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School Safety Initiative

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In November 2006 a new school safety initiative was launched in Yarmouth and Dennis. The initiative represents a re-commitment to the two-decade old partnership between the police and the Dennis-Yarmouth Regional School District. The initiative will eventually examine all aspects of school safety in both the mechanical and procedural arenas. The first step, already underway, is to train staff and students in procedures to secure schools from intruders. This has sometimes been called critical incident training of intruder protocol, but is most commonly known as a lock-down.

The lock-down procedure was developed in 1995 at Mattcheese Middle School by the school resource officer and the school administration. Over the years the staffs at all schools in the district have received training in the procedure. A successful drill was run in 1995 at Mattcheese with staff and students participating. Seeing that the procedure was effective, drilling with students was stopped. The next drill was held at Marguerite E. Small Elementary School on March 3, 2003. Only staff was involved in that drill and training continued in the years that followed with the adults only.

There are two schools of thought on drilling with students. One school is that students must practice what they are expected to do in an emergency so they will know how to react if a real situation should arise. The second school is that we could be training those who may do us harm. For quite some time we have followed the second school of thought. The 1999 incident at Columbine High School supported that thinking to a greater extent.

The Columbine incident revealed that the decades-old tried-and-true tactics employed by the Jefferson County Sherriff's Office and other responding police agencies were totally inadequate in addressing this new kind of threat. Columbine was not the first school violence incident but it was and still is the worst. It stands as the equivalent to 9/11 for school violence. The law enforcement industry was jolted into action and developed new tactics to effectively address such an attack upon a school or workplace.

In 2002 the newly formed Cape Cod Regional Law Enforcement Council assumed responsibility for training all 500 police officers working in the region in these tactics; know as Rapid Response to the Active Shooter. The initial training was conducted at the Law Enforcement Training Center at Yarmouth Police Headquarters, Mattcheese Middle School and Dennis-Yarmouth Regional High School. The full two-day course was presented over two cycles of annual police in-service training in the 2001/2002 and 2002/2003 seasons. A one day refresher course was run in the following season. The two-day course is run periodically for new-hires. Officers from every police department on the Cape can now deploy interchangeably and expect to successfully apply these tactics should they be called to a neighboring community. Police chiefs are purchasing and fielding the proper equipment to support their officers in the use of the rapid response techniques.

With the police properly trained in rapid response the issues and concerns keeping us in the second school of thought, to train only the adults, were relived. Plans were developed to train students at D-Y High School in the lock-down procedure. Faculty and staff received an intensive refresher and teachers then trained the students. A successful drill was held on April 12, 2006. Present as observers and evaluators were police leaders from four agencies and senior administrators from three school districts. The plan was reviewed and readied for presentation throughout the D-Y District.

The process is moving forward. The high school has had a second drill and Wixon Middle School has had its first. Training is scheduled for the remainder of the schools in the district as well as St. Pius X School in South Yarmouth. As an added endorsement the Barnstable Police has adopted the D-Y model and are in the process of working with their partners at the Barnstable Public Schools to train their faculty, staff, and students.

Parents of students attending schools in Yarmouth or Dennis should be aware that sometime during the winter of 2007 their child will be trained in the lock-down procedure. A parent forum has been held on each occasion to explain the process and answer questions and concerns some parents have had. Check your school announcements for the date and time of the forum for your school.

The long-range plan for lock-down is to make it as common as fire drills in frequency and in nature. Once this initial phase of training is complete, staff will receive brief refresher training prior to the opening of school and students will receive similar preparation upon school's opening each September. A more intensive program will be presented to newly hired teachers and staff members.

The lock-down concept tends to cause anxiety for some. To accept that lock-down procedures are necessary in the 21st century school could cause one to conclude that schools are unsafe places. The reality is that schools are very safe places and the chances of being seriously injured do to violence are relatively small. The unsafe school is the one that is unprepared, with no procedure and no institutional mindset to be ready for the unlikely or the unthinkable. We have decided to be ready and we are constantly planning for the unlikely and thinking about the

unthinkable and how to stop it. In the past fifty years not one student has been killed in a fire in a school in North America. It's fair to attribute that statistic to the excellent preparation and planning by the fire service. The firefighter has trained people in fire evacuation as far back as anyone can recall. They have also, through legislation and building code, equipped and caused to be constructed the safest buildings in history. The police have a lot of catching up to do. We tip our hat to their success and endeavor to emulate it. You have but to watch the news to know that school violence is a problem that is not going away on its own. Our combined efforts, those of the police, school officials and the community as a whole, will face many challenges. Many school buildings were designed and built decades ago as open and accessible community centers making the objective of securing them in today's climate difficult and costly. Many citizens regard such steps as these as an overreaction and still cling to an "*it can't happen here*" attitude in spite of the fact that the mid-Cape region bears striking demographic similarities to the communities that have already experienced incidents of serious school violence. And the thought of your own child in a lock-down situation, even a practice one, can be chilling enough to suppress cooperation. With these obstacles and more before us we forge on, committed to do the best we can with what we have, to plan, to practice and keep safe our most precious treasure.

No plan is perfect, and even the perfect plan is not 100% effective in the face of a fluid situation. This lock-down building block we have laid as our cornerstone could easily save a life or even dozens. Support it.

Once the lock-down phase is complete and the plan for on-going drilling and training is in place the initiative will move forward into other aspects of school safety both procedural, through training and planning, as well as mechanical, examining the facilities themselves for the proper equipment. The process is designed to be a perpetual one with school officials working as a team with the combined resources of the Yarmouth and Dennis police departments.

If you have any questions about the school safety initiative you should contact the D-Y Police Services Office, or if you are a Yarmouth or Dennis resident, the principal of your school.