

Prepared for the Worst

School district and police work together to train students and staff on how to defend and protect themselves

SESSION: *Community Collaboration in School Safety* | **Presenters** Whitewater Unified School District: Eric Runez, superintendent; David Brokopp, principal; Whitewater Police Department: Lisa Otterbacher, police chief; Dan Bradford, police officer

Keeping students and staff safe doesn't mean living in fear. But it does mean thinking ahead and being prepared.

Officials from the Whitewater School District and representatives of their local law enforcement agencies discussed their collaboration on an extensive school safety initiative.

"We're never paranoid but we're always prepared," said Jefferson County Deputy Sheriff Bill Dandoy. "We can't not have plans. Nothing is perfect but you'd better work on this."

After the tragic shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School, Whitewater school officials — like many across the country — began reviewing their school safety plans and procedures. They asked for help from local law enforcement and revamped their plans, creating comprehensive training for staff and students.

One challenge was increasing security without increasing anxiety among staff, explained Whitewater School District Administrator Eric Runez. Also challenging was finding a way to make the schools more secure while still keeping them a warm and welcoming place.

Upon the advice of law enforcement, the school district created secured entrances at each of their buildings. Another step was devel-

oping training for staff that involved hands-on practice in scenarios that were meant to be very close to a real situation.

"We have to put people in somewhat stressful situations so they can start thinking about how to respond," said David Brokopp, a Whitewater elementary principal and the district's safety coordinator.

Whitewater Police Chief Lisa Otterbacher said that they decided to focus on the worst case scenario — an active shooter in the building. Although such incidents are rare, training for the worst case can be



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adjusted for use in other less serious scenarios.

Instead of teaching a specific set of instructions, the goal of the training was to present multiple options so people could gain life skills that they could use anywhere, not just in a school setting, Otterbacher said.

Training started with cognitive drills, led first by building principals then by law enforcement. Staff was presented with a situation — they heard gun shots fired close by — and staff was asked for their response. In live action training, they were taught about verbal de-escalation and the options to run, hide and finally, fight.

Getting school staff, who normally spend their days nurturing people, to buy into the idea of a no-holds barred attack on an armed intruder took a bit of work. But as the training progressed, staff began to feel empowered, Brokopp said. ■