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EDUCATION

Designing a School to Stop Shooters

One suburban Dallas elementary school is designed with fears of a shooting in mind; students prepare for nationwide antigun protests Wednesday



The new George W. Bush Elementary near Dallas was designed to protect children from an active-shooter scenario. PHOTO: MISTY KEASLER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By Tawnell D. Hobbs

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ST. PAUL, Texas—Designers of the new \$19 million George W. Bush Elementary School had more in mind than education. The blueprint for this school in an upper-class Dallas suburban neighborhood was intended to stop a school shooter.

Sparse landscaping and numerous windows in front provide a clear view of approaching visitors. Entry is a multistep process. Visitors enter a vestibule and must be buzzed inside the main office. From there, a government-issued ID must be scanned through a system called the “Raptor,” which alerts for child molesters and anyone flagged to keep out.

Wide hallways devoid of nooks make it harder to hide or avoid video surveillance that is viewable by school administrators as well as police officers in patrol cars.

“Every time there’s a school shooting, we try to learn something from them,” said Ian Halperin, spokesman in the Wylie Independent School District, where Bush Elementary is located. The district has regular lockdown and emergency drills, full-time security officers trained in active school shooting situations, and strong ties with local police, including holding regular meetings and providing officers with keycards and access codes so they can rapidly enter schools.

Such designs and procedures are becoming more common among the country’s 98,000 public schools amid rising concerns about how to stop would-be shooters and improve student safety, particularly after the shooting last month that left 17 dead at a Parkland, Fla., high school.

Since 1990, there have been 32 shootings in schools where at least three people were killed or injured, according to a Wall Street Journal review. Students in schools throughout the country are expected to participate in nationwide antigun violence protests on Wednesday.

School administrators are pairing law-enforcement personnel or safety experts with architectural firms to design new campuses and renovate older ones.

A school that opened last year in Quincy, Ill., allows a security officer to lock down building sections with the push of a button, said superintendent Roy Webb. “We can mitigate a lot of risks.”

Last week, Florida Gov. Rick Scott signed a bill that includes \$400 million for improvements to school safety and mental-health services in the wake of the Parkland attack. Minnesota’s

governor is seeking \$20.9 million for the same purposes, while Maryland's governor is allocating \$175 million for improvements, including panic buttons, security cameras and funding for school resource officers and counselors. Federal efforts to ramp up school safety are also under way.

Security experts warn of the limits of safety measures. "When you have someone who's a committed shooter, they're going to find a way to get on the campus," said Ronald Stephens, executive director of the National School Safety Center in California. "I just tell schools to do everything you can."

Inside Bush Elementary, the hallways are typical of a grade school, with student artwork and inspirational messages such as "Making dreams come true" lining the walls.

On a recent day, students moved through the building in single file, walking across a big presidential seal on the foyer floor—all under the watchful eye of discreetly placed security cameras.

Bush principal Maricela Helm said the security measures don't take away from the inviting feel of the school, which opened in 2016 and has room for 900 children. "We've developed a good culture, while being more alert, more ready," she said.

Classroom doors all have a built-in window—a feature that security experts say provides safety by allowing teachers to easily observe hallway activity.

But the district is considering covering them. In an active-shooter situation, the windows would allow police to see inside, but they also would offer the same advantage to a shooter.

Mr. Halperin, the school district spokesman, said the local police department is weighing in on the window issue. Meanwhile, part of the lockdown procedure at the school involves students staying out of view and teachers covering the windows, he said.

The added security measures offer comfort to some Bush Elementary parents.

Jennifer Edmondson, whose son attends first grade there, said she likes the safety that the school provides, even with the extra steps that are required for her to just enter the building.

Ms. Edmondson said the strict procedures make her feel both that her child is safe and that the school is paying attention. "I love it," she said.

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