



El Dorado County Office of Education

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CRISIS PLANS CARRIED OUT

Louisiana Schnell Elementary School held a lockdown drill shortly after school started near the end of August 2010. The morning of February 2, 2011, all three Placerville Union School District schools went into lockdown. This time it was not a drill. The staff knew by the sound of the secretary's voice as she initiated the lockdown that something was very wrong. Schnell School Principal Sam LaCara had been mortally wounded; however, at the time of the lockdown, staff had no inkling of what tragedy had occurred.

School staff and students responded to the crisis calmly and according to their plan. According to one kindergartner, "We knew just what to do because we practiced it." While students may not have known the seriousness of the situation, they followed procedures as their teachers directed. Teachers locked doors, turned off lights, and directed their students to sit under their desks. First grade classes were on the field at recess at the time the lockdown was called. Teachers took their classes into the school library where school Librarian Rhonda Reeves helped the teachers keep their 84 first graders calm and occupied with reading, games, quiet singing, and watching "Dumbo."

Classes were locked down for approximately three hours. Children passed the time with drawing or quiet reading, if the classroom had enough natural light. Some teachers, like Beth Peterson, were afraid to use their television to show videos in case the intruder (who at that time was unknown) could see into their classroom due to the light. The fourth and fifth graders in her class seemed to know there was something bad happening because Mrs. Peterson gave them the "good paper" to draw on. Vicki Kennedy's fifth graders used art materials and played board games quietly

under their desks. Her classroom faces an open lawn area where Sheriff Deputies gathered.

Students could see them outside the window in a video game-like, surreal scene.

El Dorado County Sheriff Deputies made “welfare checks” during the lockdown. They visited each class to be sure teachers and students were safe and to ascertain whether or not the class needed assistance. Superintendent Dr. Nancy Lynch was also present and visited every classroom to talk with teachers and students and to prepare for the evacuation of the campus.

Students were evacuated to the El Dorado County Fairgrounds that afternoon; even though the suspect had been apprehended, and students were not in danger. However, the school had become a crime scene making evacuation procedures necessary. As classes prepared to evacuate, teachers lined their students up in alphabetical order. Teachers took class lists with them in order to take roll and account for their students. Beth Peterson’s students were very concerned about being able to do homework while at the fairgrounds. She kindly told them, “No homework this week!” Younger children were excited when told that they were going to the fairgrounds, thinking there would be carnival rides and games, hoping that this was an impromptu field trip.

Placerville Union School District buses, El Dorado Transit buses, and buses from other local districts delivered students to the fairgrounds. Head Start and State Preschool classes located at the Bliss Center on the Schnell School campus transported preschoolers in vans. The main building at the El Dorado County Fairgrounds had been set up with orderly rows of tables and chairs, enough to hold 411 elementary students and 36 preschoolers. Some children had not eaten lunch and were hungry as they arrived to peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, goldfish or animal crackers, pretzels, cheese, and baby carrots provided by the El Dorado County Office of Education’s food service department. A pallet of water bottles was donated by Placerville Raley’s. “I have never been allowed to eat this many animal crackers at one time in my whole life,” quipped a fourth grader.

Teachers supervised their classes in the large room. Staff from the Placerville Union School District office, the El Dorado County Office of Education, County Mental Health, the Boys and Girls Club, and law enforcement, including Chaplains, assisted with student supervision, preparation and

serving of snacks, and parent check out. Fifth grade teacher Vicki Kennedy said teachers felt supported when they arrived, seeing the number of staff from the other agencies who were present. Although teachers didn't know everyone personally, Kennedy said, seeing familiar faces helped them feel stronger. By this time, many teachers knew their beloved Principal had been shot.

Children kept busy with paper and crayons while awaiting parent pickup. A Warden from the Fish and Game Department brought her canine with her. Students enjoyed petting the dog and talking to her. As the afternoon wore on, the preschoolers needed to get up and move around. Two preschoolers found a creative way to use their energy – they lay down on the cement floor, flapping their arms and legs. They were making “pretend snow angels”. Before leaving with his parent, one of Beth Peterson's students asked again, “Is there really no homework?” Children still didn't know what had happened at school that day when parents picked them up. Several parents later stated that they were grateful their child didn't know; they preferred to be the ones to tell them what had happened to Mr. LaCara.

Thanks to the immediate and calm implementation of the school's crisis plan by staff and with the assistance of local law enforcement officials, Schnell School students remained safe during and immediately after the tragic incident of February 2, 2011. In the days, weeks, and months that follow, parents, staff, and students will work through the healing process together.