

## The Severn Journal

# Severn reacts to Connecticut school shooting

By **Karen Sampson Hoffman**

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Fourth grade students at Sandy Hook Elementary School perform during this year's winter concert. The students of Sandy Hook will return to classes in January in a former middle school building at a neighboring school district. (Photo Courtesy of the Sandy Hook Elementary School Website)

**It was with shared horror that the members of the** Severn community learned of the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newton, Conn., on Friday, Dec. 14, by a young man from that community. He shot his way through the school's glass front doors and proceeded to the hallway of first grade classrooms, where he opened fire on children who were six- and seven-years-old. Twenty children died in the attack, along with the school principal, psychologist and two teachers and two teacher's aids.

The reasons why Adam Lanza, 20, murdered his mother in her sleep and then went to the school are still emerging. Regardless of what those reasons may be, parents in the Severn community thought first of their own children and the safety of local schools.

Adding to those local fears are rumors of threats of violence against Anne Arundel County Schools, including

Old Mill High School which educates Severn teens. Schools have sent letters home with students detailing procedures during an emergency and actions school officials and law enforcement are taking when threats are made.

"We have been made aware of rumors at a number of schools today and those schools, working with police and our Office of School Security, have investigated every single one," reads a statement by the Anne Arundel County Public Schools Office of Public Information released on Tuesday, Dec. 18. "As of this time, we have not found a single rumor to be credible. We are sending letters home at schools where rumors seem to be spreading the most, in an attempt to reassure parents and clear up some false statements being made on social media and elsewhere. We will continue to thoroughly investigate any information that comes to our attention and will inform parents as warranted. However, parents should understand that it is impossible to address in a letter every single rumor or allegation that comes about."

Superintendent Kevin Maxwell and Board President Andrew Pruski, along with the heads of the school district's unions, jointly released a statement on Friday addressing the attack at Sand Brook Elementary.

"We also want to assure you that our school system, like those across our state, has a network of security procedures and practices in place to help keep our children and our employees safe," they said in the statement. "To be clear, there is no plan that guarantees 100 percent safety to all students and staff in our schools in every situation. We continue, however, to put in place proactive measures that are prudent and reasonable to protect students and employees. We have invested heavily in technology such as video intercom systems at main entrances to schools, and in electronic visitor tracking systems, which allow us to detect registered sex offenders who may try to gain access. Our partnerships with law enforcement, emergency response agencies, and health departments have resulted in increased resources and supports for our students and employees."

The Anne Arundel County Police Department also announced it would increase patrols at county elementary schools during the coming weeks, including during the past few days.

"[W]e will have extra patrols at and near our schools next week, especially at our elementary schools where our most vulnerable students are," said Captain Herbert Hasenpusch, Western District commander, in a statement. "If you see a police officer at your neighborhood school next week, please do not be alarmed, we only want to provide a calming presence."

For some parents, this reassurance was not enough.

"It's time to step up the protection," wrote Debbie Benik Wholey in response to the county schools' statement on the Anne Arundel County Public Schools Facebook page. "My school is very good at watching who is coming in. However, if an armed person were to enter the school, I'm not sure anyone would be able to stop that! It is time to have law officers at every school, every day in every state in every county! Don't wait to pass this, do it TODAY! Our children have to return to school on Monday! It should not matter if we are in a 'newer' school, and I want a 100 percent protection every day! I entrust the school system to protect my world by any means necessary, and I don't believe that's too much to ask!"

Several parents commenting on the school district's Facebook page mentioned their apparent ease of entry into Meade Middle and Meade High schools and expressed concern that students be instructed not to allow people into the buildings once the school day has begun.

Director of Emergency Services on Fort George G. Meade Lt. Col. Darrel Sides appeared in a brief video on Fort Meade's Facebook page to reassure parents of students who attend these schools.

"Our schools have numerous safety measures in place," he said, noting that not all of these measures are public information. "Three of the schools have armed police officers in the schools."

Sides added that there are two police departments within five minutes of the schools.

"The second someone makes that 911 call, the cavalry is coming and it will be amazingly fast," he said.

The Rev. Wendy van Vliet is pastor of Severn United Methodist and Delmont United Methodist churches. The children of her congregations attend Anne Arundel County Schools. She, like pastors across Severn and the United States, pondered what to say to her congregations on Sunday.

"When things like this happen, it breaks our hearts," van Vliet said. "We struggle to understand it. There is no answer to the question why. It's a season where we normally prepare for joy and these parents have gone from making Christmas lists to preparing for funerals. We are always part of God's plan. It's not God's plan that this happened. But we can respond as part of God's plan. A long term response requires changes in our society. We either respond with fear or with faith and promise."

#### **Related Links**

- [Schools reassure parents about student safety](#)

**URL:** <http://www.zoomvillage.com/newsStory.cfm?newsID=12731>