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Two Madison schools held an active shooter drill and students and staff didn't know it was a drill

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A mural decorates O'Keeffe Middle and Marquette Elementary schools. The two schools held unannounced Code Red drills on Oct. 17.

PHOTO BY MICHELLE STOCKER

Principals at O'Keeffe Middle and Marquette Elementary schools are facing criticism after a Code Red drill — a procedure designed to help students and staff prepare for threats such as a school shooting — was not conducted in accordance with Madison School District guidelines.

At both O’Keeffe and Marquette, teachers and students did not know a drill was taking place when it happened on Oct. 17, according to Liz Merfeld, the district’s communications coordinator.

Unannounced drills are counter to guidelines that say participants should be notified of a drill before it begins. As a result, some students and teachers thought it was an active threat situation.

Jodi Vander Molen, whose daughter is a third-grade student at Marquette, penned a letter to the principals of both schools, the School Board and Superintendent Jennifer Cheatham criticizing the drill. It was signed by 26 parents and community members.

“Creating a false sense of trauma in staff and students for the sake of ‘making it seem real’ or in order to have people ‘take it seriously’ is wholly counterproductive and extremely irresponsible from a basic trauma-informed perspective,” the letter stated.

Code Red drills are required by district policy and state law to be conducted once per semester, according to the Madison School District.

Though officials at the district's central office believe prior notification should happen, it's unclear that all schools knew this to be the case, according to Rachel Strauch-Nelson, MMSD's media and government relations director.

Merfeld said that with the state Legislature's passage of Act 143 last year — a bill calling for increased school safety measures — the district has work to do to document and streamline the procedures they have in place.

“We are strengthening and reinforcing our guidance to schools to ensure that consistent communication goes out to families so they know what to expect and when,” Merfeld said.

Carolynn Schwartz Black, who also signed the letter, said her son, a sixth-grade student at O’Keeffe, told her that “everyone was scared,” and that he wondered who was going to die that day.

Schwartz Black said a student was assigned to go around O’Keeffe to rattle doorknobs and bang on the windows to simulate an active threat. Her son missed school the next two days, which she said was a result of being worried and anxious so much he became sick.

“In the name of safety, our children are being traumatized,” she said.

Merfeld did not clarify if a student was assigned to bang on windows and rattle doorknobs at the schools.

Parents at Marquette were not notified before or immediately after the fact that a Code Red drill had taken place. Following Vander Molen’s letter Tuesday, Marquette Principal Sally Parks emailed parents an apology for not sending any notification of the drill.

“I appreciate you bringing your concerns to me so that I may address them,” Parks said in the email.

Vander Molen said several parents decided voice their concern because they were upset there was no communication with families.

“We need to have this conversation because I think a lot of different things are happening at different schools,” Vander Molen said. “You can’t learn in a state of fear and can’t teach in a state of fear. That’s a real problem.”

Tony Dugas, the principal of O’Keeffe, emailed parents Tuesday night. Both Parks and Dugas acknowledged in their emails that there was confusion about whether participants are supposed to be notified ahead of a drill.

“The district’s Safety and Security Coordinator is working with us to ensure that our procedures are clear and consistent moving forward,” the email from Dugas said.

Schwartz Black said she confronted Dugas after school on Tuesday about the letter but he dismissed her concerns.

“He (Dugas) said he was perplexed by our reaction and that it must be a Madison thing to go above the principal’s head,” she said, a reference to how the letter was sent to the superintendent and School Board. “I got the impression that he thought we were being overreactive.”

Schwartz Black said she thought Dugas' email did not address the concerns of the letter sent to the principals, and instead chalked up everything to confusion instead of admitting a mistake.

"The letter did not address other concerns, that our kids are being scared at a place where they are supposed to feel safe," Schwartz Black said.

Dugas did not respond to multiple requests for comment. Parks declined comment and directed questions to the district's press office.

Lynn Lee, a parent of another student at O'Keeffe, said whoever made the decision to make the drill unannounced did not take into account how traumatic it can be for an individual student to think a real threat exists.

"I think the school is a great school, the teachers are outstanding and the principal is dedicated and a great principal," said Lee, who signed the letter. "It was just a bad decision that was not thought through."

Lee said his daughter told him kids were shaken and crying because of the drill.

"It was a surprise to everyone that people in the school were not notified that the drill was taking place," Lee said. "Parents found out simply from our kids and talking to each other about how the drill was conducted."

Vander Molen and Schwartz Black said they believe Code Red drills might not be the best way to fully protect children.

“Obviously, everyone is doing their best,” Vander Molen said. “But there needs to be more consideration in regard to protecting the mental health of our students and of our teachers.”

Merfeld said the district is looking into what happened at O’Keeffe and Marquette and seeing it “as an opportunity to clarify and reinforce our procedures.”