

More safety drills for students among possibilities as part of amended OPRF school safety policy

By **Steve Schering** Pioneer Press

March 16, 2018



Administrators at Oak Park and River Forest High School are seeking to implement more frequent safety drills. (Steve Schering / Pioneer Press)

One month after a high school shooting in Florida left 17 dead, administrators at **Oak Park and River Forest High School** are seeking to implement more frequent safety drills with a wider scope.

Last month, administrators asked board members to vote down an amended safety policy in order to facilitate a more in-depth discussion on school safety

measures. At the March 13 school board meeting, Principal Nathaniel Rouse discussed amended policy 4:170, which is expected to be approved later this month.

"We certainly know we can do more drills, and we'll do that," Rouse said. "In these times, it might behoove of us to have one drill each semester instead of once per year. One of the biggest things that have come up with the community and some students is when we have our drills. I'll just say it, we have our drills when it's convenient for us."

In seeking to better prepare the campus, Rouse said the school intends to change the schedule of when it hosts various drills. According to Rouse, OPRF is in compliance with all state required drills, which includes shelter-in-place, hard lockdown, soft lockdown and fire drills.

"We're looking to implement a couple more drills in a wider scope, primarily looking at periods during lunch," Rouse said. "It will be an unannounced drill, maybe with a discussion with people to say, 'let's get prepared.' We're going to give just enough so people are on their toes, ready to react."

In an active shooter situation, Rouse said administrators have to make a choice whether to enter into a soft or hard lockdown, which is determined if they believe there is a threat to the building.

"The most difficult part about those drills is when those things happen and we are locked down, the most difficult part for a parent is to stay away from the school," Rouse said. "If parents come to the school, our emergency response folks can't get here."

Rouse recalled a situation last fall in which he said the school entered a lockdown when it was believed a gun was possibly on campus.

"Everybody came to the school," Rouse said. "It really compromised our ability to work with local law enforcement. I had to go out and talk to parents saying I wouldn't be out there talking if I thought we were in danger. It got to a point where we had to allow some students to leave. The message in what needs to happen if we go on lockdown is [for parents] to pay attention to those phones and those messages and do not come to the school."

Board President Jackie Moore said the school should not only develop a plan for the school building, but one for parents to follow if the school enters a lockdown situation.

"Our parents need to know where they should go as well," Moore said.

While a plan to host more safety drills appears likely to move forward, some board members worried what increased drills could do to the social and emotional well-being of its students.

"I get we need to do this, and this is the world we live in, but I still remember my nuclear war drills and hiding under my desk, and that was scarring," board member Sara Spivy said. "I do worry about the effect this has on our students and our staff going through these repeated traumas."

Moore suggested each drill be followed by a "decompression time," which would allow staff and students to process what occurred during the drill.

"I know, in speaking with some students and being in the room during the drills, they have very different reactions," Moore said. "Some of the students are in panic mode."

Administrators said staff and counselors continue to work to identify any students who may be struggling with stress or mental health, with hopes of getting them immediate help to address those issues.

"What I'm most concerned about is identifying those kids that have problems," board member Fred Arkin said. "When you look at the research and data, most of these offenders have had issues. They've had social and emotional issues, and they've been bullied at some point in time. It's about getting those students those supports through our social services and working with them and their parents."

Should an incident occur at OPRF, school security officer Dough Walksler said the school would work closely with Oak Park's fire and police departments. A plan in place called "CommandScope" allows the school to immediately share information with first responders before they arrive on campus, Walksler said.

The CommandScope plan includes the downloading of all emergency crisis plans, building blueprints, shut off valve locations and other pertinent information for staff and first responders in an emergency situation.

"When they're coming here, they're ahead of the game," Walksler said. "I also think, from the bigger picture, it will help save lives in case we are in that type of situation. We can say we've done everything humanly possible, from a school standpoint, to keep everybody safe."

The amended school safety policy is expected to be approved at the March 22 school board meeting.