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Auditor General DePasquale Stunned by Woefully Outdated Safety Issues at Woodland Hills School District

Audit finds safety policies have not been updated for decades

PITTSBURGH – Auditor General Eugene DePasquale today said Woodland Hills School District, Allegheny County, must prioritize school safety improvements and academics to better serve students and the community.

“In this day and age, it is critical that emergency response plans are in place at every school and are routinely rehearsed with first responders so that not a second is wasted during a school emergency,” DePasquale said.

“Despite the tragic school incidents around the country this spring, my team found that not only are some of the emergency agreements with first responders out of date at Woodland Hills, but there are also internal policies and procedures governing school safety that haven’t been updated in decades,” he said.

DePasquale today released a 26-page audit report for Woodland Hills School District that covers July 1, 2012, through June 30, 2016. It also includes a review of safety aspects through the 2017-18 school year. The report includes two findings and 10 recommendations.

“Woodland Hills has six police departments that must coordinate efforts in the event of an emergency situation where a quick response is absolutely crucial,” he said. “Not having the proper plans in place unnecessarily puts students and staff at an increased risk of harm. As we have seen in incidents across the country, every second counts.”

Inadequate Safety Plans, Outdated Policies

Pennsylvania law requires school districts and local law enforcement agencies to update and biennially establish procedures to be followed when a health or safety incident occurs on school property or at a school-sponsored activity.

Auditors found that the Woodland Hills School District’s agreements with all six local law enforcement agencies expired in April 2017 and as of June 30, 2017, none were re-executed. Subsequently, the six agreements were renewed five to 13 months late.

Auditors also found that, although the district has a bullying prevention policy, there are no administrative procedures aimed at raising awareness about bullying and no standardized, written procedures for investigating complaints. The bullying prevention policy is also not posted in prominent locations within the district, and the district does not provide annual bullying prevention training to its students.

“I was stunned to learn that the Woodland Hills School District does not provide annual bullying prevention training,” DePasquale said. “Making our schools safer is about being proactive and educating students about how to prevent bullying before an incident even occurs.”

“Working with students and staff to prevent bullying is a step that no school can afford to skip, especially given the history of violence at Woodland Hills.”

Additionally, several of the district’s safety policies are woefully outdated. One policy was written 35 years ago and has never been updated by the district. Another was adopted 24 years ago and never updated. Two more policies were last updated more than 20 years ago.

Woodland Hills School District Outdated Board Policies		
Policy No.	Policy Title	Date Adopted (Revised)
218.2	Metal/Weapon Detection System or Device Policy	April 9, 1997 (rev.)
220.1	Gang Policy	April 13, 1994
225	Students and Police Policy	June 29, 1983
225.A	Students and Law Enforcement Policy	May 11, 1994 (rev.)

“When it comes to the safety of our students, having policies that were adopted decades ago and never updated is unacceptable,” DePasquale said. “The Woodland Hills School District must immediately review and update all district policies governing school safety and communicate these updates to the entire school community so that students, parents, teachers and administrators are aware of them.”

This audit was one of the first completed since DePasquale increased the level of his school safety reviews. To protect the safety of students and staff, some safety recommendations were shared confidentially with the appropriate district personnel and law enforcement agencies.

“Given the tragic school shootings in our country, and the incidents that occurred within the Woodland Hills School District itself, student safety should be a foremost priority for the district,” DePasquale said.

Proper Certifications Missing

Auditors also found that the district failed to obtain the proper certification determinations from the Pennsylvania Department of Education for nine individuals employed as behavior specialists.

Although the job, which is a non-teaching position, is not governed by PDE guidelines, prior to filling the positions the district should have sought guidance from PDE to determine whether certifications or licenses are required based on the duties specified in the job descriptions.

Nine individuals were missing the required certifications. Seven of the nine were still employed as of March 2018 without the required certifications, and one of those nine was employed without proper certification since the 2009-10 school year.

“Woodland Hills School District must ensure that it has qualified support staff working with its students,” DePasquale said. “Part of the effort to improve school safety is making sure personnel who interact with students have the proper qualifications to provide the services those students need.”

DePasquale noted that since PDE determined that the behavioral specialist position requires certification, the district may be subject to \$59,146 in basic education subsidy forfeiture.

“With the significant costs the Woodland Hills School District faces for expenses such as charter school tuition, the district cannot afford to forfeit even a dime in state subsidies, let alone over \$59,000,” DePasquale said. “Going forward, the district must obtain the proper certification determinations from the Pennsylvania Department of Education prior to hiring individuals to fill positions.”

The Woodland Hills School District audit report is available online at: www.PaAuditor.gov.

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