

Minutes of the Work Session of the Barnwell School District 45 Board of Trustees

TIME: 8:00 a.m., Wednesday, March 1, 2023

PLACE: Barnwell Schools Administration Building, 770 Hagood Avenue, Barnwell, SC 29812 for Board Members

PRESENT:

Board of Trustees: Rosey Anderson, Chair; Felicia Devore, SGM Abraham Sexton, Clerk Vice-chair; Becky Huggins, Member; Dr. Rhett Richardson, Member

District Office: Crystal Stapleton, Superintendent; Rachel Wall, Assistant Superintendent/Curriculum Director; Tina Smith, Administrative Assistant; John Moody, IT Director; Kay Gooding, Barnwell Elementary School Principal; Henrietta Williams, Guinyard Butler Middle School Principal; Franklin McCormack, Barnwell High School Principal

Others: Josh Deurkop, Special Agent SLED Bomb Squad

The agenda for the meeting was as follows:

OPENING BUSINESS

1. Chair Rosey Anderson called the meeting to order. SGM Abraham Sexton, Clerk, delivered the reflection. Dr. Rhett Richardson led the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag. Superintendent Stapleton announced that local media had received notice of the meeting as required by the Freedom of Information Act.
2. Superintendent requested an addition to the agenda for a motion to go into executive session to discuss a security issue consistent with FOIA. The Board unanimously approved the agenda. Motion was made by SGM Abraham Sexton and seconded by Felicia Devore.

ACCOUNTABILITY

A. Information

1. Superintendent Stapleton discussed the recent bomb threats at Barnwell High School:

The Superintendent thanked the board members for making changes to their schedules to have this work session here today. She explained that, considering the recent bomb threats our high school has received, we feel reviewing and evaluating our responses is important to do in a timely manner. She also shared that, if we ever have to activate our emergency protocols, we revisit our plans and meet to debrief regarding any recommendations or possible modifications to the current protocols.

Prior to the bomb threat we had in January, we had not had a bomb threat at BHS since 2017. However, we have had 5 threats in the past two weeks where we evacuated and where multiple agencies have responded onsite to help us clear the building and investigate. As you can imagine, this has been quite disruptive to our educational environment and there is a definite concern with loss of instructional time due to the response to these threats.

We have seen numerous bomb threats in recent media reports, both statewide and nationwide, and many have happened in clusters. We've seen several other school districts in the state who have had bomb threats multiple days in a row, as we have recently experienced.

As a review,

- In early January we had a text message sent to our bus supervisor that was very vague and not specific to Barnwell High School but it did reference a bomb in the high school.
- Friday, February 17th we had a bomb threat emailed. We evacuated, the bomb dogs came from SRS and cleared the building, and we resumed normal operations. This was the day the same emailed threat was received by more than one school that we were aware of.
- Thursday, February 23rd we had a bomb threat emailed. We evacuated, the bomb dogs came from SRS and cleared the building, and we resumed normal operations. This was the day we know there were at least 12 other bomb threats in the state that we were aware of, the closest being Richard Carroll Elementary School in Bamberg.

- Friday, February 24th we had a bomb threat emailed. We evacuated, the bomb dogs came from SRS and cleared the building, and we resumed normal operations. This was a different because it was a phone call.
- Monday, February 27th we had a bomb threat emailed. We evacuated, SRS sent their bomb dogs, and we cleared the building quicker than we had yet. Normal operations resumed within two hours.
- That same day, a little after noon, we received another emailed treat from a different email address. We were currently meeting with SLED officials in this room when that happened. We had not made changes to our response plan, so we evacuated again, the dogs returned, and the building was secured.

Prior to SLED and local law enforcement officials leaving on Monday, we sat down again with them and worked on a proactive plan for Tuesday morning. Our goal was to determine a way we could discredit the threat from the beginning. We let parents know we would be searching bookbags. We had two administrators at every entrance checking bookbags for anything suspicious. Law enforcement was present at every entrance, as well, but our people have to be the one to check the bookbags. The building had already been swept and cleared. We did this proactively, because law enforcement had already predicted we would get another threat that day. When it came, we were advised to confer with law enforcement and SLED to determine if it could be discredited. We have utilized the same protocols this morning. Law enforcement and school administration swept the building prior to students arriving. As students arrived, their bags were checked. This is again a proactive measure. This is not a long-term solution but it has allowed us time to come together today to be able to hear from SLED recommendations for addressing these threats in the future.

Over the past few weeks, we have researched data, looked at other school who have had this happen, and I've talked to other districts about changes they have made to their responses. It is extremely disappointing these threats continue to happen statewide, and even nationwide, taking time away from what our greatest job is - educating our students. We are fortunate law enforcement responds so quickly and we are able to activate our plans and return to normal operations as quickly as possible; however, any loss of instructional time is too much. Barnwell High School administration is working diligently to plan with the staff how to address any lost instructional time that has happened in the past two weeks. They will support our students as they "catch up" on any instruction or skill acquisition they need to recover from any lost instructional time.

Superintendent Stapleton said she cannot express enough how grateful we are to SLED, our Barnwell County Sheriff's Department, Barnwell City Police, Barnwell Fire Department, Barnwell County Emergency Management, Medshore, and Savannah River Site for their assistance with securing the building and activating our emergency protocols. We also thank our administrators, staff, and students for quickly executing our emergency response plans. That is why we prepare for situation such as these, but we always hope we do not have to put that "practice" into action.

After Monday morning's bomb threat, Lt. Foster from SLED's Bomb Squad and Counterterrorism Dive Unit came to Barnwell to meet with us to discuss recommendations regarding those plans. We are so fortunate to have Bomb Squad Commander Josh Duerkop ("dur-cop") here with us today. Their team has been working with us this week to address the issues we are currently facing and to provide feedback about our current plans.

Prior to him speaking, Superintendent Stapleton reviewed what our current bomb-response plan is that is currently in place.

Superintendent Stapleton reiterated we are so fortunate we have a wonderful partnership with local law enforcement and emergency responders, as well as having a strong safety plan in place. They work with us each year to provide feedback and collaborate on our safety plans. Our administrators continue to train our staff members and students on how to execute those plans in the case of an emergency. We have a minimum standard of emergency drill practice outlined in policy; however, we go above and beyond those minimum requirements when practicing drills within our schools and administrators review our safety plans throughout the year.

Part of our plan includes maintaining open communication, providing accurate information to our parents, and striving to be as transparent as possible when informing our families of allegations, such as bomb threats, while still maintaining the integrity of the investigation.

2. Special Agent Deurkop from SLED Bomb Squad Division discussed bomb threat safety protocol and recommendations:
 - These recent bomb threats are not isolated to Barnwell School District 45. There has been an unprecedented rise in bomb threats statewide and nationwide.
 - Suggested adding day-to-day security recommendations
 - He shared there should be specific responses to different types of threats
 - He provided more detailed instructions on how to conduct a building search
 - He shared recommendations on how to assess a threat
 - He also suggested the district modify the current Evacuation Plan
3. Following Special Agent Deurkop's presentation, the Board of Trustees agreed that Superintendent Stapleton would work with the district team to make recommended modifications to the district's Bomb Threat Response Plan.

BASIC STRUCTURE

EXECUTIVE SESSION

Request for motion made by Chair Rosey Anderson to go into Executive Session at 9:23 a.m. Motion made by Becky Huggins and seconded by SGM Abraham Sexton. No action taken.

Board unanimously approved the adjournment of the meeting. The motion was made by Dr. Rhett Richardson and seconded by Felicia Devore at 10:30 a.m.

Chair

Rosey Anderson

Clerk

Abraham Sexton