

# Safety at BHS

## Administrators, Teachers Seek Improved Policy



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Violence in schools has been on the rise, with over 161 school shootings in the United States since 2013 (everytownresearch.org), and Burlington High School teachers and staff are attempting to bolster the school's safety policy.

Just one year ago the BHS teachers' union, known as the Burlington Education Association (BEA), filed a grievance (formal complaint) concerning safety. In the grievance, the teachers stated that they did not feel safe at BHS. As a result, BSD administration responded by hiring Burlington-based safety consultation firm, Margolis Healy, to conduct an audit. This safety and security assessment brought light to many flaws, and has led to current and proposed changes at BHS.

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The audit pinpointed four essential security challenges the school faced. These included emergency response planning, access control and visitor management, culture and climate, and security systems/technology.

BHS currently has a safety task force led by Assistant Principal Ben Johnson. The task force reviews safety procedures and discusses how they can be improved. Currently, BHS is struggling to find ways to adapt to its difficult building plan. "The physical layout of our building is the biggest obstacle we have," Mr. Johnson said. He feels that BHS is doing a good job at being prepared for safety crises. "You can never be 100% prepared for 100% of the things that could possibly happen, but I think we just need to continue to practice and improve on what we do."

Ms. Fialko Casey is the BEA Safety Representative. She feels that the conversation around safety at the high school is

happening as a direct result of action by the association. "We worry as a staff that we're not moving forward quickly enough to secure this space," she said. "You're never going to be fully prepared, but I think for that horror we all see on the news we could be much better prepared."

During the audit, Margolis Healy noticed a lack of familiarity among faculty and staff with BHS safety policy. "Many staff members with whom we spoke, were unfamiliar with the existing emergency response plan and it appears that these documents have not been advertised or promulgated in the appropriate fashion," the audit states. Additionally, the audit explains that many staff were unfamiliar with school relocation sites and the evacuation routes to these sites.

For BHS, access control and visitor management was a red-flag. The school's building plan has not adapted well to the 21st century. The audit cited unlocked front doors as a main hazard which was not up to national school security standards. "Burlington High School does not specifically account for or deny access to anyone during the school day," the audit states.

BHS is in the process of planning and implementing many improvements based on the audit. The safety task force hopes to add an electronic buzz-in system to control access during the school day. Mr. Johnson anticipates the system being added in the next year. "[The buzz-in system] would probably be the biggest change that people will see," he said. School doors would be open at the start of the school day, but would be locked around 8:15 am. A camera and two-way speaker would allow the student affairs office assistant to admit them, by unlocking the door electronically. BHS is not up to standards with other schools in the area. "We're one of the only schools in the district that doesn't have a buzz-in system," Mr. Johnson added.

Just three weeks ago a woman walked into BHS, a complete stranger, who had a warrant for her arrest by local police. She wandered around A Building



Photo: Alexandre Silberman/Register  
BHS Assistant Principal Ben Johnson poses with new security signage. The school is currently making safety improvements as a result of a 2014 safety audit.

and committed theft. The incident was a wake-up call for BHS administrators. BHS recently began locking the front doors after 8:15 am and having the handicap ramp be the only access point. "Legally we have to have some doors open," Ms. Fialko Casey said, referring to the Americans with Disabilities Act laws, "that is something I think is hard for people to understand." The ramp entrance is being monitored with a newly installed security camera.

The student ambassador program in the main lobby was an additional warning sign for Margolis Healy. This student-body program welcomed visitors to BHS up until this year.

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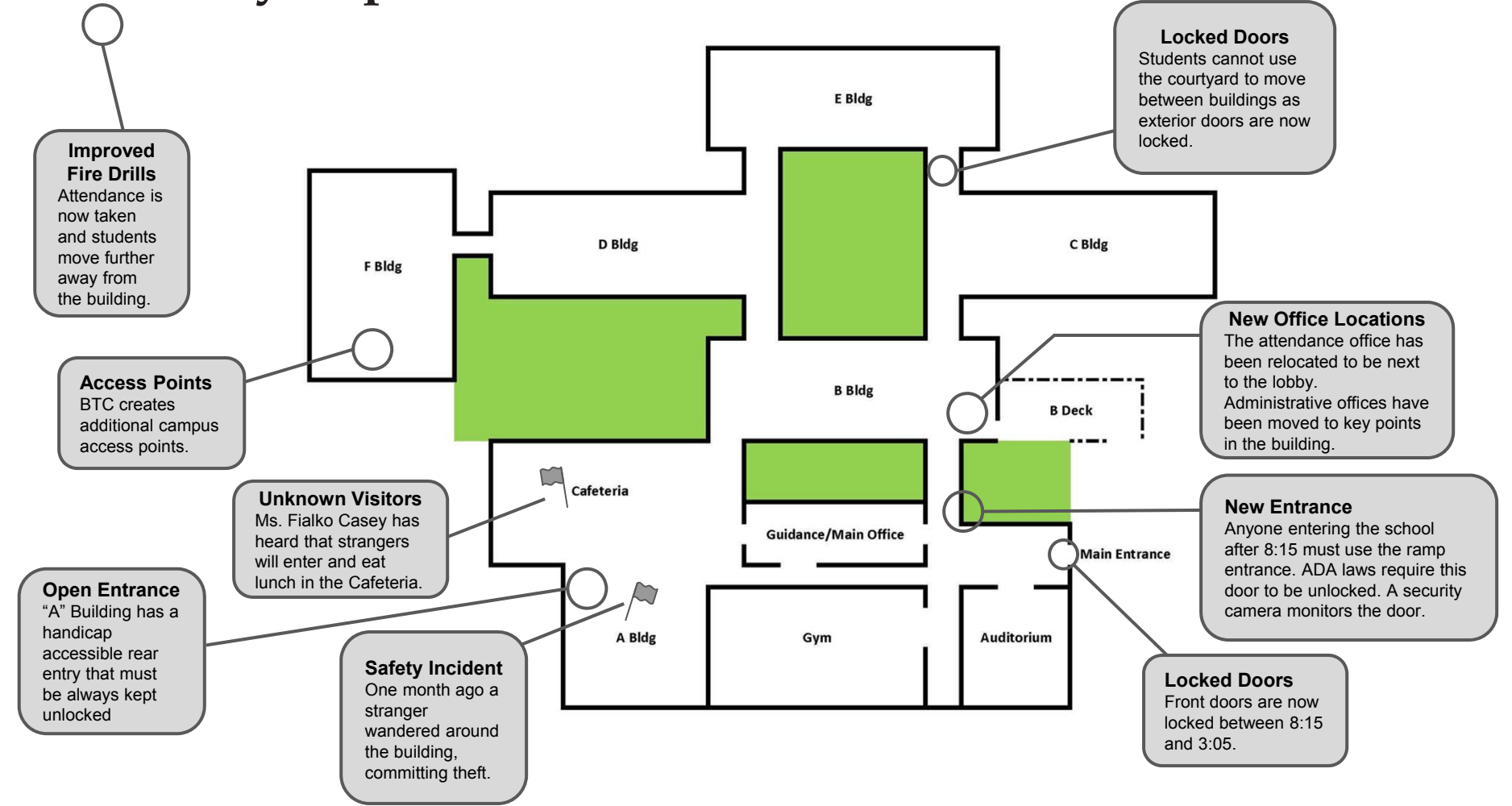
The program was discontinued following the audit. "It is our professional opinion that this practice puts these students in a position of risk during a potentially violent encounter at the main entrance to the school," the firm commented in the audit. BHS replaced the ambassador desk with new leather furniture,

creating a "loungestyle" space for students. Ms. Fialko Casey had mixed feelings about this decision. "I think we need more space for our students to just be together, enjoy each other, and relax during the day, but that's not the space for it," she said. "We would like to see there be one way in and one way out, with adults there, not students." Margolis Healy felt that BHS needed to improve its security technology. This would include more security cameras and a buzz-in electronic access system. While BHS currently has security cameras, they are limited in number. The school would need to be fully covered by the system to be effective.

BHS has been upgrading its security camera system with the addition of eight more this school year. "As we get more money we will add more cameras," Mr. Johnson said. Around fifty security cameras currently monitor the school. The cameras are a live feed that is recorded and viewable on administrators' computers. According to Mr. Johnson, the size and layout of the school continues to be an issue for installing these cameras. "A traditional school could have 50 cameras to cover the whole school, but we have so many nooks and crannies that we have to slowly build our capacity," he said.

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## Safety Improvements and Issues at BHS



BHS has made additional key improvements. All teachers now have a Crisis Binder with instructions on how to respond to various emergencies, and members of the Crisis Response Team all have walkie-talkies. Offices have been relocated to have administrators at key points in the building. Fire drills have been improved this year. Now, students must move further away from the building, and attendance is taken. BHS has made some considerable improvements over the years. When Ms. Fialko Casey began working at BHS, fire drills went out into the courtyard. Different types of lockdown drills will soon be practiced including a spontaneous situation lockdown. "The administration is responding to our need to become more secure and sophisticated in our responses," she said.

For years BHS has had a relaxed school culture and climate, including an open campus. This was cited as a major concern. According to the audit, many faculty and staff members feel there is a lack of support from the school administration and school board concerning safety. "We've had an open campus for years," Ms. Fialko Casey said. "It's really new to us—this sense of vigilance that we're trying to cultivate. I think there is a real reluctance to change that culture."

"I think how we plan against a safety situation is by having school culture and climate that helps protect you against those types of things," Mr. Johnson said. He feels that the implementation of advisory has helped to improve school culture. "Advisories are a very good piece of how we can build positive culture and climate to

keep our school safe," he added. The audit also suggested some recommendations for BHS. Many of these were indicated as critical and low-cost changes. These included improving the level of faculty and staff participation on the school safety team, and improving

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emergency preparedness drills by practicing various scenarios. Lastly, Margolis Healy strongly encouraged enhancing the level of involvement by BHS' School Resource Officer.

So how can change come to BHS? The Burlington School Board finance committee is the group responsible for securing

the funds for any improvements. Security cameras, buzz-in systems, and staff training all require considerable funds. "If it's only teachers and administrators asking for money, we're not going to get it," Ms. Fialko Casey said. "Parents and students need to believe that this building is worth securing and to generate or demand the funds to do it." She feels that the remaining financial obstacle will be difficult to overcome. "I would like the excuse of not having the money to go away. Our values cost money, and we can't do more with less. That is a myth, what you get for less is less," she said. "We've got to do some cost benefit analysis here. Don't our children deserve a 21st Century building? Or is this community satisfied with rags patched together, and the illusion of safety?"



Photos: Alexandre Silberman/Register  
New security signage at BHS has been added this December.



A sign on the exterior of BHS indicates the use of security cameras. School officials are currently attempting to make safety improvements.