

Springfield students to undergo safety training

SPRINGFIELD — How public schools should deal with the threat of a shooter long has been a topic of debate nationwide.

Some believe teachers should be armed. Others think bullet-proof windows and doors would help.

Amid the discussion, some schools are training their students and staff to act without the benefit of weapons or special barricades.

Beginning Dec. 7, the Springfield School District will train all students in ALICE, which stands for Alert, Lockdown, Inform, Counter, Evacuate.

The training system, developed by the for-profit Ohio-based ALICE Training Institute, tries to help people respond to and survive an attack, according to the program's website. The approach is an alternative to the established and more passive hunker-down approach in the face of an attack.

Currently, during a possible shooting, district staff are trained to stay in their classrooms, lock their doors, move students away from doors and windows, and remain quiet until the all-clear is given, the district says.

But that practice is unrealistic and out of date, district spokeswoman Jen McCulley said.

"If we are committed to keeping kids safe, we need to be proactive and realistic," she wrote on the school website. McCulley also said traditional lockdowns have been shown to create targets for a violent intruder.

The Springfield School District's school law enforcement officers and other local law enforcement agencies recommend ALICE, McCulley said.

One of the program's proponents, Eugene Police Lt. Doug Mozan, said there are three basic ways to respond to a shooter.

"There's escape, which is a great response; there's a lockdown with a barricade; and then there's some sort of counter strategy," Mozan said.

Mozan said ALICE is based on an active rather than a passive response to an active shooter.

"We're not trying to teach people how to be ninjas, but we have to be realistic about the fact that if the threat is right in your immediate midst and you don't have any viable options, then you need to be ready to use distance, movement and distractions to overcome the threat, or at least to think about making it more difficult for the threat to hit you," he said.

Mozan said distractions can cause shooters to miss, so if a student or staff member finds themselves in the middle of a shooting, distracting the shooter, or what ALICE describes as "countering," is a good move.



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Make it difficult

“Countering” an active shooter, as described by ALICE, can be any form of interrupting the shooter, with noise or other distractions.

“What we’re proposing is that when people are in that situation, they take the shooter off of their game by making it more difficult,” Mozan said. “If the shooter has to dodge flying objects or deal with people moving around, making noise, trying to get out of the room, it’s not going to make them as easy of a target as those sitting in a corner for instance.”

But many education and law enforcement officials realize that training students for a shooting scenario can be frightening and can be difficult.

“Introducing the curriculum at an age-appropriate level is really important because you don’t want to create fear,” Springfield Police School Resource Officer Darin Vetter said. “Because fear works against you.”

Vetter said current lockdown procedures are outdated.

“Lockdowns were created in the ’80s to deal with drive-by shootings,” Vetter said. “And we’ve seen that the lockdown-only method just isn’t going to work anymore.”

Vetter said the need for a student to try to distract or otherwise “counter” a shooter could arise.

“In the event that the shooter is in the classroom, what other option do you have?” Vetter said. “Counter is your worst outcome, because that means the gunman has gotten in. That’s why we always teach ‘evacuate first,’ but not countering is what’s getting people killed because a stationary target is much easier to hit.”

Vetter described countering as yelling, moving around or throwing things.

Staff already trained

McCulley said about 1,300 teachers, administrators and other staff in the Springfield School District were trained in - ALICE before the start of this school year. The district has been talking for the past 18 months with local law enforcement about the training.

The ALICE program is costing the school district a minimal amount. The materials are available at no cost, and the district said it paid “a few hundred dollars” for two administrators to be trained in the system, the district said.

While the majority of district staff were excited about ALICE, some were nervous, McCulley said.

“People were really apprehensive about what it (the training) might actually be,” McCulley said. “It’s an awful topic to have to talk about, but the reality is that being prepared is always more important.

“The goal is to have everyone in this general area on the same page with the same methods. If it’s consistent, then it’s easier for law enforcement to respond, it’s easier for the substitutes — so that anyone in the building or in the area will be able to understand what’s going on.”

The training will be tailored to each age group, McCulley said, with customized plans for elementary, middle and high school students.

Suzanne Price, the director of elementary education for Springfield, said ALICE training will be about three simple steps for K-5 students.

“The first step is to listen to the teacher,” Price said. “Then get away from danger, which is different than the traditional lockdown where you stay put, and the third step would be to make it even harder for danger to reach you.”

Price said classes will practice evacuations later in the school year.

Different training

Kevin Ricker, director of secondary education for the district, said training for students in middle and high school would be mostly the same as elementary training.

“Differentiation as you move from levels is relatively minor and we want to make sure it’s age appropriate, especially emotionally,” Ricker said. “Secondary (students) will get a little more of the counter (section of ALICE). ... We’ll just be a little more thorough in our descriptions when walking through each of the scenarios.”

Ricker said with secondary school students the discussion and training scenarios will be more open.

Other area districts also are in the process of incorporating ALICE training within their schools, including Eugene and Bethel.

Eugene School District spokeswoman Kerry Delf said the district has implemented training for staff of all high schools, most middle schools, some elementary schools and the district office. The remainder of Eugene’s elementary and middle schools will complete training between now and the end of the school year, Delf said.

“The trainings are for all staff in a school — licensed (such as teachers and counselors), classified (such as educational assistants, custodians and food service workers), and administrators (such as principals),” Delf wrote in an email.

Bethel School District spokesman Pat McGillivray said staff within the district were trained in ALICE in October 2014. The following August, additional newly hired staff also were trained. Classified staff and students are next on the list for training, McGillivray said.

Follow Alisha on Twitter [@alisharoemeling](#). Email alisha.roemeling@registerguard.com .

ALERT: Sound an alarm using plain and specific language to warn others of the danger.

LOCKDOWN: Doors should be locked to give all involved time to react. If a secure location is available, ALICE shows how to better barricade a room and how to better prepare for other strategies if needed.

INFORM: Communicate the intruder’s location and direction using any means necessary (such as PA announcements or walkie-talkies).

COUNTER: Interrupt the physical act of the shooting by making noise or other distraction. This could mean throwing anything available to hinder a shooter’s aim. Note that this does not mean fighting, but is rather a last-ditch effort to avoid being a sitting duck.

EVACUATE: When it is safe, move from the danger zone. Get as many people away as possible. ALICE training provides techniques for safer and more strategic evacuations.

For more information: alicetraining.com.

Two informational meetings have been scheduled to take place prior to student training to give parents the chance to review the material and ask Springfield Police officers and district administrators questions. The first meeting will be at 5:30 p.m. Nov. 30 in the Springfield High School Auditorium, 875 Seventh St. The second will be at 5:30 p.m. Dec. 2 at in the Thurston High School Auditorium at 333 58th St.