

**Tredyffrin/Easttown School District  
School Security Consultation Services  
Final Report on Fencing at Valley Forge Middle School**

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Kenneth S. Trump, MPA  
and Charles Hibbert  
National School Safety and Security Services

**Background, Focus and Process**

The consultant firm submitted a proposal on August 26, 2015, in response to an inquiry for school security assessment consultation services for an evaluation of fencing at Valley Forge Middle School in the Tredyffrin/Easttown School District (TESD). The district's board subsequently approved a recommendation by the district's administration and our firm's services were formally contracted on September 28, 2015. Off-site information collection and review began upon the execution of the formal engagement. A site visit was conducted by Charles Hibbert and Kenneth Trump on November 18-20, 2015.

The consultants focused specifically on their charge of evaluating and making recommendations related to fencing at Valley Forge Middle School. The consultants' engagement followed an extended period of debate and input from the community about fencing at the school. A climate of contentiousness between the district and some members of the community was clearly evident from both the historical documentation provided by the district as well as unsolicited information received from a community representative prior to the site visit.

The evaluation process included:

- A review of documents and data including school emergency plans, incident data, and related information
- A review of written information on physical security enhancements in the district following the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shootings

- A review of fencing diagrams, sketches, architectural drawings, prior meeting information and related documents
- Interviews with central office school district administrators, board members, building administrators, and the district's architect
- Site visits to all district schools including Valley Forge Middle School building and grounds
- Facilitated a community input meeting during the first evening of the site visit
- Provided a Facilities Committee meeting presentation of our recommendations

In planning the site visit, the consultants twice requested that the police chief or his designee(s) be asked to meet with us during our on-site visit. The district advised that the chief responded that he was not available to meet with us at any time during the site visit. We were subsequently told that our follow-up request for a representative, in fact any representative, of the department to meet with us was also declined by the police department.

The consultants did find references to police input on fencing in prior meetings. The lack of police department participation in the on-site visit did not detract from our assessment given the extensive amount of information received from the aforementioned sources.

Our evaluation context for this project included:

- Listen to community and district representative positions and concerns
- Understand the value of fencing in day-to-day operations of schools and student safety at TESD, not just an active shooter narrow-focused framework
- Determine if fencing at Valley Forge Middle School would help reduce safety risks and strengthen student and school safety
- Consider how our recommendations for Valley Forge Middle School align with best practices and our 30+ years of preK-12 national school security experience

Our recommendations herein are driven by best practices for the safety of students, staff and property. This report may fall under public record exemptions for security matters.

## **Community Input Meeting and Overall Community Context**

The consultants identified a number of common themes from the evening meeting of community members. These included community member opinions that:

- Funds allocated for fencing should be used for instructional and/or staffing purposes
- Fencing would have an adverse impact on property values
- Recent school board election results were perceived by some audience members to represent a reflection of the objection to fencing at Valley Forge Middle School including by many of those who attended the meeting
- Fencing will create a prison-like appearance
- Fencing will not stop an active shooter
- Fencing serves no purpose
- A long history of differing interpretations and disagreements between some community members and the district existed regarding the issue of fencing at Valley Forge Middle School

The contentious relationship between some members of the community who opposed fencing and the school district's representatives was quite evident at the evening community input meeting. This contentiousness was reinforced during the open committee meeting with board members, the administration and the community on November 20, 2015. It was at this meeting at the conclusion of the consultants' site visit that we provided a presentation on our process and recommendations, and answered questions from community members.

Contrary to the assertions by some community members who attended the community input meeting and the board committee meeting, the consultant team had no predetermined conclusions regarding recommendations about fencing at Valley Forge Middle School. What **was** clear to the consultants by the end of the site visit, though, was that there are some members of the community who have predetermined opinions against any and all recommendations that might be made for fencing at the school. We found

their opinions to be entrenched, their objectivity skewed, and the attacks by some of these individuals upon the consultants' recommendations and intellect to be disingenuous.

The fact that a few community members attacked our credibility and opinions when we made recommendations for fencing in the upper fields and track areas, yet felt that our recommendations were on-target for no fencing at the border of the residential area, spoke volumes about the lack of objectivity by some community members. It suggested to us that their opposition had less to do with the merits of fencing for student safety and security purposes, and more with furthering entrenched personal and power struggles with select district board members and administrators. This was disappointing given the overall highly educated, professional and generally forward-thinking characteristics of this community and its nationally acclaimed school district.

The consultants genuinely value community input into our assessment process for a school district. Such input is one of multiple factors taken into consideration when evaluating school security issues. This component of the assessment is not, however, the only factor in our process and, best practices for school security and child safety always outweigh school-community politics in our final decisions including those in this project.

### **Key relevant concepts in security and fencing**

A number of fundamental concepts and best practices in security and fencing factored into the consultants' evaluation process for examining fencing at Valley Forge Middle School.

Key concepts in security include:

- Security is about risk reduction, not risk elimination. From the White House to the schoolhouse, there is no perfect security. However, at these and many other locations, reasonable risk reduction measures can and should be taken to prevent, mitigate and intervene with security threats.
- Layered security measures contribute to risk reduction.
- Examples of areas and types of layered security include:
  - Outer perimeter security measures

- Inner perimeter security measures
- Use of surveillance cameras
- Access control measures
- Staff greeters and visitor management
- Staff training
- Emergency guidelines, plans and drills
- Working relationships with first responder community partners

The consultants found numerous examples of these layered measures at TESD schools.

There are also concepts in fencing that are applicable to the general discussion of how fencing contributes to strengthened security and risk reduction efforts. These include:

- Fencing is one of multiple security layers and is often the first layer of security located at the outer perimeter of a protected site
- The goal of fencing, like the goal of security in general, is to contribute to risk reduction
- Fencing does not automatically equate to a “prison image.” There are a number of different types of fencing that can be used to avoid such perceptions and be aesthetically acceptable to the community
- Conversations about fencing in the TESD school-community prior to our site visit were too narrowly skewed to active shooters and extreme violent threats.
- Fencing serves to discourage or delay penetration by accident, force or other methods

The application of fencing at school settings, including Valley Forge Middle School and other TESD sites, provides risk reduction benefits including:

- Visually and physically defining perimeter boundaries
- Deter, delay and guide human access to campus
- Deter animal access to student areas (deer, fox, dogs, etc.)
- Delay/slow down accidental access to student areas such as those caused by vehicle mechanical failures, driver emergencies, etc.

- Enhancing student supervision capabilities for teachers, administrators and school support staff
- Provide a clear visual cue of property boundaries
- Identify to staff adults unauthorized to be on campus
- Used to identify rally points and student management during fire drills, evacuations, etc.
- Provide boundaries for athletic-related activities (ball locations, children chasing balls into unsafe areas, etc.)
- Deter or delay special needs student runners whose unique needs may warrant additional protective measures

Some of the above most basic principles of professional security, including preK-12 school security, are relevant and applicable to the analysis and recommendations regarding fencing at Valley Forge Middle School specifically, and TESD schools in general.

#### **Feedback from TESD schools with fencing**

While the scope of this consultation was narrowly defined to evaluating and making recommendations regarding fencing at Valley Forge Middle School, the consultants felt it would be valuable to observe and understand fencing applications at other district schools. We therefore visited all district schools to conduct a visual observation of fencing and to speak with site administrators or her/his designee.

We consistently heard the following from TESD administrators whose sites have been fenced:

- Fencing supports student supervision
- Fencing has not hindered emergency evacuation plans and drills, fire drills, etc.
- No known student accidental injuries have occurred because of the fencing
- Minimal neighbor concerns arose (except at Valley Forge Middle School) but those that existed at other district schools were easily resolved (often by gates)
- Fencing is not a new concept at district schools

- Administrators would not remove existing fencing if given that option
- “Fencing helps keep children safe” was a recurring theme

In short, we did not find a hint of objection by building administrators and/or their designees to prior or newly added fencing at TESD sites.

### **Valley Forge Middle School and TESD recommendations**

Based upon the above background, process, principles and findings, our recommendations are as follows:

1. Under current conditions and usage, we do NOT recommend a fence at the far residential border of Valley Forge Middle School.
2. We support the signage, monument and surveying markers recently put in place along the far residential border of Valley Forge Middle School.
3. It is strongly recommended that the district determine and communicate any concerns and positions regarding neighbor encroachment and/or use of school property along the far residential border of Valley Forge Middle School.
4. The lower fields are not used by Valley Forge Middle School students on a regular basis during the school day, REDACTED FOR SECURITY

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- REDACTED FOR SECURITY We have no recommendations for changes to the current conditions or practices for that area.
5. We recommend enclosing the upper field and track with a five (5) foot minimum, six (6) foot preferred, black vinyl coated chain link fence consistent with existing Valley Forge Middle School fencing and that used elsewhere in the district. The consultants recommend a minimum of three gates along the upper field to facilitate evacuation egress to the lower fields pending further principal and architect input.
  6. We recommend adding a section of fencing to close out the area on the Chesterbrook side of the building, along with closing off the saw tooth opening currently on the Chesterbrook roadway fence by using either additional fencing material or a gate. Further consultation with the district’s architect on best design

options and, the principal and architect on any fire or other evacuation implications including (but not limited to) potential gating needs is recommended.

7. The brush area adjacent to the upper field/track area should be cleared and the existing pathway extended to Valley Forge Road.
8. We recommend a fence alongside Valley Forge Road adjacent to the track. The fence should be five (5) foot minimum, six (6) foot preferred, black vinyl coated chain link fence consistent with existing Valley Forge Middle School fencing and that used elsewhere in the district. The track is very close to this heavily traveled roadway (Valley Forge Road) and has a public sidewalk immediately adjacent to it. Under the conditions observed during the site visit, with no fence at that location, the track was accessible and used by adult, non-school employees for personal use during the school day that increases student safety risks. We recommend the fence be installed within three to ten(10) feet from the sidewalk with the exact location to be determined by the district's architect consistent with best design practices. A gate should be installed for pass-through at Valley Forge Road by the existing crosswalk to the neighboring community. Fencing should be installed to close off the track area from the parking lot with gating as appropriate based upon input from the architect.
9. Consistent with district practices at other district schools, gates at Valley Forge Middle School should be locked during school hours with the exception of site-by-site individual gates identified as needing to be unlocked. The district should reserve the right to lock unlocked gates if so needed. Protocols and staff training should be put in place for unlocking locked gates if such gates require opening for a safe egress for evacuation drills and actual emergencies.
10. The district should adopt a district-wide policy and procedures restricting the use of school tracks, courts, etc. during school hours. Allowing community use of such facilities during school hours exposes children and staff to greater safety risks. Signage communicating these restrictions should be posted at all such sites.



## **Conclusion**

The consultants believe that the TESD board and administration have gone above and beyond what is reasonable to obtain community input and accommodate community concerns. The district's primary responsibility is for the safety and security of its students and staff. Community convenience, as well as community individual or group special interests, cannot continue to drag out what is an already over-extended process from the professional perspectives of the consultants.

The recommendations above are grounded in best practices and an independent, objective evaluation of the safety and security of TESD students and staff at Valley Forge Middle School. We encourage the board and administration to view them as such as the district moves forward with this matter.

We wish to thank the board, administration and community for their support and participation in our assessment process.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kenneth S. Trump". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial 'K'.

Kenneth S. Trump, MPA

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