

Orange County Schools Safety Task Force

Meeting Summary

Thursday, March 23, 2023 at 5:30 PM

**Donna S. Baker Meeting Room
Whitted Human Services Center
300 West Tryon Street, Hillsborough, NC**

Members Present: Ari Schein, Cassie Rice, Kate O'Boyle, Richard Bradford, Evan Sredzienski, Jean Hamilton, Earl McKee, Andre Richmond, Tina Sykes, Chris Atack, Paul Bell, Andy Simmons

Alternates Present: Andre Stewart, Patrick Abele, Andrew Poole, George Griffin

Members Absent: Evelyn Estrada Hernandez, Rani Dasi, Nyah Hamlett, Monique Felder

Alternates Absent: Tracy Holloway, Jonathan McVey

(Note: Student members from Chapel Hill Carrboro City Schools had not yet been determined.)

Facilitator: Jay Bryan, Retired District Court Judge

Staff Present: Greg Wilder from the Orange County Manager's Office

1. Welcome and Introductions

Commissioner and Task Force Co-Chair Earl McKee welcomed everyone to the meeting and expressed appreciation for members' willingness to serve on the Schools Safety Task Force (SSTF). Commissioner and Task Force Co-Chair Jean Hamilton also welcomed everyone and thanked them for their service.

Task Force members and alternates who had not attended the first Task Force meeting on February 23, 2023 briefly introduced themselves to everyone.

2. Approval of February 23, 2023 Meeting Summary

Co-Chair McKee asked if there were any changes to the February 23, 2023 Meeting Summary that was distributed with the meeting agenda materials. With no changes, Task Force Member Richard Bradford motioned to approve the Meeting Summary. Task Force Alternate Patrick Abele seconded the motion, and the motion was approved unanimously.

3. General Overview of Safety and Law Enforcement Practices and Activities at Schools Regarding:

- Protests/Demonstrations
- Active Assailants
- Public Access to School Property During School Hours Review of the Task Force Charge and Timeline

Co-Chair McKee introduced the topic, noting that representatives from the four law enforcement agencies on the Task Force would speak, followed by representatives from both school systems. It was further noted that Facilitator Jay Bryan had mailed three questions to assist the speakers in framing their comments. Those questions were:

- What is happening within the schools to address these safety areas?
- What is one example of school safety challenges in the three areas?
- How do law enforcement and the schools coordinate to protect schools and address these safety areas?

Task Force Member Tina Sykes shared information regarding efforts related to schools and Protests/Demonstrations, noting that pre-planning meetings occur for an upcoming event, increased law enforcement is provided, and there is a debriefing after an event. She noted that school safety challenges included educating people on criminal behavior versus anti-social behavior, and explaining the constitutional and statutory limitations placed on law enforcement. She added that communication was key in coordinating school safety and having a clear understanding of everyone's roles, and that pre-planning meetings with all the agencies involved was important.

Regarding school safety activities related to Active Assailants, Task Force Member Sykes commented that Certified School Resource Officers (SROs) were present in all Orange County Schools, including the elementary schools. She noted that SROs conduct annual Active Assailant training utilizing the Orange County school campuses and that the Sheriff's Office has a field training program for new deputies which includes time at Orange County schools to become familiar with school layouts. She also referenced the Say Something anonymous reporting system as well as SROs being on sight for in-person reporting. She noted school layouts and social media as challenges in this area. In preparation for potential events, Task Force Member Sykes noted the ongoing and frequent communication that occurs and quarterly public safety meetings involving law enforcement, fire department personnel and emergency medical services. Annual training also occurs for school resource officers and administration, and there are planning sessions involving schools and the Sheriff's Office in preparation for an upcoming event involving schools and public. In addition, after an event, an after-action meeting occurs discuss the pros and cons.

Regarding safety activities related to public access during school hours, Task Force Member Sykes noted the presence of School Resource Officers in the building, the Visitor Management System, and efforts to eliminate risks associated with the public on school campuses during the school day, such as no school/teacher work day on Election Day.

She noted that educating students and staff concerning the importance of limiting access to buildings was a challenge. Coordinating to protect schools included: ongoing and frequent communication; planning sessions involving schools and the Sheriff's Office in preparation for an upcoming event with multiple meetings with all agencies involved; signage, and conducting after-action meetings to discuss what went well and what was learned from events

Task Force Member Andy Simmons shared that Captain Sykes had addressed all the relevant issues and that there was not much additional to share. He commented that the Hillsborough Police Department partners with the Sheriff's Office in school safety efforts and events and with the school safety staff and administration.

Task Force Member Chris Atack stated that Carrboro law enforcement coordinated with the Chapel Hill Police Department, the Sheriff's Office and school safety staff. He referenced the assignment of School Resource Officers (SROs) in Chapel Hill Carrboro City Schools (CHCCS) middle schools and high schools and that SROs were not located in the CHCCS elementary schools. He noted that relationships were critical to planning for and ensuring safety.

Task Force Member Atack continued that Carrboro provided investigative support to the schools and helped with threat assessments, and noted that public access to school facilities was a challenge to address. He added that Carrboro law enforcement conducted both in-service training and field training to plan for and address school safety concerns and events.

Task Force Member Paul Bell shared that the previous speakers had covered most of the issues and that there was not much additional to share. He confirmed that Chapel Hill law enforcement utilized the same strategies to support the schools and safety.

Task Force Alternate Andre Stewart shared that Captain Sykes had covered the topic for everyone. He noted that communication was key, and daily communication was important. He commented on the public access concerns related to schools and referenced visitor management, schools closure on election days, and meetings that occur on school campuses. He referred to the Standard Response Protocols and the five steps utilized to coordinate work between the schools and law enforcement, and noted that safety plans are shared with the CHCCS Board of Education.

Task Force Alternate Patrick Abele expressed appreciation to law enforcement, including the 911 center, for their efforts related to school safety. He noted that a definite challenge for schools is the unknown demonstration or protest that might occur and its impact on students, staff, school access and the school property. For known events, school safety plans are in place, but not for unknown events. He also noted that safety planning for school board meetings is different from planning for schools since schools have limited public access, and school board meetings have different protocols and processes. He continued that Orange County Schools (OCS) staff work with law enforcement both before and after events and are always looking for ways to work better together.

Task Force Alternate Andrew Poole echoed that most of the issues had already been mentioned and that OCS worked well with the Sheriff's Office. He referenced the Center for Safer Schools as a good resource for training and learning about first-time events and efforts. He shared that addressing the public access issue was a challenge when working in older facilities with outdated designs and that communication and collaboration were the biggest factors for safety.

Task Force Alternate Abele noted that one significant challenge was school threats and reminding students that they were not jokes. He referenced the need for additional mental health resources, as students making threats often involves other factors leading to those threats.

Co-Chair McKee then opened the floor to questions and discussion. Task Force Member Bradford asked about efforts during unexpected events. Task Force Member Attack commented that the school was in charge of the property and could choose to provide access or not. Law enforcement focused on the streets and adjoining properties and attempted to guide the event participants, balancing school needs and the right to protest.

Task Force Alternate Poole added that you can ask "what if?" every single day, and that the work of safety is dealing with unexpected events. He noted that every event is different and it is hard to plan for every single one.

Task Force Member Kate O'Boyle asked about the SROs not being in CHCCS elementary schools. Task Force Member Attack shared that CHCCS elementary schools previously included SROs, but not now.

Task Force Alternate Stewart commented that CHCCS looked at safety in layers, and that SROs are a single layer. He noted that there were mental health staff in the schools, and that CHCCS used a lot of different things through those layers to prepare for the unknown.

Task Force Alternate Abele added that OCS did have SROs in schools, including elementary, which provided a solid foundation. He noted a need to address school parking lots as well as the question of where does school property begin and end and the associated road right-of-ways. He added that the public is very confused about use of school facilities, such as tennis courts, and why schools were locking gates and not providing the available lights so the public could use the school facilities. He indicated an interest in the group hearing from attorneys and the North Carolina Department of Transportation about road right-of-ways, and the struggle between first amendment rights and the interruption of school access/functions.

Task Force Member Ari Schein read from North Carolina General Statute 36A, and commented that he had previously suggested the Task Force pursue presentations from attorneys. Task Force Alternate Stewart noted that the 36A provisions were included in CHCCS policy.

Co-Chair Hamilton commented that understanding how 36A might be interpreted, understood and translated into an ordinance could be explored.

Task Force Member Bradford asked about the County's Facility Use Policy as referenced in a memo written by County Attorney John Roberts. It was noted that Policy did not apply to school facilities and property, and that schools had their own independent policies.

Task Force Alternate Abele indicated that one significant current challenge for OCS was the public accessing schools buses during bus routes. It was noted that this scenario was currently not a problem for CHCCS.

Task Force Member Bradford asked about a permitting process for protests/demonstrations. Task Force Alternate Abele responded that it would be helpful and provide an opportunity to be prepared and plan for safety needs. Task Force Member Simmons shared that the Town of Hillsborough did have a permitting process and that some are simply not going to go through the process. Task Force Member Bradford added that a permitting process may just keep the honest people honest. Co-Chair Hamilton commented that a permitting process may actually benefit those protesting with additional safety measures in place and law enforcement present. Task Force Member Simmons added that it would give permit seekers the opportunity to request additional safety resources and allow for schools and law enforcement to plan.

Additional discussion by Task Force members noted that CHCCS did not have a specific policy regarding SROs in elementary schools, and that SROs were focused on safety issues internal to school facilities.

Co-Chair McKee inquired about the enhanced control of school access points. Task Force Alternate Stewart shared that CHCCS was working with students, staff and visitors on that effort, as well as facility improvements. Task Force Alternate Abele noted that entry vestibules and limited access to exterior doors were pursued, noting that Hillsborough Elementary's exterior door access presented a greater challenge.

Concluding the topic discussion, Task Force Alternate Abele shared that OCS developed Event Safety Plans and utilized Crowd Safety Managers for large events. Task Force Alternate Stewart noted that CHCCS assigned a Point Person with law enforcement for after-hours events.

4. Additional Discussion on Task Force Meeting Locations

Co-Chair McKee moved the discussion forward, noting that in follow-up to the discussion at the February 23, 2023 Task Force meeting, there had been some concerns raised regarding the Task Force meeting at schools.

Task Force Member Simmons commented that he had concerns related to the Task Force meeting at schools. A school facility would not be a controlled environment like Whitted, and having the opportunity for the public to freely roam a school during a Task Force meeting was a concern and would potentially make a soft target even softer.

Task Force Member Bradford noted that meeting at a school would not necessarily be beneficial.

Co-Chair McKee stated that meeting at Whitted, the Bonnie B. Davis Center in Hillsborough, and the Solid Waste Operations Center in Chapel Hill may be preferred options.

5. Future Task Force Meeting Dates/Schedule

Co-Chair McKee stated that the Task Force's hard deadline for completion of its work was the end of June 2023. After some additional discussion, the group generally agreed to reserve the following future meeting dates and locations:

- April 13, 2023 – Baker Meeting Room, Whitted Center, Hillsborough – 5:30 pm
- April 27, 2023 – Bonnie B. Davis Environmental & Agricultural Center Meeting Room, Hillsborough – 5:30 pm
- May 11, 2023 – Solid Waste Operations Center Meeting Room, Chapel Hill – 5:30 pm
- May 25, 2023 – Baker Meeting Room, Whitted Center, Hillsborough – 5:30 pm
- June 8, 2023 – Solid Waste Operations Center Meeting Room, Chapel Hill – 5:30 pm
- June 22, 2023 – Baker Meeting Room, Whitted Center, Hillsborough – 5:30 pm

6. Other Issues

Co-Chair Hamilton referenced a previous concern regarding the Task Force charge also including school staff. After some brief discussion, Co-Chair Hamilton shared that she would pursue an update to the Task Force charge with the Board of Commissioners.

Co-Chair Hamilton inquired regarding the Task Force's interest in a representative from the Center for Safer Schools making a presentation to the group. After some brief discussion, it was determined that a presentation would be pursued, potentially for an April 27th meeting. A presentation from the school attorneys, the Sheriff's Office attorney, and the county attorney would be pursued for an April 13th meeting.

Task Force Member Cassie Rice asked regarding the Task Force's opportunity to discuss mental health issues. Co-Chairs Hamilton and McKee noted shared that mental health issues were not within the Task Force's limited charge and that other efforts were occurring within the County to address mental health needs.

Co-Chair McKee inquired with members regarding the Task Force providing an opportunity for public comments at some point. He shared that public comments had not been a feature of previous task forces on which he had served. Task Force Member Bradford confirmed that had been his experience as well. Task Force Alternate Abele commented that the Task Force included students and that should be factored in as any opportunity for public comments was considered. Co-Chair Hamilton suggested that the Co-Chairs discuss this matter further.

7. Meeting Evaluation

Judge Bryan asked for feedback from Task Force members on the first meeting. Several members shared positive feedback.

Adjourn

With no further items to discuss, the Task Force adjourned at 6:58 pm.

This Meeting Summary was approved at the April 13, 2023 Schools Safety Task Force meeting.