

M-A PTA Forum with Law Enforcement
Tuesday, Dec 13, 2022, 7-830pm, PAC Cafe

Contemporaneous notes taken by PTA Recording Secretary;
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Principal Loosekoot thanked the attendees for coming together to support school safety, then introduced the following representatives from the county, Menlo Park, East Palo Alto, and Atherton police departments.

Atherton Police Department, Chief Steve McCulley
Atherton Police Department, Commander Dan Larsen
Menlo Park Police Department, Chief David Norris
East Palo Alto Police Department, Chief Jeff Liu
San Mateo County Council, Clair Cunningham
San Mateo Assistant District Attorney, Rebecca Baum

M-A Response

Principal Loosekoot detailed M-A's response to the two incidents of guns on campus.

- Admin messaged staff and parents, then students.
- M-A offered resources to students to make school a safe space for all.
- Atherton PD and Principal Loosekoot met with staff, Site council, Teachers and Classified Union representatives, district admin, parent groups and other stakeholders.

Police Response

Atherton PD commander Dan Larsen shared that on November 10 at 9:37am, M-A staff received an anonymous tip that a student would be arriving with a firearm. The student was detained in the office and taken into custody for weapons charges. A 9mm pistol was retrieved.

On 11/13 at 1:47pm, M-A staff found an unattended backpack with a firearm while following a student for a truancy issue. The student dropped the backpack, and officers determined the backpack owner with campus aides. The student was taken into custody.

Below is a summary of questions submitted to the panelists.

Questions to Atherton PD

Q: Is there a recent uptick in the number of guns found on campus? How common is this?

A: There have been 5 incidents in the past 5 years - 2 replica firearms (1 no function, 1 airsoft) and 1 brass knuckles. Predicting a trend would be speculation.

Q: What are the district/county consequences?

A: Atherton commander Dan Larsen answered that the student is barred from campus and expulsion is recommended, resulting in no return to campus. Rebecca Baum, county ADA stated that a juvenile charged with possession on campus will serve 2 years maximum in custody. Principal Losekoot added that academic support for this student continues while expelled.

Q: What were the reasons/motive two students brought guns to campus? Was it bullying or defense, and did they know each other?

A: PD replied that there were no signs students knew each other or were bullied. Students may have been carrying for their own personal protection and this didn't appear to be aimed toward a mass casualty event.

Q: Is there a gang at M-A? Were guns found in the same area of school?

A: Principal Loosekoot affirmed there are no gangs on campus and the guns were found in different areas.

Security Options

Q: SUHSD board member Rich Ginn asked for an explanation of the range of security options M-A would consider/concrete next steps to ensure safety from weapons?

A: Principal Loosekoot stated that police are present on campus since incidents and we are discussing if increased presence is helpful. M-A will hire a 6th campus aide to serve as the front lines of support and interaction. Complexities of additional security options include the practicality of metal detectors (limited entrances, high fences built along the campus perimeter) and portions of the community's perception of police as a threat. He does not think this contributes to a positive campus environment.

Q: What preventative measures have been implemented since the incidents? What can parents do?

A: Principal Loosekoot said M-A will do more messaging on the consequences of bringing dangerous objects to school, and communicating that M-A is a safe space. They are looking into a QR code/text to tip line to encourage "see something, say something" messaging all over school.

Q: How many law enforcement officers are on campus? Are they armed? What do we need to do to have armed officers?

A: Atherton Police Chief McCulley answered that with 9 schools, the security of staff and student is the #1 priority. M-A is in Atherton, but students come from different jurisdictions. Following the incident, there was immediate communication with the DA and fellow police chiefs.

Q: Will backpacks be checked on campus?

A: Principal Loosekoot answered no, again weighing the pros and cons of this dynamic in terms of school atmosphere, profiling, etc. He added that the student who dropped the backpack with the gun was not doing anything dangerous; the gun was found only when an aide opened the unattended backpack to confirm owner identity.

Q: Teachers are asked to lock doors when the bell rings to prevent tardiness. Was the gun found in the E wing and were students notified?

A: Karl clarified that staff do not lock their doors regularly. Occasionally, a “hall sweep” is performed when too many students are outside after the bell rings. In this case, doors are locked temporarily as kids are “swept up” for a conversation about getting to class. Names are taken during this progressive warning approach.

There was no need to notify school or lockdown - in each incident the gun was recovered without threat to the school. The gun was not found in the E wing - this is false information.

Q: Are students and staff trained for these situations?

A: Lockdown drills occur once a semester following San Mateo County’s Big 5 emergency plan.

Q: Are students with guns feeling unsafe in their homes and communities? Are there programs in place for them?

A: Principal Loosekoot detailed how M-A connects kids with the BGCP East Palo Alto. BGCP is also on site, along with Live in Peace, the 49ers Academy, and the Peninsula Conflict Resolution Center.

A: Menlo Park Police Chief Dave Norris spoke to the same organizations, stating that the SRO’s goal is to connect students with these organizations, and connect with students to help with home situations.

Communication

Q: What type of school communication is required in these situations?

A: Principal Loosekoot answered that communication is not required, but transparency is the goal.

A: SMC ADA Rebecca Baum reiterated there is no legal requirement.

Q: What communication can parents receive in the future regarding proactive next steps if this happens again?

A: Principal Loosekoot stated that M-A will always initially communicate with police and the district to avoid miscommunication. He clarified that the title of this past communication was mistakenly titled Community Message, rather than Police Incident.

Q: Is an alert system in place in case of an active shooter?

A: Vice Principal Muys stated in case of an incident, messaging will come from the district.

Q: What is the process from school/district in determining the security level for schools?

A: Principal Loosekoot answered that M-A will collect input from stakeholders and staff.

General

Q: Are guns on campus related to drugs on campus?

A: No, drug sales are prevented with the same consequences. As a point of interest, M-A has had fewer disruptions because of drug transfers on campus. It appears there are less drugs at M-A than ever before.

Q: What about students with cognitive disabilities who can't follow instructions?

A: Students are paired with staff in those situations; Principal Loosekoot is happy to talk to any specific parent.

Q: Regarding the swastika found in the student bathroom, are there plans to educate students on hate speech and the Holocaust?

A: Principal Loosekoot explained that M-A made a police report, and solicited students from Leadership and the Jewish Student Union to speak with the school. He added that Freshmen English reads Night, discussing the Holocaust and antisemitic speech.

Q: What are the different potential penalties for a juvenile vs. an 18 year old?

A: San Mateo Assistant DA Rebecca Baum shared that juvenile crime has very strict confidentiality rules. Police submit a report to probation to decide interventions vs submitting to the DA. However, possession of a gun goes straight to the DA. Currently, when a child under 18 is asked to waive Miranda rights, they are required to first have an attorney consult.

A: San Mateo County Councilwoman Clair Cunningham emphasized the need for safe storage of firearms, asking parents to amplify that message and lock guns up. She suggested looking at San Mateo Office of Education's protocols in addition to the Big 5 regarding responding to incidents protective of students with disabilities. She explained that research shows the most effective means of reducing violence on campus is by meaningful connection with students as opposed to turning schools into fortresses. The audience cheered after these remarks.