

A Look At The Complexities of School Safety

By WILL BURNEY · APR 9, 2018

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In the wake of the school shooting in Parkland, schools across Texas have reevaluated the measures they've put in place to keep students safe. But the truth is that what works for one campus will necessarily work for another.

Every day, officers are stationed in most of Waco ISD's schools, but they're not Waco Police. The school district has their own police department. Interim Police chief David Williams says his officers are trained for just about any situation.

"All of our officers are mental health certified. We have our officers with different specialties with different situations. All of our officers are Alert Trained." said Williams.

Alert training teaches an officer how to handle a shooter situation without the need for a swat team. It's the same in several other Texas city school districts, like El Paso and Corpus Christi ISD, that also have their own police departments.

However, smaller districts can't afford their own departments. Like Robinson ISD – about 25 minutes southeast of Waco. These districts rely on their local departments which means coordination. At Robinson ISD, they're using cutting edge technology to do that.

They're one of the first school districts in Texas to adopt a system called Commandscope. It shares information about the school in real-time to a touch screen computer shared with first responders. David Wrzesinski - Director of Special Programs and Safety says it can share live camera feeds, school blueprints, hazmat information and much more.

"It even goes down into the details of how much water pressure is coming from the fire hydrants." Wrzesinski said.

He says this system even works offline, in case of inclement weather or power failure. Unlike Waco ISD, first responders are not in their schools daily, so having all this information gives them the tools they need should they ever have to rush to any Robinson ISD campus. Not just to active shooter situations but any emergency response.

"When I saw this program, I thought this was something that could serve several different needs." Wrzesinski said.

According to Joseph Mckenna of the Texas School Safety center multi-function is key to any school safety plan.

"You want to write a plan that has responses for a host of different events You don't want to spend all your time planning for one incident and then have to have another plan for this incident" Mckenna said.

But for the most rural districts, the time it takes for first responders to reach the school can get pretty long. That's where the debate to arm teachers takes shape. Texas began allowing guns in schools as far back as 2007 and in the wake of recent shootings interest in the program has grown. Mckenna says

“Arming Teachers is certainly an option, and in some cases you have to consider the context. If law enforcement can’t get there for 40 minutes you need another plan. But, if you talk with your law enforcement and they say we can station an officer in your school. It’s not one size fits all.”

Emergency plans are highly specific to each district, because school districts can be vastly different. That’s just one of the things that makes school safety difficult. The problems that face schools is more than just gun violence. Mckenna says that there are daily situations that schools face and the data on prevention is low.

“Because it’s hard to measure prevention, it’s hard to measure what measures we have in place and what stopped this.” Mckenna said.

It gets even more complicated when talking specifically about gun violence.

“The number of incidents is small so you have an issue there research wise to begin with, and then number 2 schools aren’t doing one thing. Right. There not just doing a police department, there not just doing emergency planning, so it’s hard to say when you do actually prevent something what prevented it.” Mckenna said.

According to Mckenna the best thing for any district to do is to sit down with their community and find the option that works best for them.