

**Medford School Committee
Medford, Massachusetts**

**Committee of the Whole
February 10, 2016**

Minutes

The Medford School Committee was called to order by Mayor Stephanie M. Burke at 7:10 p.m. in the Library Resource Center at Medford High School. Members present: Vice-Chairperson Erin DiBenedetto, Secretary Robert E. Skerry Jr., Kathy Kreatz, Mea Mustone, and Paulette Van der Kloot. (6 present, 1 absent). Official meeting participants included Superintendent Roy E. Belson, Deputy Superintendent Beverly Nelson, Assistant Superintendent Diane Caldwell, Police Chief Leo Sacco Jr., Headmaster Dr. John Perella, Vocational Director Dr. Heidi Riccio, all school principals, director of Buildings and Grounds and community members.

All rose to salute the Flag.

Mayor Burke stated the purpose of the meeting was to review our safety and security protocol in light of the recent bomb threat at Medford High School.

The Mayor called upon Superintendent Belson to provide his report. The safety, security, and protection of our students, families, faculty, staff, and citizens is our most fundamental and highest priority. This is not a new topic and we have discussed it on multiple occasions throughout the years.

We have both systemwide and individual school plans, protocols, and practices that have been developed and refined over the years in collaboration with our public safety officials. Regular drills are performed at each location each year to help the school community prepare for an effective response to multi-hazard situations.

The Medford Public Schools takes school security very seriously. We continuously collaborate with the NEMLEC/STARS Regional Program; The District Attorney's Middlesex Partnership for Youth; The Community Based Justice Program and the Fire Safety Program with the Medford Fire Department.

All personnel, contractors and volunteers are CORI checked. Employees are also checked through the Federal fingerprint system.

All our school buildings have the following:

- Documented security emergency plans. Periodic drills are conducted at each.
- CD Rom and hard copy floor plans connected to computers in squad cars
- Surveillance cameras
- Door monitoring and main door buzzer systems.

- Raptor ID and Picture ID systems for students, staff and guests
- Uniformed door monitor staff
- Shared police resource officers
- Walkie talkie and cell phones
- New enhanced phone systems
- 911 access
- Emergency Medical Plans and building based medical staff and equipment
- NEMLEC/STARS response capacity
- Our school buses have cameras and communication devices.
- Various school committee approved policies to guide action

We are prepared to deal with a wide range of emergencies.

The range of emergencies can include:

- Violence
- Medical
- Pupil Services
- Building Equipment Failure
- Weather or Natural Disaster

There can be multiple variations of the above and simultaneous occurrences.

The above mentioned situations can be

- a. life threatening
- b. severe trauma
- c. moderate
- d. pending

The level of threat and nature of the situation determines the required response.

Security plans involve six elements:

1. Prevention – deterrence
2. Assessment
3. Intervention
4. Treatment
5. Communication
6. Re-Assessment

At all times we must remain calm, strategic, and resourceful. We must endeavor to maintain an environment that is conducive for learning and not create a culture of fear. No institution in today's society can guarantee freedom from unpleasant, threatening situations. We can, however, maintain a preparedness that enables us to respond quickly and effectively to unwelcome situations.

In the age of social media we do not control all information that emerges from situations. Too often social media misinforms and influences our obligation to do whatever is necessary to protect persons and property.

When the safety and well-being of all students and staff is at stake, we cannot allow individual preferences to dictate and compromise our response. When parents send their children and youth to school, they entrust us with their care and custody. This simple everyday act removes children and youth from the physical control of their parents. Essentially within limits the school takes on the prerogatives normally reserved for parents. “In Loco Parentis” is not just a descriptive term but a legal one as well. We take this responsibility very seriously. In an emergency everyone counts, but decisions must be made for the greater good and the general well-being of the total group.

We can and will notify parents and other involved persons at an appropriate time when the threat assessment is complete and an appropriate intervention has occurred. To do otherwise is to add a dimension of complication that could impair our ability to implement a successful intervention and/or treatment.

School safety and security in its various forms is not just a Medford issue. It is a topic for all school systems across the Commonwealth and the Nation. We talk frequently with our colleagues and regularly share ideas. The news is filled with faux bomb threats.

Tonight we are privileged to have the Medford Chief of Police here to meet with us and to explain in detail how we prevent, prepare, and respond to threats in our school environments. Chief Sacco is a leader in the field and has been a founder and driving force behind NEMLEC STARS program. We work closely together on all matters of school security.

We also have our school principals here to answer any questions you may have about their individual plans and practices regarding school security.

It would be appropriate at this time to ask Chief Sacco to provide you with his positions and recommendations regarding school safety and security.

Chief Sacco addressed the Committee and the audience in attendance. The Chief emphasized the following:

- There is a long standing excellent working relationship between the police and school system
- School security planning goes all the way back to the Columbine incident in the late 90's
- The STARS program was developed with Medford playing a key role in its formulation
- Medford is an active participant in the Middlesex Partnership for Youth with the DA's Office. Regular meetings are held weekly to discuss possible threats.
- The response to the most recent threat was determined to be low level and it was handled properly consistent with our guidelines and practices.
- The Police Bomb Squad prefers that we do not evacuate as a first step. You never know if the danger is inside the building or outside the building.

- Police have their own resources in place and also have five area response teams through NEMLEC. We also have the benefit of information through the State Police Fusion Center.

The Superintendent explained the sequence of events on February 1st. Dr. John Perella reported to the Superintendent and the protocols were activated. It was a Robocall and consistent with similar calls made at the same time in this area to other schools. There was a twelve person sweep of the building while students and staff remained in their classroom. It was clearly a low level threat.

Member DiBenedetto asked why we didn't shelter in place. Also do we have alert codes and do we practice our responses.

The Superintendent responded that all schools have a plan. We did a version of shelter in place since students were in their respective classrooms. We use plain language to describe our actions. Codes can be confusing. We practice drills during the year.

Chief Sacco responded that we were not the first district to experience this type of threat. We took actions to keep the school as normal as possible while we carried out our search.

Headmaster Dr. Perella and Vocational Director D. Riccio reviewed their assessment and responses to the situation. They both made parental calls by automated system at the supper hour. Teachers were told by e-mail after the search. Dr. Perella indicated that he did not want to disrupt the day since this was such a low level threat. Afterwards there was a re-assessment of our implementation.

Member Kretz advocated for an earlier notification. She said "It was confusing for students." Her son had questions. She would like a written letter following from the schools.

The Superintendent said he met with systemwide administrators on the next Tuesday to re-assess events. The key question was "what would you have me do differently? The group felt the response was good but notification should have happened sooner.

Dr. Riccio said that some students met with counselors to discuss the event. Dr. Perella said "there are always lessons to be learned" (when we reassess).

Mayor Burke asked the Superintendent to present the ten questions he prepared to further advance the discussion.

The questions are as follows:

1. Are measures currently in place sufficient to provide a safe school environment conducive for learning? What else should be in place?

2. When should parents be notified of a threat to the school? When should notification be delayed to avoid interference with official actions?
3. How can we better inform the public of our capacity without compromising security?
4. Will the MPS follow the Massachusetts Bomb Threat Response Guidelines as promulgated by the Massachusetts State Police Bomb Squad and the Department of Fire Services?
5. What should be our social media rebuttal policy?
6. What are the negative scenarios of evacuation when the threat is “low level”?
7. How can we best prepare parents for situations that may occur in a school setting?
8. When would we use dogs as part of our assessment?
9. Do we have access to transportation in an emergency?
10. When does our responsibility to the safety of the group outweigh individual concerns?

The Superintendent commented on each of the questions as he went down the list. He stressed that in emergency situations that it must be understood that the safety of the group outweighs individual concerns. Chief Sacco agreed that we have to limit individual preferences and concentrate on what is beneficial for everybody.

Member Van der Kloot commented that as a long time School Committee person she felt we were well prepared. However, we need to notify better and sooner. She then asked the Chief about the ALICE program to deal with an armed intruder.

Chief Sacco responded that he is sending two officers to train with the program. We will discuss if it is the right fit for our community when they return.

Member Van der Kloot asked “How do we better prepare our parents to understand what we are doing.”

The Superintendent replied that we can’t share everything because of confidentiality but we must use all our means to explain how we respond to these situations. We need to use our cable channel, web page and building level meetings.

Chief Sacco commented that the public must have trust and faith in their professionals. We are highly trained. We can’t reveal all.

The Superintendent cited the “Economist” Journal that warned against creating a “culture of fear”. Life is not perfect and things can happen. We have to live our lives with confidence.

Member Mustone wants a consistent notification policy for all the schools. A districtwide policy.

Superintendent responded that once a situation is stabilized then notification can happen more quickly than it did on February 1st.

Member DiBenedetto commented “we should make these situations into a “teachable moment for the students”.

Also more openness and communication would eliminate the fear that parents and community members have when a situation like this occurs.

She approved of the re-assessment and reflection process as a positive.

There should be a letter to parents from the school by the next morning.

Counselors should be available systemwide to deal with siblings and others.

Superintendent noted that all schools have plans. We can share best ideas and information across the district.

Member Van der Kloot stressed that it is all a balancing act.

The Mayor opened the floor for public comment.

Mr. Bob Candee felt that while he knew that we cared, we didn’t do the right thing by not informing parents earlier. We should have provided a discussion forum. He questioned the viability of our cameras and said the school was too open. “You create fear when you don’t inform.”

Melissa Dubec has a student at the high school and two at the Roberts. She felt there should have been more communication.

The Superintendent said that he is hearing the strong feeling about notification and that we will adjust. He responded to Mr. Candee that 90% of the cameras were working well.

Suzanne Hensen (parent) urged the administration to speak to the students. Also to ban parking at the curb areas outside the high school.

On the motion of Member Van der Kloot that the Superintendent report back to the School Committee on how we would improve community notification by the first meeting of March 2016.

Vote:

Yes: 6

No: 0

Absent: 1

On the motion to adjourn at 8:37 p.m.

Vote:

Yes: 6

No: 0

Absent: 1

Respectfully submitted:

Robert E. Skerry Jr.
Secretary