

Office of the Superintendent of Schools
MONTGOMERY COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS
Rockville, Maryland

August 20, 2024

MEMORANDUM

To: Members of the Board of Education

From: Thomas W. Taylor, Superintendent of Schools

Subject: Safety and Security Update

Safety in schools is a priority for me, my cabinet, and the greater Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) community. MCPS is committed to cultivating a safe and secure learning and working environment, fostering academic excellence, and supporting the physical, social, and psychological well-being of students and staff.

This is the first of the safety and security updates to the Board of Education. It is important that we consistently are discussing our efforts as a district to create a school environment that is conducive to learning. I firmly believe these conversations will increase confidence and trust from our stakeholders about MCPS' commitment to addressing safety and security needs in the district.

We are pleased to welcome Mr. Marcus G. Jones to chart and lead a strategic and focused approach to school safety and security to support the ever-expanding needs of our district. He is the recently retired Montgomery County chief of police.

It is important to create a safe and conducive learning environment where students can and want to learn, where staff feels comfortable and safe to work, and families are confident their children are safe. Serious incident data from the 2023–2024 school year (Attachment A) illustrated the need to address the rising safety concerns within our schools.

Per MCPS Regulation COB-RA, *Incident Reporting*, MCPS defines a serious incident as one that includes some level of risk, harm, threat of harm to staff or students, seriously disrupts school operations, or concerns staff or students and could escalate to a community concern or elevated to a police or legal matter.

During the 2023–2024 school year, there were a total of 4,424 incidents reported through Synergy, the student information system. Of the reported incidents, 726 (16%) were classified as critical, having the potential to impact student safety and security. Such events were classified within categories such as knives or other weapons, false alarms or bomb threats, fighting or attacks on students or adults, drug-related issues, and trespassing.

Though defined as a serious incident in Synergy, it is important to note that the remaining 3,698 (84%) reported incidents were determined to be non-critical, posing no threat to student safety and security and not requiring the activation of school-based emergency protocols at times. Such non-critical events range from a small animal entering the school to a temporary power outage resulting in the use of an automatic generator. Though these incidents are deemed non-critical, they are reported through Synergy to ensure the proper documentation of occurrence, and to ensure that the event is rectified in a manner that has no disruption to school-based operations.

Reported incidents do not include identifiable information about the students and adults who may be involved. Schools report these incidents and follow procedures for communicating, documenting, reporting, and investigating depending upon the type of incident.

The first effort is a multi-layered districtwide safety and security plan that focuses on creating and maintaining a safe, supportive, and inclusive school environment for all students and staff. This plan seeks to address the Board of Education (Board) November 9, 2023, resolution focused on strengthening security efforts across MCPS articulating a concise approach to safety, and ensuring we all work collaboratively and collectively (Resolution No. 490-23).

The four main components of the plan include:

1. Conditions for Success
2. Emergency Preparedness
3. Physical Infrastructure
4. Staffing and Training.

Following are additional details about each of the components of the plan including new initiatives that will be implemented during the 2024–2025 school year.

Conditions for Success

As we prepare for the start of the new school year it is important to create the conditions for success.

A key theme emphasized earlier this spring was to set clear expectations for student behavior while promoting respect, empathy, and inclusivity. The *Student Code of Conduct* provides a framework for accountability and encourages students to take responsibility for their behavior. Revisions are made to the *Student Code of Conduct* annually.

For the 2024–2025 school year, secondary students will complete a Student Expectations Module to accompany the Student Culture of Respect Module. This module includes an overview of the *Student Rights and Responsibilities* as well as exploring the *Student Code of Conduct* to provide every MCPS student with an understanding of the expectations for student behavior and the associated consequences at all MCPS schools. See Attachment B, Student Expectations Modules.

To maintain a focus on the educational environment and limit distractions students will not be able to access social media sites, including Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, on the MCPS network. In addition, MCPS will be evaluating its current MCPS Regulation COG-RA *Personal Mobile Devices*. The Department of Shared Accountability is conducting a comprehensive evaluation of the current regulation to inform necessary revisions. In addition, several schools are piloting an Away All-Day Cell Phone Policy this year, which will restrict students from accessing their phones during the school day. All middle schools and high schools were invited to participate in the pilot. An interest meeting was held on August 12. Interested schools have until September 2 to commit to the pilot. The Office of Strategic Initiatives will provide resources and support for school implementation based on individual school needs. Research indicates that limiting personal mobile devices and social media sites in schools can result in fewer distractions, a reduction of cyberbullying and conflict caused by social media, and improved engagement.

The Board's resolution identified an expansion of the student identification program as a viable safety measure for secondary schools. Last year, five high schools, Bethesda-Chevy Chase, Walter Johnson, Richard Montgomery, Quince Orchard, and Rockville, implemented a pilot student identification program. This school year, the student identification program will be implemented in all high schools by the end of November 2024.

The Community Engagement Officer Program (CEO) with MCPS and Montgomery County Police Department (MCPD) was established in 2022. I am not seeking to expand the CEO Program, but in collaboration with MCPD to clarify key areas and ensure fidelity of implementation. Specifically, the focus will be on establishing clear communication of roles for school staff and CEOs, reviewing shortfalls in the current Memorandum of Understanding regarding clarity, and reviewing program effectiveness for the school year. These efforts will promote high expectations, reduce variance, and cultivate a safe and welcoming environment.

Emergency Preparedness

Emergency planning is a key component of school safety. Schools collaborate with the Office of Systemwide Safety and Emergency Management (OSSEM) to create and/or update their School Emergency Plans annually to ensure they represent a comprehensive plan for the actions that staff and students should take before, during, and after emergency events, as well as inclusive of the needs of the entire school community. In addition, all schools send administrators to complete the required On-Site Emergency Team (OSET) summer training conducted by OSSEM to prepare emergency plans, and drills, and conduct ongoing OSET meetings with their emergency teams. OSSEM staff continue to support schools throughout the year with a proactive approach to emergency planning and help ensure the entire school community is prepared for potential incidents with the required drills, training, and emergency preparedness tasks.

Throughout the year, schools will participate in emergency drills including shelter-in-place, lockdown, fire, weather, and parent child reunification. These drills support preparedness in the event of a crisis or emergency on school grounds and/or that may impact the school day. At the district level, we collaborate with community partners, including local law enforcement, first responders, emergency management staff, and public and mental health officers throughout the year to provide expertise and guidance.

During the 2023–2024 school year, there were 21 bomb threats. Each created a sense of fear and was disruptive to the school day. To proactively address these threats for the coming year, it will be our goal to minimize the disruption and fear to our school community and the community at large with strategies addressing the authenticity of the threat and collaboration with principals and local law enforcement to make informed decisions.

Finally, safety and security are paramount for the entire school district. In addition to schools focusing on emergency preparedness, so will our central office locations which will have documented emergency plans and conduct at least one emergency drill this year. These efforts will increase knowledge for safe responses in emergencies.

Physical Infrastructure

All MCPS elementary schools have been outfitted with security cameras through operating budget monies allocated by the Board and a multi-year grant-funded elementary school camera project that was completed this past school year.

Also, through a settlement agreement, MCPS received \$2 million to fight the youth vaping epidemic. Once approved by the Board and County Council, these funds will be used for vape sensors that will be installed in all restrooms at the high school level.

Staffing and Training

Seven additional security assistants were allocated for the 2024–2025 school year and assigned to secondary schools. To date, there are six security assistant vacancies. The hiring process for all vacant positions is underway.

The Board's resolution identified increased training for students and staff. Our school-based security staff participate in specialized de-escalation training as well as state-mandated training that includes a wide range of topics related to adolescent behavior, positive school climate, implicit bias, restorative approaches, and other best practices to support students. In collaboration with many school-based and district partners, we have designed standard operating procedures to provide consistency and reduce variance across the school system in the development and implementation of school safety and security procedures. This increases the operational efficiency and effectiveness of safety and security measures and ensures an optimal space for teaching, learning, and enjoyment. Creating a positive school culture, responding appropriately to student behavior, and providing appropriate adult supervision must be an equally important priority outside the classroom, especially during lunch periods, transition times, and school-sponsored activities.

These efforts will develop staff to create a safe and secure school environment.

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Attachments