

# Rigby Middle School Shooting Post-Incident Review Report

## Scope and Focus

This document is not intended to create a coherent fact picture, determine causality, or assign blame. The sole intent of the document is to capture lessons learned and make recommendations for safety and security resources in keeping with the statutory mandate of the Idaho School Safety and Security program (ISSS) ([ID 33-5906](#)).

Due to the narrow scope of the task and the ongoing juvenile criminal investigation, criminal investigative records were not obtained by the interviewers, nor were requests made for educational records held in the possession of the school. Ultimately these records may become available, however the information contained therein was not available to the ISSS program at the time of the interviews and may confirm, refute, or alter the assertions contained within this document.

## Methodology

One Analyst from the Idaho School Safety and Security program responded to the site of Rigby Middle School within a few hours of the events of the shooting on May 6. Additional Staff arrived the evening of May 6 following the conclusion of response actions for the first operational period. Staff assisted with the recovery planning on May 7-10 as well as the execution of the recovery efforts on site from May 10-14. Additional intermittent coordination and support was also provided through the end of the school year.

Following the close of the school year, the office manager, and an analyst unaffiliated with the response efforts undertook a series of interviews with key staff and community responders focused on capturing lessons learned. These interviews took place June 1-4 and with a follow-up series on August 9-10.

The format of the interviews varied by location and by interviewee, but broadly the interviews were informal, and dialog was encouraged with a continual framing around the areas of prevention, mitigation, response, and recovery.

## Overview

The response to the Rigby Middle School attack demonstrated the effectiveness of a planned, coordinated, trained, and exercised emergency operations plan. As with any incident, there will always be lessons to be learned and as more information becomes available those lessons may grow in import or detail, but the commitment to provide a safe place for students to learn and grow remains constant.

## Lessons Learned

**Preventing acts of targeted violence within K-12 schools requires means and methods for gathering information of concern, evaluating information of concern, and developing mitigation strategies based on the assessment of the behavior.**

Rigby Middle School (RMS) staff and other adults reported that students had knowledge of concerning behaviors prior to the incident which were not reported until after the shooting. One of the accused attacker's classmates observed a drawing that depicted a gun and a school, and several students saw concerning postings on social media.

Other students also observed changes in behavior of the accused attacker, including changes in appearance, affect and social engagement. These changes coincided with the transition from elementary to middle school, so the change in behavior was not apparent to RMS staff as the accused attacker was in her first year at RMS as a 6<sup>th</sup> grade student. This information all came to light after the shooting during post-incident interviews.

Research indicates that in most cases of school violence, students are aware of concerning behaviors before school officials are, as was the case here<sup>1</sup>. A confidential tip line helps to bridge the gap between student awareness and staff awareness of safety concerns. RMS did have a tip line available at the time of the shooting, but it was not emphasized to students during the 2020-2021 school year. Consequently, the new 6<sup>th</sup> grade students, which included the accused shooter's classmates, likely had little awareness of the service.

### *Recommendation 1*

It is recommended that schools implement confidential tip lines that can be used by students and others to promptly report concerning behaviors so they can be quickly assessed and managed. For a tip line to be most effective, sustainable maintenance efforts must be undertaken to ensure that each year students are aware of the use of and importance of the tool. Effectiveness of a tip line rapidly decreases through inattention and attrition if marketing efforts are not maintained.

ISSS offers all publicly funded schools in Idaho free use of Idaho's statewide tip line: [See Tell Now!](#) Use of the tip line includes a dedicated point of contact, technical assistance, ongoing marketing and a 24/7

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<sup>1</sup> Prior Knowledge of Potential School Based Violence: U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Secret Service, May 2008: [https://rems.ed.gov/Docs/ED\\_BystanderStudy.pdf](https://rems.ed.gov/Docs/ED_BystanderStudy.pdf)

hotline staffed with trained professionals to assess tips for urgency when they are received – all at no cost to schools.<sup>2</sup>

#### *Recommendation 2*

One of the important lessons learned from research on both averted and completed acts of school violence is that attackers have used social media to communicate their intentions prior to a planned attack. If this kind of information is brought forward, an attack can be prevented, as happened in several averted acts of school violence. In the case of the RMS shooting, students reportedly saw social media postings from the accused attacker that were concerning but did not report the information prior to the attack.

It is recommended that Idaho consider implementing a social media threat detection system for schools in conjunction with the Idaho State Police Fusion Center. The Ohio School Safety Center has incorporated public threat detection capacity to help schools identify threat-specific social media communication. This tool provides the State of Ohio capacity and helps to protect all schools in Ohio by alerting schools and allowing them to take appropriate action if a threat is made towards them by any person on certain social media sites.

#### *Recommendation 3*

Once information of concern is gathered, it must be evaluated through structured professional judgment to make the best recommendations to support student safety. Research indicates that the most effective method for doing so is by use of a trained multi-disciplinary threat assessment team. In this case, the school district had received training on behavioral threat assessment team development and possessed an operational framework for threat assessment, evaluation, and management. However, a threat assessment was not conducted because there were no behaviors of concern reported to staff in advance of the incident that would have warranted such an assessment. If information had been reported, the plans and procedures for assessment and management of student behavioral threats was present, practiced, and evident.

It is recommended that all schools develop the capacity to receive and evaluate behavioral threat information using evidence-based effective practices. Many resources are available to assist schools in the development of the threat assessment process and team. Team development training is available at no cost to all Idaho public schools through the ISSS program as well as through national partner organizations.

**Pre-planned coordination between schools and local response agencies is critical to a smooth transition between onsite response efforts and first responders arriving on scene.**

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<sup>2</sup> Following the incident at RMS, several tips were reported to the See, Tell, Now! statewide tip line from unrelated school districts. These tips resulted in several successful law enforcement investigations of school threats.

The Jefferson County School District and local law enforcement have a strong and historic commitment to the School Resource Officer (SRO) program. This commitment had several collateral benefits on the day of the incident at RMS. Many of the first responding officers had previously served as SROs within the district and were familiar with district operations and school emergency plans, making it so there was a clear understanding of roles and responsibilities from the outset of the response.

SROs also provided a critical link in the development of a district-wide response framework. The program helped to train staff and develop site-specific operations plans as well as conducting an exercise program for staff and students. As a result, on the day of the incident, the response by students and staff was well-coordinated and largely built on the foundation provided by the longstanding commitment to the SRO program by both the school and local law enforcement agencies.

#### *Recommendation 4*

It is strongly recommended that all schools coordinate with local emergency responders in the development and practice of school safety plans. This coordination may take place in a community safety committee, through the development of an SRO program or through reserve deputy programs, as described below.

#### *Recommendation 5*

In addition to SROs deployed within the school district, the Jefferson County School District and Jefferson County Sheriff's Office had in place a formal reserve deputy program. This program further supported strong coordination in an emergency by cross-training designated school staff to local law enforcement agency standards. Whereas SROs are primarily law enforcement officers within the school, Joint Reserve Deputies are primarily school employees, with certified law enforcement standards and training.

This cross-training and coordinated exercises are of tremendous benefit and are conducive to an effective, coordinated response:

- Responding law enforcement immediately recognize designated reserve deputies because of the training and exercise requirements of the program.
- Designated reserve deputies are effective response assets within the schools because they receive standardized equipment and training in interagency coordination, emergency communications, legal issues, and a variety of other topics; and
- Reserve deputies meet standard weapon qualifications, are trained, tested, and are authorized to carry firearms on campus as deputized law enforcement officers.

During the RMS incident, reserve deputies were not in the immediate area of the attack but were able to respond rapidly to assist with response coordination. Several post-incident interviewees substantiated the importance of the close coordination established through the SRO and Joint Reserve Deputy program, in the response and reunification phases of the day.

It is recommended that schools and districts explore the opportunity to partner with local law enforcement through a Joint Deputy Reserve program. It is further recommended that the State of Idaho explore strategies to increase training and support for SRO partnerships.

## Uniformly trained and exercised emergency response procedures result in fewer casualties during acts of targeted violence.

Jefferson County School District incorporated a standardized response protocol that was uniformly adopted, trained, and exercised for many years prior to the incident. The response protocol adopted by the district preceded the development of the Idaho Standard Command Responses for Schools (ISCRS) protocol for the State of Idaho, but it incorporated many critical elements of effective response.

The response protocol adopted by the district allowed for some level of individual autonomy of response based on the immediate circumstances. Regarding lockdown or evacuation during an attack, staff were expected to make the best decision for student safety. Once lockdown procedures were initiated during the incident at RMS, students who were already outside did not reenter the building. Most classrooms were secured and students remained in place until the scene was stabilized. However, one class was evacuated from a securable classroom. Upon exiting the building, the fleeing students were fired upon by the attacker who had also moved outside.

When a district authorizes autonomous responses from staff in an emergency, it becomes critically important to provide a framework for good decision-making. A degree of flexibility is required for emergency response, but all decisions must be based on situational awareness. Research indicates that students secured behind a locked door are much safer than students in open hallways or common areas during an attack. The decision to leave a known safe space for an unknown space is not to be approached lightly or without an acknowledgement of significant personal risk to all involved.

### *Recommendation 6*

It is recommended that schools use standardized protocols, language, training, and exercise for their emergency operations plans. All schools in Idaho have access to the Idaho Standard Command Responses for Schools, which incorporates all the elements above. Resources, videos and information about the system can be found at <https://schoolsafety.dbs.idaho.gov/idaho-standard-command-responses-for-schools/> Plan templates for each response can be obtained by contacting the ISSS program directly.

### *Recommendation 7*

It is recommended that when staff are trained on options-based response for emergency situations training must include situational awareness and tactical decision-making.

### *Recommendation 8*

Lockdown training and exercises within the Jefferson County School District had been in place for many years. This ongoing maintenance of effort substantially increased the effectiveness of the response during the incident at RMS. An ongoing commitment to training and exercise supports a predictable, effective response.

It is recommended that all schools develop an exercise schedule to practice and evaluate lockdown procedures at least annually in coordination with local first responders.

## Clear communication is necessary for effective response and depends on adequate procedures, training, and tools.

The first areas to lockdown during the RMS incident were classrooms within the immediate area of the attack. Nearby staff secured their areas and attempted to contact the front office so the front office could initiate lockdown procedures, as this was the established protocol at the time. Even though the telephone system at the school had the capacity for an individual telephone to notify the entire school, it was not widely known or trained. As a result, the sitewide command to lockdown went out later than it could have had staff known and been trained on how to utilize this function on their phones.

### *Recommendation 9*

Where applicable, it is recommended that all staff be empowered and trained to initiate emergency commands from their room phones to save critical response time.

### *Recommendation 10*

The lockdown notification was delivered from the front office via the PA system. Interviews with staff revealed that the notification phrase was “lockdown, locks, lights, out of sight. Lockdown, locks, lights, out of sight.” This phrase proved to be cumbersome to remember and to relay during an actual emergency. While the mnemonic device may be helpful during training, it is recommended that a simpler phrase be used (e.g., lockdown, lockdown, lockdown).

### *Recommendation 11*

As a component of the response, the co-located high school campus was directed to “lock-out” as a precautionary measure. The directive to “lock-out” meant the high school was supposed to lock its exterior doors to safeguard people inside and continue normal operations. The response commands of “lock-out” and “lockdown,” which sound similar, were confused, and resulted in significant information gaps as the high school locked down instead of locked-out. For example, because the high school locked down, they did not answer school phones as this was the protocol for lockdown situations. This communications blackout persisted at the High School through the initial stages of the response.

It is recommended that emergency commands are dissimilar in sound to avoid confusion. For example, under the ISCRS system, the equivalent directive to lock-out is referred to as a “hall check,” which is easily distinguish from “lockdown”. Notably, the group that developed the emergency command phrases used by the Jefferson County School District has since dispensed with the command to lock-out, and now uses other phrases that don’t sound similar any of the other commands. Jefferson County School District has already transitioned to the new notification phrases.

### *Recommendation 12*

Overall, there were few areas of the middle school campus unaware of the lockdown notification, either due to hearing the actual gunshots or the notification to lockdown. One significant area disconnected from the middle school public address system were the portables 300 and 301. These portables were used by the high school at the time of the incident and were disconnected from both PA systems. Once the attack moved outside, the occupants of the portables were able to observe some of the events but did not hear the lockdown notification. Staff in the portables were able to render aid to a wounded student, but the students remaining in the portable classrooms had not been notified to lockdown.

It is recommended that campuses assess their grounds to determine if there are any coverage gaps in their notification systems. Gaps found should be remedied to ensure clear and timely communication.

*Recommendation 13*

School telephones were not an effective means of communication due to the high call volume at the middle school, and the lack of unaffected personnel to staff phone lines. Several facilities within the district reported failures of both incoming and outgoing phone calls due to the high volume. As a result, external communication was primarily accomplished by the district's emergency notification system, which incorporated mass text, email, and telephone calls to parents. While this did not reach all parents in all circumstances, it reached more parents in a more efficient manner than any single method would have.

It is recommended that schools and districts employ multi-modal, mass communications tools to notify parents, employees, and off-campus students in the event of an emergency.

*Recommendation 14*

The first priority of communication to parents at RMS was to contact the emergency contacts of injured students and staff. Shortly thereafter, parents of uninjured students were notified using several methods. In the reunification center, students were encouraged to contact their parents using their personal cell phones and to share their phones with friends so they could do the same. In addition, a mass notification was sent to all parents informing them that if they had not been previously contacted, their student was confirmed to be safe. This helped to reduce anxiety for parents of uninjured students and allow for a much smoother reunification process.

It is recommended that parents be notified about the status of their children as soon as it can be determined. This can be accomplished through a variety of methods, including those described above.

*Recommendation 15*

There was no interoperable radio system in effect at RMS at the time of the incident. The location of the incident resulted in a multi-site, multi-agency response with no unified communications plan. Lacking a unified communications system resulted in most communications requiring face-to-face interaction between agency representatives or cell phone use between buildings. Both law enforcement and school staff reported that the use of interoperable radio communications would have been beneficial to the response efforts.

It is recommended that districts work with local response agencies to develop district-wide, interoperable communications systems to allocate and manage frequencies in an interoperable system.

*Recommendation 16*

Clear communication can also take place through equipment and procedural elements to improve emergency response. As was evidenced in this case, three physical communication strategies are recommended: Surveillance monitors, employee credentialing and wayfinding signage.

The use of passively monitored surveillance displays in the front office at RMS helped to gain a rapid awareness of the developing situation, including identifying the location of the incident, victims, and the early identification that there was only one attacker. These monitors provided a critical, tactical advantage during the response, evacuation and securing of the facility.

Responding officers reported that it was easy to differentiate staff from parents, volunteers and observers because of the conspicuous identification badges worn by staff as required by district policy.

Responding officers also reported difficulty wayfinding inside the school. Rooms containing wounded were called out by radio by specific room numbers, but officers unfamiliar with the building had difficulty moving to make contact because of the lack of orienting markers inside the building.

It is recommended that schools employ wayfinding signage, credentialling and surveillance monitors to convey critical information to emergency responders during the initial response phases of an incident.

**Reunification plans consist of plans to reunite students with parents/guardians and document the transfer. Reunification forms the bridge between immediate emergency response and the beginning of the recovery process following an event.**

As with many elements of emergency response, the value of a plan is in the planning. In this case, the district had developed and trained on reunification plans prior to the incident. Though several variables during the incident at RMS caused deviations from the original plans, the original concept of operations still helped guide reunification processes and actions.

#### *Recommendation 17*

One lesson learned is the importance of having a pool of unaffected individuals available to help with the reunification process. The original plan called for RMS staff to have a much larger role in reunification, but it was clear from the outset they did not have the capacity to engage in the reunification process in the immediate aftermath of the attack. The decision was made to staff the reunification center with personnel from the district office, and this proved to be very effective. According to the assessment of district staff, no fewer than 40 individuals were necessary to accomplish an emergency reunification of approximately 940 students without significant delays. The district office staff had the necessary familiarity with student information systems and were able to maintain the necessary pace to have students reunited with parents in rapid fashion.

It is recommended that schools consider the use of unaffected personnel to run the reunification process, and that this deployment be reflected in plans. This can be accomplished by utilizing district personnel, community partners or staff from other school buildings.

#### *Recommendation 18*

A critical component of reunification plans is the transfer of students from the classroom teacher to the reunification center and ultimately to an appropriate parent/guardian. Foundational to this process is the classroom roster and roll sheet. Although a process was in place at RMS to update the classroom roll sheets, the process was unevenly applied, and staff members reported needing to update the roll sheets by hand to begin the reunification process.

It is recommended that a designated individual(s) be specifically tasked with updating and collecting current class rosters during emergency situations, and that this role be specifically defined in plans.

#### *Recommendation 19*

Speed of reunification is a significant consideration. In this case, students were reunited with their parents rapidly, which allowed resources to flow to other necessary tasks following the closure of the

reunification center. Most students were reunited with their parents within an hour of opening of the reunification site. However, 10-20 students were unable to be picked up at the reunification site and remained until the end of the day. An important planning consideration for reunification plans is the reality that some students will not be picked up early, and provision needs to be made for them as well. Several staff noted that for students who remained until the end of the day, finding engaging activities to remain occupied was a challenge.

It is recommended that emergency plans include provisions for a percentage of students to remain at the reunification site for an extended period. Thought should be given to food, water, restroom use, medications, and engaging activities to provide relief from the emergency situation.

#### *Recommendation 20*

The outpouring of local, regional, and national responding entities was strong and immediate. However, there was confusion about the roles, function, and responsibility of those responding. In addition, the donated food and other items required active management and had the effect of removing staff from other response priorities.

It is recommended that emergency operations plan templates contain a functional annex for volunteer/donation management.

#### *Recommendation 21*

During the first week back to school after the incident, the district activated a significant pool of substitutes to support staff. This excess capacity proved to be critical to ongoing education in the aftermath of the attack. Several staff members needed support after classes resumed, and the substitutes were ready to stand in at a moment's notice should a staff member need to step away for a few minutes or talk with mental health support staff located on site. Most substitutes were needed on the first day back and the need reduced to near-normal absentee levels within two weeks.

It is recommended that on-site substitute teachers be available to support continuity of education in the immediate aftermath of a traumatic event.

**The need for mental health support following traumatic events can easily exceed the mental health capacity of a local school, district, or community. Additionally, the infrequency of high-impact events can compound the lack of resources with a lack of experience for those individuals tasked with beginning the recovery process.**

#### *Recommendation 22*

The first few days back to school following a violent attack require special planning and coordination. Following the incident at RMS, the decision was made to delay the return to school for a day to support and coordinate with staff. The additional day was used to communicate the facts to all staff members, provide a critical stress debriefing opportunity, introduce opportunities for mental health support and develop a plan for a controlled reopening of schools. Without exception, all interviewed staff agreed

that this day generally, and the critical stress debriefing specifically, were crucial for recovery and restarting schools.

It is recommended that in the aftermath of a traumatic event, a sufficient period be reserved for staff support prior to student return. This should include time to inform staff of critical information, provide access pathways for additional support services, conduct a critical stress debriefing to affected staff and address logistical concerns.

*Recommendation 23*

While there were significant levels of community support in place for staff and students, leveraging regional and state mental health agency resources was critical for long-term recovery. Region 7 Children's Mental Health (CMH7) was able to coordinate with local providers and agencies to develop a single onboarding process for inducting individuals seeking additional support. This single sign-up was immensely helpful to the district to help students, staff and families begin to negotiate the path to gaining mental health supports. CMH7 was also able to help manage the outpouring of volunteer mental health support while validating and vetting through their network.

It is recommended that schools coordinate with regional and statewide mental health support agencies and include them as part of mental health crisis planning.

*Recommendation 24*

In the days following the incident at RMS, neighboring school districts provided trained school counselors to RMS. These counselors provided student assistance and worked within an overhead planning team to develop a support strategy for students returning to school. Staff reported that without the additional school counselors loaned from neighboring districts, the district counseling staff would have been overwhelmed with student support needs.

It is recommended that districts develop agreements (MOUs) with neighboring school districts for the cooperative use of school counselors in the event of a major traumatic event. Further, it is recommended that a common statewide plan template and training be developed to allow for uniformity of response to school mental health crises. This statewide plan should coordinate between behavioral health agencies and school practitioners (school administrators, counselors, and psychologists).

*Recommendation 25*

In addition to the increased counselors and substitutes at RMS, many parents, community members and agency staff remained at the school for the first week following the return. Staff reported that some students appreciated the show of community support, while others found it to be a detraction from the return to normal.

It is recommended that schools monitor the levels of additional adults throughout the first few weeks of recovery and scale down as necessary to meet student needs. Large impact events may require a formal demobilization plan.

*Recommendation 26*

In addition to the other mental health supports noted above, staff reported that the presence of certified therapy dogs helped some students to emotionally regulate themselves. Some students responded best to professional counseling, and some to group work.

It is recommended that following a traumatic incident, schools consider using a variety of research-supported strategies to aid in building student capacity for social-emotional regulation and coping skills for grief and loss.

*Recommendation 27*

A community-based recovery team was able to stand up within the first few weeks following the incident to coordinate long-term recovery needs, specifically focused on the summer months when students and staff may be without support. These local recovery initiatives broadened the network of services available and leveraged awareness to reach underserved populations affected by the incident. This recovery team included representation from local law enforcement, schools, victim's services agencies, prosecutor's offices, and county emergency management.

It is recommended that long-term recovery efforts be primarily guided by local community agencies, who are typically best positioned to understand local needs, priorities, and resources.

**Physical site maintenance and logistical considerations after an act of school violence requires thoughtful planning to reduce additional trauma.**

*Recommendation 28*

Before students returned to RMS, district maintenance staff repaired all visible damage from the attack. This task revealed two significant lessons. First, evidence of the attack should be repaired or cleaned before resuming school, but this task may cause additional trauma for individuals. Second, even damage not directly related to the incident may have a traumatizing effect on students. District maintenance staff took the thoughtful action of filling all pre-existing holes throughout the building to prevent rumors. When students returned to school, there was no actual or perceived evidence of an attack.

It is recommended that provisions be made in emergency plans for third-party restoration services to address repairs or cleanup that may be hazardous, either emotionally or physically. As part of this, crews should address any damage that could be perceived to have originated in the attack.

*Recommendation 29*

Some students needed to gather their personal items from various areas of the school before the repairs were completed, including backpacks, medication, personal electronics, etc. To accommodate this, a guided escort process was developed and established. Parents were allowed to travel to the school site and were given their student's personal belongings in a process controlled and guided by school staff. This was necessary to prevent access to areas of the school being repaired.

It is recommended that emergency operations plans make provision for returning important personal items following an incident but before full reopening in cases where students and staff were evacuated.