

AKLAND COUNTY

Oxford schools upgraded security again after report found holes. Is it enough?

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Nearly two years after 10 students and a teacher were shot inside Oxford High School, the district's top leadership said school buildings have been fortified with artificial intelligence technology, fail-safe procedures have been added to threat assessments and staff has been trained in preventive approaches to quell student behavior before it turns deadly.

Widespread changes — some made in recent months since an independent assessment of school security was released in May — have put Oxford Community Schools ahead of any other Michigan school district in terms of prevention, the district's top leader told The Detroit News.

"We have added training, information and people, so everybody is going to be more aware of the signs to look for, the interventions that need to be put in place and the need to do it as early as possible," Vickie Markavitch, superintendent for Oxford Community Schools, said in an interview. "I think that the mental health interventions — even more than safety and security interventions we are doing — is going to be the key to prevention."

"I feel very strongly that we are way further ahead on the prevention scale, whether it be safety or mental health, than other districts around us," Markavitch said. "Which would be normal for any district that went through what Oxford went through. We should be way up further on the scale."

Yet as the Oxford community braces for a long-awaited report into the deadly tragedy on Nov. 30, 2021, expected later this month, some people say it's just not possible to trust that

the district's rebuilding efforts are enough or meaningful.

The bottom line for some Oxford parents, such as Andrea Jones, is that until they fully understand and know the truth of what happened on the day of the shooting, the mistrust will remain.

"And you don't just get that back," Jones said. "We need something tangible that shows us exactly where the failures occurred. Until we know exactly what those failures were, how can we know everything is on track?"

The Michigan school district was the scene of a gun attack by a student on Nov. 30, 2021, that killed four students — Madisyn Baldwin, Hana St. Juliana, Justin Shilling and Tate Myre — and injured seven others, including a teacher.

On Oct. 4, the district released an update outlining the changes made in the last five months to physical security and to school assessments for threats and suicide risk cases based on recommendations issued in May by Guidepost Solutions, an investigations, regulatory compliance, monitoring and security consulting firm hired by the district to assess security conditions. The document also outlines the work the district has yet to do.

Of the 55 recommended changes in the May report, Oxford Community Schools has completed work in at least 15 areas and has ongoing work in another 19 areas — more than 60% of the recommendations. The status of 21 remaining areas are pending, to be determined or happening in the 2023-24 school year.

School security expert Kenneth Trump said many of the recommended changes are best practices that he would expect to have long been in place in a school district, and he was critical of the relying on AI systems in general, saying they still face challenges and miss some weapons like knives.

"The artificial weapons detection systems and clear backpacks are security theater," Trump said. "There are a lot of questions about the limitations of AI weapons detections in schools."

Recent security upgrades in Oxford

One of Guidepost's biggest criticisms of the district was that its threat assessment teams only inquired about access to firearms involving troubled students half of the time after the mass shooting. The consultant's 179-page report recommended threat assessment teams ask about

weapons access and document that information in every assessment as required by the district's own policy.

Markavitch said in April that the district adopted a new system called Navigate360, which moved a threat assessment and suicide risk assessment checklist from paper to digital.

"There were inconsistencies in how people were filling out paperwork. Sometimes, they filled out every single square. Sometimes, they skipped something," she said. "When Guidepost did the analysis in how many times we asked about weapons, it was not high. We went back to the reports, and we went back to the people."

Markavitch said in some cases, a student was wanded by security for weapons, but the staff didn't check a box indicating that the weapons check was done.

"There are four places where you have to record that a weapons check has been done. ... We changed the form, so if you don't fill out that space, you can't go any further," she said. "We should be getting to 100% there."

New rules adopted by the district since May require that a school resource officer is included in every threat and suicide assessment. That's an update to a policy set in January that requires at least two staff members to decide on whether a threat assessment or suicide risk assessment goes forward. The other staff member can be a school administrator, a family-school liaison or a teacher who knows the student well.

"Pre-tragedy to post-tragedy, staffing went up. We hired more counselors, social workers, psychologists. That staffing up is helping get this done," Markavitch said.

The district has a new rule this school year that all interior doors will be closed and locked at all times at the secondary level — grades 6-12 — and that doors are closed, but not locked, at the elementary level. Guidepost recommended that the district place classroom locking hardware in all buildings.

Markavitch said all staff have been told about the new rule.

"It's a new expectation, so there is going to be a learning curve. Staff are going to forget. They are going to have to be reminded. We are going to have to build this into how we do business every day. It's going to have to become a habit," Markavitch said.

"Sometimes when I walk by a classroom, if a teacher is teaching and having a wonderful lesson and the door is open, I smile, I wave and I just kind of close the door. ... It's a learning curve," she said.

Last month, the district resumed its active shooter preparation training — known as ALICE — with high school students, which had been put on hold since the attack nearly two years ago. Markavitch said the first training with students across the district resumed in September with the Nightlock door system, a barricade for doorways.

"At the high school, we have to be aware that 50% of our population was there (at the shooting) that day. Our teachers were there that day. We need to go forward. And we need to go forward gently," she said.

How threats can 'slip through the cracks'

Work that remains to be done in the district includes adding more bullet-resistance laminate exterior glass on all main entry points and other locations, putting in nuisance alarms, installing sensor technology in the courtyard areas where students are not supposed to be and having an audio expert test the mass notification system.

Trump, the school security expert, said threat and suicide assessments are critical areas of attention for schools, but the level of effectiveness rests with how well practices are followed. Trump's firm, National School Safety and Security Services, conducts K-12 school security and emergency preparedness assessments across the nation.

"If administrators, staff, and safety officials consistently follow the policies, procedures and plans, threat assessment can be an effective tool," said Trump, who reviewed Oxford's changes. "... But (if) there is inconsistent or haphazard implementation, serious threats can slip through the cracks.

"Too often ... we see all of the boxes checked on paper, but ... school officials are not actually doing in practice what they claim on paper that they are doing," he said.

Trump said while bullet-resistant film may provide some benefits, his company has found the details need to be reviewed with the local fire official to ensure the film does not create unintended consequences with fire code and emergency fire department access delays in areas where the film is applied.

"It can be costly and becomes an issue of where should you actually put the film," Trump said. "I am also surprised they would publicly list with such specificity in their public report where it may be applied. They have just told anyone and everyone with ill intentions where the film might be applied."

The district has adopted several high-tech security measures since the shooting. At the district's middle and high schools, that includes Evolv, a weapons detection system, and ZeroEyes, which is artificial intelligence or AI gun detection software that works with existing digital security cameras.

It is now adding Drift Net's KnowWhere system, which provides first responders with two-dimensional and three-dimensional mapping of a school and uses sensors with AI in each Drift Net device that can see and hear gunfire and issue an automatic lockdown.

Drift Net's owner and CEO Aaron Coles said he designed the system specifically to be placed inside K-12 schools after the 2018 Parkland, Fla., school shooting. In that attack, a police officer stayed outside the school during the massacre in which 17 people were killed.

"Our system gives law enforcement a crystal-ball look. They can see a (real-time) 2D and 3D look at the school, a quick floor plan look to see where people are and where the threat is. Is there a firearm, what type, were rounds fired?" Coles said. "It's there to give law enforcement the confidence they need to respond efficiently. They are just as much at risk of being a casualty as the victims inside the building are."

Another big difference compared with other security systems, he said, is the camera/detection device uses AI.

"It's processing in real-time and (issuing) real-time notifications," Coles said. "It results in immediate detection and notification a few seconds between seeing something and sending out an alert."

Trump, the security expert, cautioned that AI weapons detection systems have limitations, such as difficulty in detecting knives.

"We have yet to see a school using such systems 24/7 with fidelity of implementation. And these systems are known for false alerts on Chromebooks, water bottles, and other items routinely carried by students to school," Trump said.

Markavitch said Drift Net's system is expected to handle mass notifications, surveil for weapons and operate the district's visitor management system.

"We believe that if the system delivers everything it is supposed to deliver, all of this will be taken care of. We are running it like a pilot and redundantly in case it does not work. We will evaluate it. We are putting it in all of our buildings — common areas first, classrooms second," she said.

Oxford parents still have questions

The second detailed report — also by Guidepost, due before Oct. 30 — will examine the events that unfolded before, during and after the deadly shooting.

Numerous missteps by school staff were revealed during court hearings for the shooter, including school administrators not searching his backpack that contained the gun and releasing him back to class after his parents declined to take him home. Within minutes of leaving the school office, the teen began his rampage.

Before the attack, an Oxford High teacher saw the shooter looking at handgun ammunition on his cell phone and reported him to other school officials. He was told it was an improper classroom activity. While in English class, the shooter was caught watching a shooting video on his cellphone, which the teacher reported to higher school officials. In math class, the teacher found his worksheet with drawings of a gun and the words "Blood everywhere." Below the gun drawing were the words: "The thoughts won't stop" and "Help me."

The school community in Oxford remains on high alert for potential threats, which have "spiked exponentially" across the region in the years since the shooting, according to Wayne County Prosecutor Kym Worthy.

One threat "to shoot up" Oxford High School in August led to criminal charges against a teen from Maryland. The 17-year-old is charged in Maryland juvenile court with threats of mass harm, improper use of a telephone and other crimes. Sheriff's officials said they were alerted to the Maryland threat after receiving an OK2Say tip from the Michigan State Police.

Jones, whose son graduated in June from the district and who has a freshman at the high school now, said the update from the district on Guidepost recommendations is too vague to

understand if meaningful changes have occurred. It has left Jones with more questions, many of which she has asked Markavitch to address via email.

"Training is ongoing, but we don't know the percent trained or if it's mandatory," Jones said. "Are we practicing all of these procedures regularly so everyone knows the roles, and if something escalates, who do they go to?"

She said the district still needs to do more work to improve communications and earn back trust.

"We should be an example for the other districts because we have eyes on us, and we need to make sure this doesn't happen again. Those (changes) were done due to failures that occurred," Jones said.

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