Oroko Was Prepared For the Test, But Still Had Lockdown Lessons to Learn

On February 20-21, 2018, when back-to-back threats rocked Orono Schools, the district was well-situated to address the one threat determined to be credible. That threat, exactly one week after the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, required that the district go into lockdown. More than 3,100 students and staff members were sequestered for just over five hours.

For more than 15 years, Orono has prepared for such an event. That preparation included attending training provided by the Department of Homeland Security and Federal Bureau of Investigation, participating in active shooter drills and establishing and training internal response teams.

Perhaps one of its most significant assets, however, is the school district’s trusting relationship with the Orono Police Department and West Hennepin County Public Safety, as well as with the Long Lake and Maple Plain fire departments. These relationships have been nurtured through mutual planning and training.

On the morning of February 21, the district’s administrative team was debriefing with law enforcement officials about the threat that was dismissed the night before. At 10:57 a.m., Orono Police received notice of a second threat made via Facebook and Twitter that a shooting would occur at noon.

“Because we have trained, because we have an excellent relationship with the police, the decision to lock down was executed immediately, and the administrative team knew what to do next,” said Stephanie Levine, school board member from West St. Paul-Mendota Heights-Eagan, is chair of AMSD.

These two-sided laminated posters hang in every Orono classroom to help remind teachers of emergency procedures but, more importantly, to remind parents that safety is always at the forefront.

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Communication is Key to School Safety and Security

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Superintendent of Schools Dr. Karen Orcutt. “While the threat lacked clarity – Was it coming from inside? Was it someone outside the district? – our response was precise. Preparedness brings a certain level of calm even during a tense situation,” she added. “Don’t ever assume, ‘It will never happen here.’”

Orono’s crisis plan calls for a command center to be staged with law enforcement and the superintendent. The director of special services and coordinator of facilities and safety, who head the district’s crisis training, also work out of the command center.

The communications team includes the communications director, technology coordinator, an administrative assistant and district receptionist. “We learned in responding to a bomb threat in 2013 that communication needed to be more frequent and as widespread as possible,” said Gary Kubat, the district’s communications director.

The district used its mass notification system (emails, text messages and phone calls), Facebook, Twitter and websites to update parents and community members every 15 minutes with a few gaps. The updates were numbered (“In hindsight, I would also timestamp them as well,” Kubat noted) and always ended with the reassurance that students and staff were safe.

“From the start, establish the district as THE source of information,” Kubat emphasized. “Remind parents to dismiss rumors or opinions they see on social media. And those text messages from their students? Students are most likely experiencing only pieces of the larger picture.”

Staff members in Orono were receiving all of the same communications as parents and community members, but may have been so focused on student welfare that they didn’t see them. “Be sure principals are checking in with their staff members, so they know how everyone is doing,” Orcutt said.

“A parent’s first instinct might be to come to the school, but remind them not to,” Orcutt continued, “as it could interfere with an emergency response.” With all of its schools on one campus, the city was able to assist in that regard by blocking the roads with snowplows and police cars. Concerned parents gathered at a nearby garden center and food co-op where a police officer was stationed to calm them and communicate with them. “It wasn’t part of our plan, but such a place – an offsite location where parents can gather and support each other – is a good idea,” Orcutt added.

The suspect, a student at Orono High School, was arrested by police about 4:15 p.m. and students were finally dismissed. A press conference was held shortly after that at the Orono Police Department with Police Chief Correy Farniok, other law enforcement officials and Dr. Orcutt. “It was an efficient way to convey information to the media and to ensure every media representative heard the same story,” Orcutt said. “Be honest, show compassion for everyone involved and express your gratitude for the support you received.”

The successful conclusion to this threat didn’t mean that the work was over once the crisis has passed. Orono staff and law enforcement immediately debriefed and sent one more message to parents that evening. It thanked them for their cooperation and support, and provided online resources should they or their student(s) need further reassurance. Communication about the threat continued through the end of the week.

Prepare for the return to regular classes with much care. Have crisis teams available in each school. “Use team members to build lists and check in with students who are struggling or may be at risk of struggling,” Orcutt said. “Don’t forget staff members. Even though they are adults, they may still need support in processing what they went through.” Orono was fortunate to have partners in the community and nearby school districts to support these efforts.

“At some point, the spotlight moves on,” Kubat noted. “Keep school safety and security at the forefront, however, by communicating about it frequently. Even if a procedure or training seems routine or mundane, constant reminders that safety is a top priority is encouraging to parents.”

Every situation is unique and, no matter how well prepared you think you may be, there’s always a twist or somewhere to improve,” Orcutt said. “The feedback we received about our response was overwhelmingly positive.

“What we achieved together – the police, staff, parents, communities of Orono Schools and our students – was incredible,” Orcutt said. “We were fortunate.”

This month’s member spotlight was submitted by Gary Kubat, director of communications, Orono Schools.
Six AMSD school districts are going to voters with referendum requests this fall, asking their residents to provide additional – and essential – funding for their students. The ballot questions range from operating referendum increases to capital project levies to support technology to bonding proposals. The six districts will have a total of 10 questions on the November 6 ballot.

The Mahtomedi, Minneapolis, Robbinsdale and Saint Paul School Districts are seeking to increase their current operating referendums. The Rockford School District does not currently have a voter-approved operating referendum in place and is proposing to establish a $750 per-pupil referendum.

Minneapolis and Rockford are also asking for technology support: Minneapolis is seeking a $12 million, 7-year levy and Rockford is asking residents to approve a 10-year, $4 million levy for technology.

And in Columbia Heights, the school board is putting three capital projects to a vote to make several improvements: to an elementary school, to improve its high school performing arts space and to expand its high school band space.

In the case of every of the six AMSD districts going to voters, the boards are making clear: voter support is critical to elevating student success. Staving off staffing and program cuts, investing in literacy, social emotional learning and student support services are among the initiatives the districts will pursue if their referendums are successful.

The need for community support is clearly a resonant message.

Columbia Heights Board Chair John Larkin earlier this year explained to the community the importance of its support:

“School safety and security is vital and cannot be compromised. The Arts are an integral part of the curriculum and must have facilities that support programming and are comparable with other school districts in the area.”

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Why referendums are necessary

School district funding historically has been a state and local partnership to provide students the resources and opportunities they need to graduate ready for college or career.

In 2017, local property taxes provided about 27 percent of the revenue for Minnesota school districts; the state provided 67 percent, and federal funding accounted for 6 percent.

The state does provide the lion’s share of funding for operating costs but referendums deliver critical resources for basic programming. The additional funds from local referendums support opportunities and programs critical to student success.

While the Governor and legislators have made strides toward stabilizing Minnesota’s education funding system in recent years, including approving a 2 percent per year formula increase in the 2017 legislative session, the basic formula continues to lag behind inflation. As the chart shows, the basic formula would be $618 per-pupil higher in the current school year had it simply kept pace with inflation since 2003.

Inflation is just one challenge.

Dr. Tom Melcher, director of school finance for the Minnesota Department of Education, explained to the State Senate E-12 Education Committee in August how the under-funding of special education impacts school district budgets. Insufficient state and federal funding for special education means school districts are forced to redirect funds meant for general classroom instruction to make up the difference. That difference is no small amount. In FY 2017, special education was under-funded by more than $670 million according to the Minnesota Department of Education’s Annual Special Education Cross-Subsidy Report. In other words, school districts redirected $670 million in funds meant for general classroom instruction to cover the special education funding shortfall. According to Melcher’s calculations, federal and state funding covers just over 70 percent of special education costs.

The chart on page 5 outlines the AMSD member district referendum questions that will be on the ballot on November 6. Voters are encouraged to contact their local school officials if they have questions about their local referendum.
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<th>District</th>
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| Columbia Heights         | [More information: Go to the Columbia Heights Public Schools website](#) | Capital Bond                  | N/A: Bond levies are for specific amounts. | "The projected budget for the three requests are $12,476,758 for North Park Improvements, $1,751,538 for the CHHS Performing Arts Space Improvements and $2,785,015 for new Band Room Addition at CHHS. The approximate total is $17,013,311, or a six percent increase, from the 2017 ask of voters."
|                          |                                                       |                               |                  | **Question 1:** North Park Elementary improvements: $12,476,758. **Question 2:** High school performing arts space improvements: $1,751,538 **Question 3:** High school band room addition: $2,785,015 |
| Mahtomedi Public Schools | [More information: Go to the Mahtomedi Public Schools website](#) | Operating Referendum           | $276             | "On November 6, Mahtomedi Public Schools is seeking to revoke and replace its current operating levy with a tiered payment structure. Mahtomedi Public Schools made $1.6 million in budget adjustments ($1.1 million in expenditure reductions and staffing and enrollment adjustments) for the 2018-19 school year. If the levy passes, our priorities include: reducing class sizes district-wide; enhancing academic programming; strengthening the safety and security of our buildings; and building financial stability through deficit reduction."
|                          |                                                       |                               |                  | **Per Pupil Amount:** $276.26 **Total Amount:** Approximately $1 million **Duration:** 10 years                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| Minneapolis Public Schools | [More information: Go to the Minneapolis Public Schools website](#) | Operating Referendum and Capital Projects | $490             | "If passed, the referendum would give Minneapolis Public Schools access to $30 million in additional revenue. The funds will be used across the district to improve student achievement and well-being through equitable investments in literacy, social emotional learning, and support services. The new revenue sources will also help avoid future budget cuts and reductions in services to students across Minneapolis."
|                          |                                                       |                               |                  | **Operating Referendum** **Per Pupil Amount:** $490 **Total Amount:** $18 million **Duration:** 7 years **Capital Projects** **Total Amount:** $12 million **Duration:** 7 years **Project details:** Provide funds for the purchase, installation, and maintenance of software applications and technology equipment, and for training and directly related personnel costs. |
| Robbinsdale Public Schools | [More information: Go to the Robbinsdale Public Schools website](#) | Operating Referendum           | $515             | "The funding would support district efforts to maintain Robbinsdale Area Schools' high-quality academic and co-curricular programming for students."
|                          |                                                       |                               |                  | **Per Pupil Amount:** $515 **Total Amount:** $5.968 million **Duration:** 10 years                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| Rockford Area Schools    | [Go to the Rockford Area Schools website](#)         | Operating Referendum and Technology Levy | $750             | "Question 1: A General Levy for $750 per-pupil for 7 years, generating approximately $1.2 million annually or $8.4 million total. **Question 2:** A Capital Projects Levy at 3.57 percent for 10 years, generating approximately $400,000 annually for technology or $4 million total."
|                          |                                                       |                               |                  | **Operating Referendum** **Per Pupil Amount:** $750 **Total Amount:** $8.4 million **Duration:** 7 years **Technology Levy** **Total Amount:** $4 million **Duration:** 10 years                                                                                                                                 |
| Saint Paul Public Schools | [More information: Go to the Saint Paul Public Schools website](#) | Operating Referendum           | $475             | "SPPS is asking voters to consider increasing its operating levy to provide additional funding which would enable the district to invest more in schools, keep pace with the educational needs of its students and help implement the district's Strategic Plan to increase achievement for all students."
|                          |                                                       |                               |                  | **Per Pupil Amount:** An increase of $475 (existing levy is $704). **Total Amount:** $18.6 million. **Duration:** 10 years                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |