



High School Incident, Security and Communication



By Bob Sherburn

The News Story

“A dozen brawls involving nearly 200 students erupted at Patterson High School on Wednesday, prompting about 30 sheriff’s deputies and California Highway Patrol officers to descend on the campus to quell the violence.”

The Details

During a 20-minute student break around 9:30 a.m., a fire alarm was pulled as a distraction to an attack on a student. Campus administrators, teachers and security dealt with a small number of fights that included about 12 students. It took less than 15 minutes to apprehend the aggressors and get students into a safe classroom environment. To make the situation worse, there was a report of a gun on campus. The school was put into a “lock down” state until the situation could be understood. The local Sheriff’s Department and CHP responded quickly to help stabilize the situation. They created a security zone around the campus to prevent movement into and out of the school. Very quickly a crowd grew to about 400

people at one entrance to the school. They had been contacted by students with cell phones, some stating there was a riot. At this point, district administrators were working with site administrators and the Sheriff’s Department including a gang task force. It is now 10:20 a.m. Because of the report of a gun, the lock down continued and firearm sniffing dogs were called to the scene. It would be about an hour for the dogs to arrive. At this point, district administrators, the Sheriff’s department and the gang task force started working on a communication plan.

District administrators thought it was important to get a message out to parents via our Connect-Ed system as soon as possible, but we needed good information. The Sheriff’s Department and Gang Task force were giving us conflicting advice. One would say, “Get info out” and the other would say, “Wait until we have more information from the search.” Now it is 11:00 a.m. and the district has no message to send and the people at the entrance of the campus wanted answers. The principal, vice principal and counselors did their best to keep the parents calm but after a short time the crowd grew anxious. At this point there were traffic issues which required district employees to direct traffic as the sheriff deputies were all securing

the campus. This continued until 1:30 p.m. when the sheriff’s deputies and dogs confirmed the campus was clean. The person reported to have a gun was found off campus, had not been on campus this day and had no gun. At this point, the district sent a message via Connect-Ed to parents notifying them the students would be let out in phases beginning at 1:45 p.m.

What the District Learned

Communication is imperative. Communication with staff, parents, the community and the media plays an important role in the type of reactions received from the community. Because the media will use information from any source, be proactive in communicating what you want the public to know.

Having a site plan in place is very important. The site did a very good job of calming the situation and getting students into a safe classroom environment quickly.

The District’s Actions

Preventive Measures: The district came up with measures to suppress this type of incidence in the future. The district added a full-time student resource officer to the high school site. They increased the number of campus supervisors from two to five and will upgrade the campus camera

system to improve the capabilities to pan and focus around the campus. The campus is sided by four streets. To create a more secure area, the district will install fencing to create one main entrance to the campus and in future incidents the roads will be blocked to the public. A youth development committee made up of district employees, city employees, the fire department and police department was created. The committee will work together to create gang awareness, after-school activities and graffiti eradication. Students have opportunities to create problems in the local parks after school so the district worked with the City Parks and Recreation Department to schedule city employees to perform park maintenance to coincide with the end of the school day. Also, the district created a long-term education plan involving guest speakers on the subjects of motivation and gang awareness.

Response Plan: The district also created a plan to ensure better communication at the school sites and with the community. The high school has a radio system but it was not an integral part of communication. This system was updated and more radios were added. The district created an emergency response team that includes backups for all team member positions. The district will have one spokesperson that will deal with the media and communication to the community. A team of district office staff will assemble to take incoming phone calls. There will be a specified area for the media to assemble and parents will use staging areas off-site where they can hear the latest information. All communications will be coordinated to go to the media, parents (via a call system) and, in real time, on our webpage. Communication will occur early to create as much calm as possible.

Overview

Create a response plan that includes a response team listing the duties of each member. Each member must have a backup so all responsibilities are covered if someone is away from the district. It should also include a communication component that ensures the community gets information quickly. Be proactive in preventing incidents by educating students and creating positive activities for students ousted of the school day. ■

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