

Fremont schools get new resource officer

Fremont policeman fills position vacant for 2 years

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Students in eighth grade at Fremont Middle School walk to their next class while School Resource Officer Jim Burkin monitors the halls. PHOTOS BY CRAIG SHOUP/THE NEWS-MESSENGER



Jim Burkin and Fremont Middle School Principal Marjoe Cooper monitor the halls during transitions between class periods.

FREMONT - As the bell rang shortly after 8:15 a.m. on Wednesday, hundreds of students flooded the hallways of Fremont Middle School heading to their next class.

And for the first time in nearly two years, students and faculty could feel reassured by the presence of a Fremont police officer who recently started working as the School Resource Officer.

Since Feb. 20 — less than a week after the Feb. 14 mass shooting at a school in Parkland, Florida — Officer Jim Burkin, a 20-year veteran of the Fremont Police Department, has been patrolling hallways throughout the Fremont City School District.

Like he did on Wednesday, Burkin tours the middle school and the eight other buildings in the district, helping to break up fights, investigate weapons or drug calls, and provide a trained lawenforcement presence as an added safety net for students, staff and parents worried about school shootings, weapons, or any other crises.

While Burkin's day often begins with monitoring bus arrivals for students going to Ross High School and Fremont Middle School, the police officer is no hall or bus monitor.

His job is to keep the schools safe in the event of a fight or shooting or if the administration needs him to investigate a drug or weapons complaint at a school.

Burkin is the first School Resource Officer in the district since Belinda Rosenberger was promoted at the police department almost two years ago.

"Most of the problems were staffing," Burkin said. "We didn't have enough officers to have a resource officer."

Burkin's arrival comes at a pivotal time for the district, following the Parkland, Florida, massacre in which a 19-year-old former student is alleged to have shot and killed 17 students and staff at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School.

Fremont voters approved a levy in May 2017 to build a new high school and four new elementary schools.

Fremont City Schools Superintendent Jon Detwiler said recent community meetings involving the district's plans for new buildings has yielded a number of questions about the future of the district, but the most frequent questions, he said, were from parents voicing concerns about school safety.

"Security was a big push during the levy campaign, and we are listening," Detwiler said.

He said the district can learn from school shootings elsewhere to determine a course of action for security in the new schools, which are expected to begin with a design phase this August. Groundbreaking for the new buildings is scheduled for 2019.

Initial plans call for most of the buildings to be built towards the back of the lots, and three of the four new elementary buildings will be one story — something Fremont

Police Chief Dean Bliss said makes it easier for students to escape in an emergency while also providing a tactical advantage for police in handling an active shooting threat.

Detwiler said because of space restrictions, Lutz Elementary will be two stories.

“The high school will have classrooms that will be stacked, too, but we want to learn from shootings and look into funneling parking and having one main entrance at buildings,” Detwiler said.

Detwiler said bringing Burkin in as a school resource officer allows the district to have a police presence in the schools in the event an incident occurs.

Burkin, a former Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE) officer, said he was interested in the SRO position after the police department announced in December that they

would once again have a resource officer in the schools.

“I always enjoyed my time with DARE and I love being around kids,” Burkin said.

He said his job goes beyond providing law-enforcement in the schools.

“I like to be out in the halls, talking with kids, and educating them on internet safety,” Burkin said. “There’s so much that we can do in the classrooms.”

Fremont Middle School Principal Marjoe Cooper said Burkin’s presence has already paid dividends for the school after the Parkland tragedy caused high anxiety nationwide.

“There’s a new sense of security,” Cooper said. “Teachers are saying they are feeling safer.”

Burkin and Cooper, like many working for the district, have a vested interest in student safety because their own children attend Fremont City Schools.

“You can’t lead in fear, you just have to hope that the plan you have in place is the right one and that everyone is kept safe,” Cooper said. “The school these kids attend should be the second- safest place for them, with their home being first.”

Many of the current district buildings were built 50 or more years ago, and have been retrofitted to enhance security.

But Detwiler said all security options are at the district’s disposal now that new schools are in the planning stages.

“Everything is on the table right now,” Detwiler said. “One of the biggest things we want to address is allowing teachers and staff to be able to lock their room doors from the inside, instead of outside like they have to now. We won’t compromise on that.”

Like all the current school buildings, Detwiler said the new schools will have locked main entrances where guests will have to ring a buzzer to alert staff that they are on school grounds.

The setup and use of security cameras will be addressed for the new buildings, because some schools, such as Atkinson Elementary, have poor angles for their security cameras and staff cannot see who is coming towards the building until the visitor rings the buzzer to enter the school.

Cooper said middle school teachers are always present in the halls between classes, and they wear identification badges that ensure students know who they are interacting with.

“I think the staff is working really hard,” Cooper said. “Discipline is down 75 percent in the past two years, and I think with the new buildings coming, the district is on the upswing.”

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