

Gateway High School Observations & Recommendations

November 3, 2022

The school shooting on Monday, October 24, 2022 was a wake-up call for Saint Louis. Like any emergency situation, the shooting highlighted our strengths (the quick response by the St. Louis Police Department to the Arsenal & Kingshighway scene) as well as exposed areas that need our serious and immediate attention. Hopefully, review of those areas will result in subsequent changes by the appropriate entities. This document is rooted in a collective concern for our children and is based upon talking with many people on the day of the shooting, mainly at the Gateway High School location, from parents to administrators. A small, ad hoc group of volunteers who were at the scene met shortly after the tragedy to discuss our individual experiences and prioritize them into helpful recommendations.

Logistics:

For the most part, given the short notice and circumstances, staff and SLPS security responded in an organized manner. There were multiple sites that needed clear leadership-CVAP, Schnucks and Gateway HS. At the Gateway site, there was no clearly identified logistical team in charge, forcing those on the scene to improvise a disjointed process for parents to retrieve their children.

Additional observations include:

- There seemed to be a missed opportunity to use the lockdown time to address the fears and concerns of students, not only at Gateway but throughout the district and especially for the middle and high school students who were more aware of the situation based upon their access to social media.
- There were no identified point people at strategic points, e.g. the front door area. There were no personnel at the entrance to Gateway High School (McRee Avenue) to guide traffic to appropriate parking. Security staff, administrators and volunteers rallied and quickly developed a plan on the fly to manage emotional family members, anxious students waiting to be released to family, members of the media, and others.
- The “horseshoe” at Gateway made traffic control difficult and created a snarl for family members, law enforcement, volunteers and SLPS staff to navigate. In the event of a “copycat incident” at the Gateway location or another emergency, moving people and vehicles would have been a challenge.
- As the crowd grew, it became increasingly difficult to hear because there was no available sound system. (Jamala rounded up a megaphone that was very helpful as instructions were provided to parents.)
- There were concerns expressed by several staff members and others about “protecting” Gateway’s campus and whether the Gateway location should have been publicly disclosed. This alerts active shooters or copy-cat shooters to a location making it a vulnerable target.
- The area in front of Gateway was open and basically unsecured. Anxious parents waited for hours to retrieve their children while being bombarded by the media during that time. The scene was chaotic and volatile.
- There were no handouts for parents that recommended counseling resources. Had not the St. Louis T had their agency’s trauma literature on site, there was nothing to put in the hands of worried parents.
- The release of students to their parents/family members presented a couple of challenges:

A.) sibling groups were not always identified and released at the same time. Parents signed one child out and then waited for sometimes exceptionally long periods before the sibling/family member they were also picking up could come down.

B.) Special needs students were placed in a disorganized environment that broke from their usually structured day. Some were in wheelchairs; some were clearly triggered by the noise and confusion. Their caregivers had to make decisions as to leave the child and find the parents outside or to keep the student with them as they navigated through the crush of people.

C.) ESL students and their families had difficulty in both communicating their needs and understanding what was going on.

D.) Additional staff were needed to monitor halls once students were called over the intercom. Some students were seen wandering around the hallways and had to be rounded up while their parents were outside waiting for them and becoming increasingly agitated.

- FBI was observed removing students from classrooms but not sharing with staff which students they were taking, where they were taking them or what the nature of their involvement. The agents were not forthcoming with information when questioned. Underaged students cannot be interviewed/interrogated without a parent or guardian being present.
- Some parents came to pick up students who were actually absent that day. We needed a cross-checking of that day's attendance and a way of communicating absences during a crisis.
- The 9-1-1 system had already been a focus of criticism before the shooting. Many students, teachers and parents were put on hold when they call during the active shooting.

Recommendations

The overarching recommendation is that minimally the St. Louis Public Schools and the Public Safety Department (Police, EMS) constitute a multijurisdictional team, adding other agencies as needed. This team would be composed of trained personnel and be deployed during such emergencies. The team would be easily identifiable to parties both internally and externally (eg. vests or armbands). These entities probably have their own crisis response teams but in the case of a school shooting, there must be a coordinated response across departments and agencies with common training around first aid, de-escalation, etc.

Additional recommendations:

- The school district must have a clear plan in the case of active shooters and regular drills. While there was some semblance of a plan at CVAP (per the code phrase "Miles Davis is in the building"), it appeared that staff and students were not clear about what to do once the code phrase was activated. Some remained in secured classrooms, others ran from the building and a few even jumped from windows.
- The site for student pick ups during emergency situations should take into consideration its location and capacity to secure it quickly and safely. Parents should not be waiting or students released in an open and unsecured space. Non-schools sites such as City community centers or churches should also be considered.
- Efforts to take care of students, staff, volunteers and others should be intentional. Snacks, water and restroom facilities should be available.

- A plan for students with special needs must be created that takes their mental and physical abilities into consideration and when parents or guardians can pick them up.
- There must be a clear, trauma-informed training and plan for onsite and aftercare for all school personnel and parents. It is important to minimize emerging behavior problems by students that become disruptive, as was the case in the week following the tragedy.

We offer these observations and recommendations in the spirit of cooperation. We are available for further discussion of this document or participation in any processes already activated by the situation. We are unconditionally committed to the safety and well-being of our children.

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