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Like many of you, I was deeply saddened by the recent school shootings at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Florida. In times of tragedies like this, as a community we cannot help but think of our own children and the students of Prior Lake-Savage Area Schools (PLSAS). While I know you grieve the loss of life in Florida along with me, I also want you to know that the staff of PLSAS are thinking of our students' safety everyday.

Safety is our top priority. All of our schools are practiced in crisis management and the district has a plan to help ensure we are doing everything we can to first prevent a crisis, but also be prepared for one should it occur. Our crisis plan has been in existence for several years and covers dozens of scenarios ranging from natural disasters and bus accidents to missing students and an unknown intruder in the building.

Our plan does not simply sit on a shelf. All schools perform five lockdown and five fire drills every school year. In addition, PLSAS has a Community Crisis Response Team made up of Prior Lake and Savage police and fire departments, Scott County Emergency Management, ambulance, and PLSAS administrators, who meet annually to review safety plans, make sure we are implementing best practices, and are up to speed on the latest strategies and philosophies regarding school safety.

We also have two police liaison officers in our district, one assigned to the middle schools and one at Prior Lake High School, who play an important role in school safety and building positive relationships with students.

Over the years, we have worked hard to improve the safety of our schools by way of increasing the number of surveillance cameras throughout the district and redesigning the front entrances to better control access to the buildings.

Parents or other community members who wish to visit a building during the school day are only granted access to one door to the main office where they are greeted by a staff member who will make sure they know their business with the school, properly sign in and take a badge. Staff are trained to ensure all visitors are wearing a badge when they see visitors in school and accompany them to the main office if they are not displaying the proper credentials.

At Prior Lake High School (PLHS), all doors but one are locked to outside visitors during the school day and guests must sign in at the front desk which is staffed full time by a campus supervisor. Thanks to voter approval, we are in the process of designing a new, secure front entrance to PLHS to further improve safety.

For before and after-school hours, we have coded door access for Kids' Company and Community Education. In addition, PLSAS has an anonymous Tip Line (952-226-0005) to provide students, parents and community members a way to report unsafe situations. We take all threats seriously and we follow up anytime someone voices a concern.

One of the most important safety measures in the fight against violence is continuing to build caring relationships with students and helping to foster strong community connections.

At this time, more than ever, we all need to remind ourselves and our children that our schools are safe places. What happened in Florida, thankfully, is a rare occurrence. A resource titled "Talking to Children About Violence," created by the National Association of School Psychologists, might be helpful as you talk with your children about this latest event.

1. Reassure children that they are safe
2. Make time to talk
3. Keep explanations developmentally appropriate
4. Review safety procedures
5. Observe children's emotional state
6. Limit television viewing of these events
7. Maintain a normal routine

At PLSAS, we know we have an incredible responsibility to provide an excellent education to our students in a safe learning environment. As a parent and an educator myself, please be assured that PLSAS has the safety and best interests of our students in mind at all times. We will continue to work to make sure that our procedures for preventing and dealing with crisis situations are as strong as possible to keep our community's children protected.