

WHITEHALL CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT
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Whitehall – Birthplace of the U. S. Navy – www.railroaders.net

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To the Whitehall Community,

The terribly tragic school shooting in Florida as well as the recent Arrest in Fair Haven have prompted me to reach out in an effort to support our students, educators and families as we attempt to process all we are hearing and seeing in the media over the last 48 hours.

Many parents are asking “what is in place at our school if this were to happen? What would they do? How would they protect my child? How would I be notified?”

New York State requires each building principal to instruct and train students and staff in various types of emergencies so they know what to do in each situation. Every person responds differently when adrenaline kicks in under a stressful situation, so each building conducts a minimum of 12 drills per year. Eight of these drills are evacuation drills (four of which include using fire escapes or secondary means of egress), and four of the drills are lockdown drills, which would be used in the event of an active shooter. Additional drills are done if the district hosts summer school.

Every building has a plan in place for lockdowns, fire/evacuation, hold in place, lockout, and shelter in place. The adults in each building are trained how to respond to each of these situations to keep children safe. Staff have developed a system for accounting for each student in the building and communicating with each other from different parts of the building.

The school district uses an emergency alert system (SchoolMessenger) to communicate with parents and guardians in the event of an emergency. In this day of social media and instant communication, parents may read posts prior to hearing from the school. While the district is committed to communicating as fast as possible, it is equally important to communicate the facts. The district may send several notifications through the emergency alert system as the situation unfolds and more facts become clear. The district may also choose to use its official website to relay vital information. It is important to remain patient and calm in these instances as you await communication and instructions from the school district. Parents should refrain from calling or traveling to the school during times of emergencies.

What You Can Do to Prepare for Emergencies

Notify the school if/when you change your phone number and/or email address

Keep the district’s website handy on your mobile device

Ask your children about the drills they do in school and what their roles are

I’ve included a few items/perspectives to consider when/if you choose to discuss this tragic and sensitive event with your child:

How do I explain these senseless acts of violence to my children without scaring them?

We all want to protect our children and keep them from hearing about the horrors of the world, but we live in a day and age in which violence permeates our lives. We encourage parents to have age-appropriate conversations with their children and use these opportunities to teach important lessons.

Watch the news with your children. Interpret events in a way in which they can understand at their age. Children absorb your emotions, so if you are upset or nervous, they will be too.

Limit exposure. The 24-hour news cycle might lead children to believe that traumatic events are an everyday occurrence. Children need a limit to the amount of graphic sounds or images they are exposed to.

Take their fears seriously. Encourage your children to talk about what they may have seen or heard. If you notice a change in their behavior, they may be trying to process the information. Help them understand their fears and concerns are normal by sharing how you felt when you heard about the event.

Learn together. Some older children may want to learn more about why an event happened. Be present when they research and talk it through.

Stick to your routine. In a chaotic world, a normal schedule can be comforting to children. If transition times like bedtime are problematic, be patient and understanding as children may not verbalize they need comforting.

Look for the positive. Highlight the heroes in tragic events, and talk about ways in which the community worked together to help each other.

Encourage play. Children process worries and fears through play. Allow them to play make-pretend as long as it doesn't get aggressive.

If you see something, say something. Report serious indicators of mental illness to law enforcement, including changes in behavior, anger problems, excessive and foolish comments about guns and shootings, etc. If you hear or see something online (on social media or blogs), report it – it is the job of police to talk to those individuals.

Be alert to your surroundings. If you're in a public place, take note of the exits and entrances. If you can watch a quick video about how to respond in an active shooter situation, that is the least you can do. If you can run through a reality-based training, that is even better.

Unfortunately, violence isn't just a school problem or a law enforcement problem or a gun control issue. This is a community issue that demands the involvement and collaboration of all to prevent, respond, and help each other through it. We urge you to access your school social worker and counselors if your child needs additional support.

In an effort to be proactive and vigilant about this item, the principals and I are planning to host a meeting with local law enforcement in the very near future to allow us to review our current safety procedures and gain additional advice from law officials. The safety of our students, faculty and staff continue to remain our highest priority.

Sincerely,

Patrick