

Preparing for a worst-case scenario

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As kids get ready to return to school next week, school administrators and local law enforcement are also focused on preparation. But how can they be prepared for the worst situation in a school — a violent attack?

In an effort to be prepared for just such a scenario, members of the Webster County Sheriff's Office, Niangua Police, Missouri State Highway Patrol and Missouri Department of Conservation met at the Marshfield High School Friday for a training session on how to handle active shooters or intruders in a school. Also participating were school personnel from Marshfield and Niangua. The training focused on responses from the schools and law enforcement, and how the two could work together during such an event.

"Awareness is really the big thing," said Jeff White, one of the training instructors with Strategos International.

The training touched on a variety of topics, including communication between the schools and law enforcement, responding in different areas of the school grounds, how teachers should react to a shooter and more.

"What we want to do is learn to integrate the school and law enforcement all into one," White said of the training's goal.

To help with that, having the training in Marshfield High School helped both school personnel and law enforcement become more familiar with the building, its exits and on-site tools.

"It's good to keep the communication open," said Alan Thomas, Marshfield's assistant superintendent.

They also discussed previous school shooting incidents, such as in Columbine, Colo., and Jonesboro, Ark. Though the thought of such a thing happening in Webster County may be difficult to consider, White advocated being prepared even while hoping it never happened.

"It's a horrible world that these people are forcing us into," White said. "But if you don't 'what if' these things in your head ..."

"It's hard to think tactically," he continued. "It's hard to think worst-case scenario."

White said he works with schools and churches on being prepared for possible attacks, as both types of buildings are generally not designed or prepared for tactical maneuvers, which can make it difficult for law enforcement to respond against an attacker.

Dr. Mark Mayo, Marshfield's superintendent, agreed, saying schools are not built to be like prisons.

"They're designed to be open spaces, inviting to students and inviting to parents," Mayo said.

School administrators and law enforcement had each done some preparation on this issue in the past, but had not previously come together in such a way. Webster County Sheriff Roye Cole organized the training.

"We're just doing our best to be prepared," Cole said, adding he'd like to do a similar training session in the southern portion of the county, involving the schools and law enforcement agencies at Rogersville, Fordland and Seymour.

Administrators at Marshfield and Niangua agreed the training made them consider and adapt policies.

Sherry Mayo, a principal at Niangua, said of the training, "It does make you tweak stuff."

She said Niangua has had an action plan in place for emergencies for several years and also practices intruder drills at the school.

"You hope it never happens at your school," she said.

"If we didn't do this and something happened, I couldn't look a parent in the eye," Mark Mayo said.