

In aftermath of tragedy, schools evaluate security

As it did on most U.S. campuses, the American flag flew at half-staff on the grassy area of Doyle Circle on the campus of College of Notre Dame of Maryland, Baltimore, April 17 - one day after 32 people were gunned down some 300 miles away at Virginia Tech University in Blacksburg, Va.

Across the nation, learning institutions from elementary schools to colleges reacted to the tragedy and faced their own vulnerability.

"I want to assure everyone that we are reviewing all of our safety and security procedures ..." wrote Mount St. Mary's University, Emmitsburg, president, Dr. Thomas H. Powell, in a letter to school families. "I have met with the Mount's emergency management team to fully review our plan to handle such emergencies. You should know that the plan is current and very detailed ... Over the new few weeks we will be running drills and adding new equipment for more rapid notification concerning emergencies."

Dr. Ronald J. Valenti, superintendent of schools for the Archdiocese of Baltimore, e-mailed principals of schools in Baltimore City and nine counties encouraging them to have a heightened awareness and sensitivity in the aftermath of the Virginia Tech tragedy.

The superintendent said an emergency plan has been in effect since before Sept. 11, and the division of facilities management drafted and published a reevaluated plan nearly four years ago. Principals and school staff undergo extensive, detailed training about what to do in a particular situation. Dr. Valenti said that schools have certain code words they utilize over the intercom system, so as not to alarm students.

An archdiocesan pastoral response team of 15-20 individuals is also in place to respond to crises, he said.

When situations do arise, the superintendent said, "quick thinking is necessary."

“You can’t go to a plan book and look it up – you have to know what to do if it happens,” he said.

To ensure effective communication with public schools, principals try to establish a good working relationship with local government and some schools have security guards if their finances allow.

In a message to the community at Loyola College in Maryland, Baltimore, Loyola president Father Brian F. Linnane, S.J. wrote: “At times like these, I am particularly mindful of the responsibility we, all share for campus security. Our campus safety systems – including the professionally trained staff who are on constant patrol 24 hours each day, closed-circuit camera systems, card key access to residence halls and other facilities, education and prevention activities and comprehensive communications tools – are fundamental to maintaining the kind of environment we desire for living and learning.”

Awareness seems to be the “name of the game,” according to Paul Fer, assistant principal of St. John Regional Catholic School, Frederick. All outside doors are locked, visitors are buzzed in, a security camera is monitored in the office, and faculty and administration members carry walkie-talkies to communicate in the case of a disaster, he said.

The College of Notre Dame has learned a big lesson post-shooting, said Theresa G. Wiseman, director of media relations for the all women’s college.

“The situation at Virginia Tech reinforced College of Notre Dame’s policy of immediately addressing situations in which a student exhibits a behavior that may be a threat to others or to herself,” she said.

The college’s crisis management plan has been in effect since 1998 and a team meets regularly to review and update the protocols, she said. Security officers patrol the campus around the clock and emergency blue lights scattered throughout the campus can be used by students and staff in the event of an emergency.

Not all schools employ, or can afford, security personnel.

Situated on a physically open campus, Loyola Blakefield, Towson, hosting grades

6-12, is one of the few high schools in the archdiocese to employ a professional security company around the clock.

“Our first duty is to provide as safe an environment as possible to ensure that our faculty and students can teach and learn in an atmosphere of protection and security,” said the director of communications, Kathi O’Conor. “With the knowledge that we as schools are vulnerable to outrageous and unexpected acts of violence at any time, we have a comprehensive crisis management plan in place to provide us with the tools to anticipate unexpected occurrences and quick-response procedures to be followed in the event of a campus disturbance.”

Loyola Blakefield reports a regular practice of school-wide evacuation and lockdown drills.

But as Dr. Valenti pointed out, “No matter how secure you are, someone will know how to breach it.”

It’s a sad commentary about the world we live in,” he said.

Catholic Review writers Meghan Walton and George Matysek contributed to this story.