

September 19, 2024

Dear Orange County Families,

As you are aware, we have been through an incredibly distressing situation at Orange Elementary School (OES). This event certainly has ramifications far beyond the OES school walls and the OES community. While such events rightfully increase emotion and concern, it is important for all of us to recognize that it is more than appropriate to process in our own way. I must admit that this situation has been mentally and emotionally draining for me personally; however, I am incredibly grateful for the quick and professional response of OES staff members and our School Resource Officer. Their actions prevented this situation from turning out worse. I also know that we will overcome this adversity and be stronger and more unified.

Being the Superintendent of Orange County Public Schools is like having 5,130 of my own children. I want nothing more than for all of our students to have the opportunity to excel in a safe and supportive environment. This desire was reinforced by members of our Strategic Planning Committee, who recently identified safe learning environments as one of our five key areas of focus. As I reflected on this week's event, I began to think about the steps we have taken in recent years to create the type of learning environment our students deserve. I would like to share some of these steps that fall under the umbrella of school safety and security measures:

Staffing

- Worked with the Sheriff's Office and the OC Board of Supervisors to employ a School Resource Officer at every OCPS school;
- Hired an additional School Security Officer at Orange County High School;
- Hired an additional Licensed Clinical Social Worker for OCPS;
- Worked with the Board of Supervisors to secure funding for 2 additional assistant principals at LGMS and the LGES/LGPS site to enhance supervision and responsiveness;
- Secured funding to maintain 5 student support coaches, who are critical in addressing a myriad of student issues;
- Developed partnerships with two private agencies to provide outpatient counseling within our schools; and
- Secured grant funding to partner with Encompass to provide a full-time crisis counselor for our students.

Safety Expectations and Guidelines

- Created the OCPS Code of Student Conduct;
- Devised specific expectations for student behavior on school buses; and
- Developed extreme weather guidelines to enhance student and athlete safety.

Partnerships

- Reviewed and enhanced our MOU with the Sheriff's Office to solidify the partnership between OCPS and the OCSO; and
- Established the Blue Ribbon Panel comprised of OCPS administrators, Sheriff's Office leadership, and key members of the community who have expertise in safety and security.

Physical Plant and Buses

- Completed walkthroughs of all sites and evaluated our physical plants using the "School Safety Inspection Checklist for Virginia Schools;"
- Upgraded all school buses to three-camera digital surveillance systems;
- Implemented GPS tracking and electronic routing via Transfinder;
- Added Raptor visitor management ID system at all sites;



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- Constructed walkway connectors at Unionville and Lightfoot (the connector at Gordon-Barbour will be completed in the summer of 2025);
- Completed security vestibule entrances at all 9 school sites;
- Implemented electronic access control and Aiphone technology at all schools;
- Added security fencing around all playgrounds; and
- Continuing to use RFID student bus passes and the Stopfinder parent app.

Safety Practices, Processes, and Training

- Created an automated Code Red announcement and activation process at all sites;
- Completed digital mapping of all OCPS sites;
- Initiated the use of Blocks! for student safety context-aware alerts that are scanned 24/7 by review experts;
- Enhanced our threat assessment process and procedures in line with DCJS and VDOE guidelines;
- Streamlined communication between law enforcement, fire and EMS, and OCPS through expanded use of the public safety radio system;
- Created the OC-Safe anonymous reporting platform;
- Partnered with the VDH to provide Naloxone (Narcan) training for specific staff members; and
- Annually completing active shooter, lockdown, and stop the bleed training for all staff members.

I would like to acknowledge the School Board's concern, support, and involvement throughout this past week. Their efforts have been helpful to all members of our OCPS family. Moving forward, we remain committed to continuous improvement. We will have ongoing discussions about security enhancements, and I am certain that features such as additional CCTV cameras, wearable/mobile panic buttons for staff members, metal detectors, clear back packs, and other types of alarm systems will remain top of mind. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge one of the most effective components of safety and security: positive school culture.

It is essential to have a school environment in which both students and employees feel valued, heard, and respected. A positive school culture promotes student engagement and connectedness, reduces behavior issues, and increases employee satisfaction and retention. In schools with positive culture, students benefit from appropriate and trusting relationships with staff members; further, they have access to supports and resources that can help them effectively navigate difficult scenarios. These relationships are critical in reducing inappropriate or destructive behaviors.

However, we must acknowledge that nothing can replace the importance of effective parental supervision, engagement, and involvement. Our goal is to be the best possible partners with our parents/guardians in helping develop our children into productive adults and citizens. We ask and encourage all parents/guardians to remain active in providing the crucial oversight needed to help our children make responsible decisions. We are undoubtedly stronger together, and together we can continue to build the best OCPS. Thank you for your support and resilience. I look forward to navigating the road ahead in partnership with you.

Sincerely,



Daniel P. Hornick, Ed.D.
Superintendent