group and discussed in detail;
- A prioritized action plan was agreed upon by consensus of the Task Force, addressing both District-wide and building-specific solutions to explore;
- With input from Altaris, an initial draft of this report was prepared and disseminated to the Task Force for review and comment; and
- A final report was prepared for submission to the Superintendent and the Board of Education.

Findings of the Task Force

Best Practices

Altaris provided a summary of the findings of their safety review and identified six general areas of focus for the Task Force:

- *District-wide*. District-wide improvement opportunities relate to areas that have applicability to each school and should be applied uniformly throughout the District. Examples include but are not limited to such areas as: policies and procedures, emergency teams, emergency plans, and a school resource officer program.
- *Equipment*. Certain types of equipment are an integral part of emergency preparedness in schools. Some examples include: “Go Kits” which contain the necessary equipment to care and manage building occupants in an evacuation or parent reunification, portable radios that allow effective communication across the campus and even the District, and quick reference guides to guide employees in a critical incident.

Best Practices (continued)

- *Exterior.* Improvement opportunities on the exterior of the building focus encompass safety, security and emergency preparedness. Areas include: identification and mitigation of critical landscaping hazards or vulnerabilities such as obscured sight lines or roof access, adequate fencing that also permits safe evacuation of building occupants from the campus when necessary, and uniform signage to guide visitors to the campus and outline applicable policies and procedures.
- *Interior.* Improvement opportunities on the interior of the building also focus encompass safety, security and emergency preparedness. Areas include: room preparation to ensure that all areas of the building are able to implement the necessary protocols such as a lockdown, safety and security film that reinforces glass windows and partitions and can slow a potential intruder from gaining access to a space, and door locks that can be quickly secured from the interior of all rooms.

Best Practices (continued)

- *Technology.* While technology does not take the place of people when preventing and responding to emergencies, it can greatly enhance the overall safety and security of schools. Some key areas of improvement include: Electronic access control for both exterior and interior doors, robust security camera coverage on both the exterior and interior of all school buildings, and a lockdown panic system that allows large school buildings to lockdown immediately and automates many of the necessary procedures to save critical time.
- *After-school.* The security of buildings after normal instructional hours is a key challenge for schools. Many security measures in place during the school day do not extend to after hours, raising concerns about weapons and other devices being brought onto campuses for future use. The District is considering opportunities in this area including staffing and limiting access to certain portions of the building.

Practices to Avoid

Altaris also provided recommendations regarding practices to avoid, which included:

- *Metal detectors.* A properly run metal detection program can cost schools in excess of \$100,000 to run properly. Unfortunately, while metal detectors may be used to secure a particular entry, they are easily defeated in a variety of ways. Checkpoints that are also not in some way protected by armed security or law enforcement personnel can be easily defeated by anyone with a weapon who is willing to use it. Finally, due to the time required to screen and the lack of preciseness with these devices, extensive delays would result and even further additional resources required. Instead, a school may wish to consider the availability of portable “wand” metal detectors to assist with specific investigations or for use as a deterrent in conducting random checks. A District-wide policy should guide any metal detector use.
- *Wedges.* Simple plastic wedges, magnets and more elaborate lockdown devices may violate fire codes. Section 19.3.6.3.10 of the Life Safety Code states that corridor doors shall not be held open by devices other than those that release when the door is pushed or pulled.

Current School Safety Status

Please note that this information is not cumulative, as some procedures and protocol are kept confidential in order to not jeopardize the safety of students and staff.

- The Chief Emergency Officer for SCSD, along with the District's SROs and PNW BOCES Safety Officer, conduct regular security checks and review safety plans for each building throughout the year. In addition, SCSD partners with the Somers Police Department, New York State Troopers, Westchester County Police, and the Somers Fire Department to develop its safety procedures and train staff and students.

Current School Safety Status (continued)

- Daily safety measures include single point of entry and check-in systems, an armed SRO with a police car on each campus in the fall, regular checking of all exterior doors by the SROs throughout the day, security vestibules at SIS and SHS (with vestibules soon to be under construction at both PES and SMS, and expected completion by the summer of 2019), security cameras in multiple locations, sweeps of the buildings by both night and morning custodians, and a professionally monitored motion-activated security system.
- SCSD conducts both announced and unannounced drills throughout the year at each building, including lockdown, lockout, and evacuation drills. As part of these procedures, staff conducts a headcount and accounts for each student by name. Law enforcement officers actively participate in these drills and debrief the group after each drill to review both the positive aspects and areas which can be improved. The administrative teams also conducts table top exercises to strategize various scenarios.

Current School Safety Status (continued)

- All SCSD staff undergo ongoing safety and security training. This includes but is not limited to a recent active threat “train the trainer” workshop run by the Westchester County Police, safety/security workshops offered by PNW BOCES Safety Service or by law enforcement agencies. In addition, bus drivers and monitors receive training on how to respond to threats on the bus or in schools. For the 2018-2019 school year, eight half days are incorporated into the schedule for professional development, which will provide an opportunity to refresh staff on safety measures. The staff is also trained to identify at-risk students, and if needed, to report such students to the administration. SCSD also has an Anonymous Alerts Online System in place for staff and students, which allows for anonymous reporting of information to school officials.

Current School Safety Status (continued)

- Upcoming security projects include additional safety cameras on each campus, and as previously referenced, SRO officers with police cars on each campus, as well as security vestibules at PES and SMS. In addition, the District has purchased a Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP) phone system, which allows for communication to each classroom, as well as other benefits.
- In its report, Altaris observed that many of the improvement opportunities Altaris typically identifies were currently in place. Altaris noted that the District evaluates its current condition annually and makes refinements to its policies, procedures and physical sites as necessary. As part of their assessment, Altaris is working with SCSD regarding these refinements, as well as identifying other areas of improvement that range from low hanging fruit to large capital projects.

Opportunity Areas

Below is a list of opportunity areas identified by the Task Force, both District-wide and building-level. As the Task Force discussed numerous opportunities in extensive detail, this is not intended to be an exhaustive list, but a summary of those opportunities which gained the most traction with the Task Force.

- Opportunities discussed at the District level included employee sign-in and sign-out procedures; single point of entry to each building; increased student training; improved threat assessment process; and improved parent-District communication.

Opportunity Areas (continued)

- Opportunities discussed for Primrose Elementary School included the management of visitors to the campus; the security of the playground; security during after-school hours; communication between staff, and between staff and parents; and the parent reunification process (including go kits).

Opportunity Areas (continued)

- Opportunities discussed for Somers Intermediate School included the use of social media for communication with the community; potential soft spots in campus security; key management; the threat assessment process; and the parent reunification process (including go kits).

Opportunity Areas (continued)

- Opportunities discussed for Somers Middle School included ongoing student training, including the incorporation student feedback and use of Anonymous Alert system; communication between staff; safety during exterior activities, such as physical education and recess; and ongoing review and improvement of safety policies and procedures.

Opportunity Areas (continued)

- Opportunities discussed for Somers High School included changes to the access points to the school to improve overall safety; continued and increased the focus on prevention via the whole child safety team, SRO, community engagement, and student engagement/involvement; accountability, with a focus on the Raptor system and wearing of IDs; the security of the building during after-school events; and communication between staff.

Recommendations of the Task Force

The Safety and Security Task Force proposes the following actions. These recommendations are intended as a starting place, with an ongoing and improving process to be maintained. Additional comments are provided regarding the timeline for potential implementation. With any recommendation, due consideration should be made regarding the costs of such recommendation against the benefits such actions would achieve regarding improved school safety.

District Level Recommendations

On a District level, the Task Force recommends the following:

- Single point of entry for each building (within 3 months);
- Increased student training (9+ months);
- Updated safety drills (3-9 months);
- Improved threat assessment process to address mental health concerns (please refer to the Index of this Report for more information) (3-9 months);
- Prepare and deliver presentation to community regarding the current social and emotional wellness programs provided by SCSD (3-9 months); and
- Improved procedures regarding employee sign-in and sign-out (within 3 months).

The Task Force and Altaris specifically do not recommend the use of door stops or metal detectors, per previous comments above. The Task Force notes that recommendations regarding student training, safety drills, and threat assessment are already in the process of being implemented in consultation with Altaris.

Equipment Recommendations

The Task Force recommends the following actions regarding equipment:

- Updated parent unification kits (within 3 months); and
- Updated protocol flip charts (i.e. short guides for every class with guidelines for emergency responses) (within 3 months).

The District has already completed improvements in this opportunity area with the purchase of portable radios for use by staff members to improve communication, and the purchase of safety vests for staff to improve the admittance and dismissal process at each building.

Exterior Recommendations

The Task Force recommends the following in regard to the exteriors of the District buildings:

- Improvements to secure safety of the open area between SIS and SMS (9+ months);
- Improvements to address the perimeter safety of the PES playground (9+ months);
- Safety/security film on exterior windows and doors (9+ months); and
- Improved uniform signage (e.g. signage noting that vehicles parked in certain areas are subject to search) (9+ months).

As previously noted, the exterior safety of PES and SMS will be improved within the next year with the completion of construction of vestibules. In addition, the District installed a new fence between Route 139 and the PES playground, increasing the height from 4 feet to 8 feet, and the district will soon be adding mesh to the fence to limit visibility, which partially addresses the Task Force's concerns.

Interior Recommendations

The Task Force recommends the following in regard to the interiors of the District school buildings:

- Swipe card access/locks to the classroom level (please refer to the Index of this Report for more information) (9+ months);
- Safety/security film on exterior windows and doors (9+ months); and
- Add locks to the limited number of SIS rooms without them (and which are currently not in use) (3+9 months).

Technology Recommendations

The Task Force recommends the following technology improvements:

- Lockdown panic system (9+ months);
- Door ajar systems, providing notice when any exterior door is open (9+ months); and
- Increased security cameras (9+ months).

As previously noted, the District has already begun improvement in this opportunity area with the purchase of a VOIP phone system, with a phone installed in each classroom. Once this system is in place, the recommendations above regarding an automated lockdown panic system can be built on the platform and implemented.

After-School Recommendations

The Task Force recommends the following actions for after school improvements:

- Increased staffing (9+ months);
- Single point of entry (within 3 months); and
- Improved visitor policy (within 3 months).

The District has already taken steps to address opportunities in this area, including beginning the process of hiring staffing and the development of new policies for after school.

Conclusion

As noted above, some of the recommendations of the Task Force have already begun being implemented by SCSD. Many other recommendations can be implemented quickly and with little financial cost, though there are others that would require additional funding to implement.