



# Keeping Our Schools Safe

**Emergency Preparedness, Response  
Require Strong Partnerships**

*by Melanie Moss*





hen Dennis Williams began his career in education in Beaumont 17 years ago, he had no idea that interaction with local law enforcement would become a regular part of his school schedule. Collaboration with law enforcement is an important part of his duties as assistant superintendent of Administrative and Pupil Services at Longview ISD, and this partnership has bolstered safety and security across the district's campuses. The emphasis placed on partnering with law enforcement reflects the changing attitudes of what constitutes a safe, healthy learning environment and how the role of schools in their respective communities has changed.

Longview ISD's HI-5 (High Five) program, launched by Williams in March, involves fostering an atmosphere of "community policing" by increasing positive interaction between area law enforcement and the district. As part of the HI-5 program, Longview ISD invites both active and retired officers to visit campuses and participate in student activities.

The HI-5 initiative is a strong example of successful collaboration between schools and the communities they serve. It augments the school resource officer program already in place at Longview schools and is just one of many ways that local police can become more involved in their community's schools.

### School-based Law Enforcement

Longview ISD isn't the only district looking to strengthen ties with local law enforcement. Chief William Edwards played an integral role in the creation of the Pflugerville ISD Police Department and currently heads the Hutto ISD Police. In that role, he has seen the importance of ensuring that school district police work closely with their city and county law enforcement counterparts. That collaboration is an important part of school-based law enforcement. School-based law enforcement is community policing to a specific target audience, he explained. "You could say that school-based law enforcement is community policing on steroids," Edwards said. "It's taking ownership of issues and remaining involved to educate, to prevent, and to address school and community needs."



Photo courtesy of Eanes ISD

Central Texas School Safety Consortium members work on emergency operations plans during a meeting. The group of school faculty members, staff, area first responders, emergency management personnel, parents, and community leaders works together to address preparedness.





Photo courtesy of Eanes ISD

Participants in a Dark Skies exercise, hosted by the Central Texas School Safety Consortium, include school district personnel, local officials, and community leaders in three counties.

School districts that have strong school resource officer programs or school-based police departments have a good foundation for collaborative programs. Edwards pointed out that school-based police departments not only serve as a deterrent for crime and disorder but also provide specialized resources. School-based police officers deal almost exclusively with youth and receive specialized training in areas of youth development, crisis intervention, bullying, and crime prevention.

Williams echoed Edwards's sentiment regarding the concept. "What could be a better link to the community than enhancing safe schools through a school-based law enforcement program rooted in a positive, meaningful school and police collaboration?"

He added that police officers foster relationships with the schools by reading to elementary students, joining them during meals in the cafeteria, and attending various campus events. This proactive approach spills over to the Longview law enforcement community at large, as explained by Corporal Josh Tubb, the Gregg County Sheriff's Department spokesperson, whose office works closely with Longview ISD and its HI-5 program.

"The importance of safety and security at our school campuses cannot be overstated," Tubb said. "Every school day, parents in our community drop off the most important thing in their lives: their children. These children walk into a school where hard-working, dedicated teachers pour their hearts into providing these young souls with the knowledge they need to grow into proud, upstanding adults, who one day may be the leaders in our community." He said that is why the Gregg County Sheriff's Office is honored to be a part of the HI-5 program.



Longview Police Officer Jose Rodriguez spends time with elementary students as part of the community policing program.



## Community Collaboration

Lessons learned from successful community policing and school initiative programs such as HI-5 and best practices in community interaction demonstrate that safe and healthy learning environments require well-established relationships among district leaders, first responders, emergency managers, and community leaders. It is important that schools reach out to all of these partners and potential partners and maintain open lines of communication. Emergency plans cannot be created or executed in a vacuum. When all community and school partners come to the table, everyone benefits.

Collaboration is an essential function for both safety and emergency management. It helps to ensure effective preparedness, response, recovery, and mitigation. These efforts must include open communication and coordination, as well as documentation in the district's emergency operations plans. Response protocols, memorandums of understanding, and other mutual-aid agreements should also reflect a collaborative approach.



Photo courtesy of Longview ISD

tudents as part of the HI-5 program, developed by Longview

It is important to recognize that community collaboration involves the whole community, including faculty, staff, first responders, emergency management, and parents. This is something that is well represented in Central Texas, where school districts and local officials in three counties have banded together to create the Central Texas School Safety Consortium. The consortium allows school and community leaders to work together to address preparedness in a process that represents the best interests of each entity and ensures consistent communication and cooperation.

Scott Swarengin, assistant director of Homeland Security and Emergency Management for the City of Austin, has seen the value of collaboration among school and community leaders and considers these relationships critical to the

## Local Police Tour Schools in Refugio Regularly

In Refugio ISD, Superintendent Melissa Gonzales has taken strong steps to ensure district security and promote a message of safety to parents and the community. Gonzales, whose husband, Raul "Pinky" Gonzales, is the Refugio County sheriff, has coordinated local law enforcement tours and meetings with school district personnel.

Refugio ISD School Resource Officer Peter Silvas said the purpose of the tours is to address the schools' safety plan and communicate it to other law enforcement entities. In the event of a lockdown, Silvas said teachers and staff will secure classroom doors and turn off lights to give the appearance of an empty classroom.

The first five minutes are the most critical time in an active-shooter situation, said Refugio Police Chief Enrique Diaz, who added that the tours and meetings are used to gauge whether more training or an updated notification system are needed.

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Photo courtesy of Longview ISD

Officer Ladarrion Brown of the Longview Police Department reads to elementary school children as part of Longview ISD's collaborative HI-5 program. The program was developed to increase law enforcement presence on school district campuses.

safety and well-being of the whole community. "Since school district boundaries don't match political boundaries, it is easy for a city to be served by several school districts," Swearingin said. "Conversely, a single district may lie within multiple cities and counties."

When this occurs, a collaborative approach to emergency preparedness helps to manage expectations. Swearingin advocates for consortiums to bring school and community leaders to the table before disaster strikes. "Consortiums provide an organized focus to look at emergency and safety issues as a whole community, not just within the confines of one school, district, or jurisdiction," he said.

Swearingin cites several examples of how these partnerships have benefited the entire community, including preparedness and response for winter weather, public health emergencies, fires, evacuations, and even hurricane sheltering operations.

Darla Humes, director of Risk Management for Leander ISD, shared a school perspective, saying, "Being a member of this [consortium] group has been extremely valuable and a resource that I count on for emergency planning, training, best practices, and debriefing all sorts of incidents and emergencies. This consortium as a whole gains a great deal of knowledge, experience, and expertise from all of its members. I can't even imagine doing my job without their support and participation."

Establishing lines of communication is not difficult, Swearingin noted. "If you aren't already in touch with your local emergency manager, you should be able to locate them through your city or county government," he said. School districts also may reach out to the local Texas Department of Public Safety office, which can put them in touch with their state emergency management district coordinator (who can connect the district with the local emergency manager).

#### Assistance from TASB

In addition, the TASB Risk Management Fund offers members emergency management and school security support, including information and assistance on collaborative programs, all-hazards planning, and help in reaching out to local first responders and emergency managers.

Collaboration and school safety go hand in hand. Longview ISD Superintendent James Wilcox noted that the district "is not content to accept the status quo, especially when it comes to the safety of our children."

He added, "Our district is glad to partner with these agencies, and we're always looking for ways to improve how we protect the many precious lives in our care."★

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## Commissioner Weighs in on School Safety Measures

*Editor's note: The following is a letter addressed to school administrators from Texas Education Commissioner Mike Morath dated May 8, 2018:*

### **To the Administrator Addressed Subject: Adequate and Appropriate School Safety Measures**

In recent weeks, there have been media reports from different parts of our state regarding potential threats in various school districts that were fortunately headed off thanks to the collaborative efforts of school administrators, local law enforcement, and state-level support from the Texas Department of Public Safety.

One such incident occurred in Uvalde, where Texas Rangers, working with local law enforcement, investigated and uncovered a plot by two students who were allegedly planning a mass-casualty event against a school. Thankfully, this plot never came to fruition. However, this incident underscores the importance of school systems to always be vigilant and prepared.

Our schools face emergency situations that vary in severity and duration. With that in mind, it is important not only for school personnel but also for students to remain vigilant and aware of their surroundings, both on and off campus.

Schools must take preventative safety actions to successfully fulfill their primary mission, which is educating students. These preventative measures include planning, drilling, and training for a variety of emergencies. Last month, I was pleased to advise Governor Abbott that all Texas school districts were in compliance with recent state-required safety and security audits. However, emergency preparedness does not end there.

School districts should continually self-assess their emergency management processes. School safety plans should be coordinated with local emergency management agencies, law enforcement, health departments, and fire departments. This coordination can help ensure safety plans will not conflict with existing local emergency services protocols. It is

the responsibility of district administrators to ensure staff is trained and adequately prepared to respond to and recover from these incidents.

Access control continues to be one of the top safety and security challenges faced by schools. Allowing unauthorized individuals access to a school or facility can compromise student and staff safety. Consider tools, such as your local Crime Stoppers program, which is available at no cost to monitor suspicious activity through a reporting mechanism that allows students to report tips or concerns.

Please remember that the Texas School Safety Center provides a variety of resources to assist schools with implementing a comprehensive safety program. One of these resources is the High-Quality Emergency Operations Planning tool (<https://rmt.txssc.txstate.edu/tools/hq-eop>), which provides guidance on the state-mandated planning process to prevent, prepare for, respond to, and recover from any type of emergency. As part of an effective safety plan, districts are also encouraged to incorporate the K-12 Standard Response Protocol (<https://txssc.txstate.edu/tools/srp-toolkit/>), which is a multi-hazard-based response protocol for a variety of threats that could impact a school. These response protocols should be drilled and exercised regularly with local first responders. Further, districts can access guidance and resources for conducting state-mandated ongoing self-assessments (<https://txssc.txstate.edu/tools/k-12-toolkit/>), which serve to identify hazards, threats, and vulnerabilities that might pose a danger to life or property or interfere with a safe and healthy learning environment.

Evacuation, fire, and lockdown drills should be conducted throughout the school year. Several of these emergency drills should include first responders so they can become familiar with the campuses.

Thank you for your unwavering commitment to the safety of students on all our campuses.

*Mike Morath  
Commissioner, Texas Education Agency*



## Agencies Train Side by Side in Decatur ISD Schools

by Richard Greene

Racing through the main hall of Decatur ISD's Carson Elementary School, three officers from different law enforcement agencies come to a sudden stop at the first wing with guns drawn.

Seeing a girl lying in the hall, one officer yells: "Show me your hands!" After getting no response, the officers start their slow descent down the hall as a team. Sweeping each foot, they carefully check the first few classrooms as another group of officers joins them with guns drawn.

Down another hall, "Bang! Bang!" breaks the silence, and five of the responding officers sprint toward the danger. Two more officers stay behind and wait for assistance to again start sweeping the hall to look for victims or assailants.

After 20 harrowing and chaotic minutes, the drill ends—a drill the officers hope is never a reality. But as the February shooting in Parkland, Florida, proved, no community is immune. The multi-agency active shooting training in March at Carson Elementary, which followed classroom preparation at the Decatur Fire Department, is part of an effort on behalf of local agencies to prepare for the nightmare scenario.

"This is your worst-case for small kids, but any school would be bad," said Decatur Police Chief Rex Hoskins. "The training we're learning here is not just for the schools. It could be the hospital, your office building, or the courthouse. It'd be the same technique. The main goal is to get everyone familiar with each other—the different agencies. If it happens in Decatur, Texas, we'll have the sheriff's office, DPS here. They may be the closest units here besides us. Bridgeport will be coming over to assist us. We're trying to work so we know what everybody does and everyone has an understanding this is how everyone is going to do it."

The drill was the first in what Hoskins, Bridgeport Police Chief Steve Stanford, and Wise County Sheriff Lane Akin hope is a quarterly effort that will include



medics, firefighters, Wise County Emergency Management, and the Department of Public Safety.

Hoskins said Decatur and Bridgeport officers conducted a drill two years ago in Bridgeport, but it did not include as many agencies.

"We plan to try to do this quarterly with every agency," Hoskins said. "We want to try to look at





every school before it's over with, not just Decatur. We're going to go to Bridgeport, Alvord, Slidell, and Chico. If the sheriff's department has a big shooting in Alvord, Decatur police officers are going to be there, too."

Bridgeport's Horace Langford and Decatur's Royce Gastineau led the drills, critiquing and offering advice. They showed officers how to stand to check class-

rooms, including hidden spots that assailants could use to their advantage.

Paul Booker, the Wise County Sheriff's Office School Resource Officer (SRO) in Slidell, praised the training. "It makes you more aware of your surroundings," Booker said. "With me being up at Slidell, I'm the only one out there until my backup arrives. Going through this training helps me be more alert and more aware of my surroundings. If there is a situation, how I'm going to take my stance. I'm the only one there. My next backup may be 20 to 30 minutes away. I have to get in there, eliminate the threat, and make sure my staff and students are safe."

Akin, who is in talks with Alvord, Chico, Paradise, Northwest, and Slidell superintendents to put more SROs in the schools, said he enjoyed the opportunity to collaborate with the other agencies. He also wants the SROs to be ready to react if needed.

"Our SROs will be the first person there. They have to be prepared to respond quickly and prevent a situation. These guys can't hesitate," Akin said.

Gastineau and Langford noted that they enjoyed watching the efficiency of the officers in the drills improve as the day went. "It went well. It's a matter of getting everyone on the same page," Gastineau said. "When something like this happens, we have to have help here."

Hoskins pointed out that assistance may be in a variety of roles and that everyone must know the protocols. "In reality, in an active shooter event, you're only going to have so many people entering the building," Hoskins said. "You also have to worry about the perimeter, setting up a command post, and getting everything where you want to get it in medical personnel and fire personnel. After the shooter is neutralized, how do we go back in, check the doors, and then get the kids out? This will show us how everyone will react."★

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