

January 2013

Over my years as an educator, I've seen violence change the way schools operate in many different ways. Most visitors now understand that identification is required as well as a pass or escort to enter the building. Occasionally, parents have voiced their disapproval of this practice as unnecessary but I can assure you it is here to stay. School design changed greatly following the Columbine shooting. Visibility and supervision of students is more important from inside the building and less outside exposure to classrooms is now a goal in new buildings. This allows students and staff members a place of refuge in the event of a lockdown. Unfortunately, our buildings were built in a different time, when priorities were much different. Several of our buildings have classrooms where the windows were designed to provide as much natural light and ventilation as possible. Obviously, this was before modern efficient lighting and the air conditioning our students enjoy today. I'm sure when all of the investigations are completed on the recent Newtown, CT, tragedy, we will have additional best practices to employ which will make our schools even safer. I recently (after the Newtown shooting) heard a school safety expert speak who provided the perspective that our schools, nationwide, are much safer than ever before. This is largely because of the changes school safety experts have implemented during the last decade to secure our schools.

Following the Newtown tragedy and the subsequent arrest of one of our students who made threats to harm others, I heard from many parents regarding concerns for their child's safety. Most parents were complimentary for the quick communication the district provided to parents regarding what was happening at school. Interestingly, the parents that were critical of our efforts said they wanted faster communication from the district. Social media and inaccurate information led to a near frenzy by a few. This reaction was fueled by the raw emotions we all had coming off a weekend of truly tragic media coverage and the burning question regardless of where they attend; "Is my child's school safe?"

Thanks to the cooperation we enjoy with the Guthrie Police Department, Logan County Sherriff's Office and the Oklahoma Highway Patrol, our schools received additional layers of safety before the winter break. With regard to what parents and the community should expect going forward, the Guthrie Police Department has pledged to provide a greater presence in our schools. I have asked all school sites to have a meeting of their Safe Schools Committee during the first week of school in January so parents, students and the building administration may have dialogue leading to suggestions for improved safety. If you would like to attend any of the meetings, please call the school site for more information. I realize some of the suggestions may require building modifications that cannot occur immediately but these suggestions may be documented as our district enters a long range planning process where we will prioritize our needs for future bond issues. Finally, with regard to communication with parents, we will always work to provide the most accurate information available within the law. I

will tell you that our emergency phone call did not work as promptly as I would have hoped but I think we have made modifications to our system that will increase the speed of the calls. I will always operate under the following principle: Accuracy is much more important than to be first when communicating important information. From my perspective, I would consider no communication more important than information regarding the safety of our children.

Happy New Year and a special thank you to the Guthrie Police Department and all other law enforcement officers for their dedication to the safety of our children.