

LTUSD slow to create safe school environment



Hundreds of South Tahoe High Students rally for safe schools on March 14. Photo/Julie Threewit

By Kathryn Reed

Teachers are now human shields, ready to take a bullet for a student. And students – little kids, not just teenagers – no longer feel safe at school, a place that not so long ago was a sanctuary of sorts.

During the recent Tahoe Valley Elementary School lockdown teacher Jody Dayberry peeked into the hallway. She saw the fear in the first-graders' eyes, and the tears rolling down. One 6-year-old asked if someone had a gun and told her teacher she didn't want to die.

This is what it's like today to be a student – and a teacher – in the United States. A certain innocence has been lost.

Dayberry relayed this exchange to the school board members at their meeting this week. Fortunately, that event was a false alarm, but for the kids it was still a scary time.

“We as educators can't stay silent,” Dayberry said. “We can't idly sit by and hope the odds are on our side. We must make plans. We must have procedures.”

She lobbied for training in how to talk to students and getting help with identifying at-risk students.

Talk about safety measures is cheap until someone dies.

Talk is what Lake Tahoe Unified School District is good at. There was even more talk on March 13, with board members wanting to talk even more before they pull the proverbial trigger to actually do something.

Safety in this South Shore district has been talked about for at least a decade. School shootings seem to spur the discussion. So it was in **summer 2013**. At that time the board said yes to cameras and other measures.

The cameras, well, they still aren't all in. The wiring isn't even in place for many. The district has more than 80 cameras and wants to triple that number.

Safety was an issue in **2010 as well**. A gate at Viking Way was talked about, but never came to fruition. Cameras were also part of the discussion then.

What the board decided to do on Tuesday was allow staff to come up with plans, and to have community meetings to gather input from the public, students and staff. In other words, more talk and no action.

The latest impetus to do more was prompted by last month's

deadly school shooting in Florida.

Shelby Lyon, South Tahoe High School's rep on the board, articulated her peers' opinions, saying they don't want a fence – that now is the time to build bridges, not fences. She presented the district with a petition signed by students regarding their stance against a fence.

STHS teacher Eric Beavers said, "Fences are not going to bring our community together. I think we put up fences and gates because we don't know what else to do."

District staff admitted fencing in STHS would be a difficult endeavor. This is the most difficult school to secure because of all the buildings, therefore points of entry.

Staff is contemplating reinforcing windows so they wouldn't be easy to shoot through, having entrances more secure so it would be near impossible to get to where students are assembled, and installing cameras in hallways so an intruder would be tracked more easily. These measures could be for all schools. There was also talk of installing panic buttons in classrooms and/or front offices that would link to law enforcement. Having more modes of communication was broached.

"We are also recommending a school resource officer at the middle school. We need it for cannabis, and safety and security," Superintendent Jim Tarwater said.

He said that person can carry the gun, but does not want teachers to be armed.

Tarwater also wants a social worker for K-3.

Creating a threat assessment management team is another idea. Members would include law enforcement, probation, mental health and others. After all, even when someone is expelled from school, they are still in the community and can be a threat.