

School district, community react with stepped up security Tuesday

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Farmington Public Schools reacted quickly to the national tragedy which unfolded with Tuesday's new school day. While middle and high school students learned about the tragedy at the World Trade Center in New York City and at the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., school officials asked building administrators not to mention it

to preschool/elementary school children unless a student asked about it.

"It's important to emphasize that children are safe and that if they need more information, their parents will be able to explain it to them tonight."

That was the message contained in a memo delivered about 9:30 a.m. by Estralee Michaelson, director of Safe/Drug Free Schools, which came from Farmington School

Superintendent Bob Maxfield's office. It announced a general lockdown situation.

"There have been no known threats against any school or governmental building in the state of Michigan," the memo read. "We are defining this situation as a precautionary measure."

Personnel were directed to keep students within the building and ideally in the classroom. They were instructed not to accept deliveries.

Students were permitted to go to lunch and bathrooms within the building. Parents were permitted to pick up their children if they chose, and dismissals remained on schedule. Students were to be supervised closely as they moved through the building.

At North Farmington High School, students watched news reports.

"We've let the kids watch this," said North Farmington High School Principal Rick Jones. "We feel it's important for kids to know the truth, to get accurate information."

Crisis teams, as well as all building staff, were told to be

alert to anyone, students as well as staff, requiring additional support.

In a phone call Tuesday afternoon, Michaelson declined to discuss additional information about these crisis teams but said they were part of an organized and publicized Safe Schools project.

On high alert

"We are on high alert," Michaelson said. "We're trying to take care of one another right now. We have kids who are very emotional right now, parents who are very upset."

About 10:30 a.m. the school district announced it was canceling school board meetings, other evening meetings and after-school activities because of "world events."

School Superintendent Bob Maxfield grappled with the question of whether school should be closed Wednesday. Some people raised issues of whether there would be a safety threat.

"We have strong safety plans," he said. "They were also carried about irresponsible finger pointing at certain ethnic groups. This is such a horrible

thing for us to deal with."

His decision: "School is the best place to be. School is a safe place, emotionally and physically."

Maxfield visited different schools throughout the day. He found a range of feelings from confusion to disbelief. By the end of the day his opinions matched those of a Farmington High School teen with whom he spoke.

"It's hard, I don't even know what to think," Maxfield said.

Adults need support too, he said, as the full impact, the bombarding of images and the personal stories become known.

"We will need to take care of each other. We need to challenge our consciences," he said.

That will take time. Maybe as much time as it took to come to grips with the attack on Pearl Harbor that escalated World War II, he said.

John Barrett, Farmington High School principal, said the day went well. "They are pretty calm," he said. "I'm proud of the kids."

Even so, Barrett noted the tragedies "hadn't sunk in yet" with some students. "We have a generation of kids who have been brought up with catastrophic movies," he said.

One student couldn't understand why the evening basketball game was canceled, he said.

"A couple of kids wanted to talk to somebody," Barrett said. "Some kids came down because they have relatives in D. C. or New York."

Local security

In the central part of town, Farmington Public Safety Director Gary Goss kept abreast of news reports. Goss didn't need to put anyone on standby because off-duty officers are always on standby, he said.

In a paid, call-back department, members are cross-trained to serve as police officers, firefighters and emergency responders. They carry "minitors," which are small radio receivers that emit a distinguishable tone to alert the public safety officers, he said.

"Nothing has happened (here)," Goss said. "We have no installations in the city, no federal building. We don't even have a post office anymore. We don't have major targets in Farmington. Farmington Place is our biggest building. This is a horrific situation, no question about it. We will be keeping an eye on certain buildings."

Goss, too, drew comparisons with Pearl Harbor. However, he is of the Vietnam era and served in the Marine.

"It is similar to Pearl Harbor but then you knew who the enemy was," Goss said. "Time is on our side. We don't have to react immediately. I'd like to see the country come together and strengthen our resolve. We need to pull together as a nation. Time will heal. I have a firm belief the perpetrators will be brought to justice."

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