

School Districts Receive Education Grants

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BY DOUG WATERS

One of the U.S. Department of Education's largest grants was awarded to 11 school districts in south central Kentucky for disaster and emergency preparation. The first round of several ongoing safety training sessions is at Western University's Carroll Knicely Center from 1 p.m. to 4 p.m. Thursday and 9 a.m. to 12 noon Friday, according to David Keller, manager of the \$471,000 grant. The duplicate sessions are an attempt to accommodate law-enforcement personnel.

Keller said the purpose of the sessions is "to get everyone up to speed" before implementation begins in individual districts.

Upon completion of the nearly 18-month project, Keller said, "These school districts will be in the top 1 percent of school districts in the nation in terms of their capacity to respond to emergencies."

Allen, Barren, Logan and Simpson counties are among the districts that chose to participate under the banner of the Green River Regional Educational Cooperative, which consists of about 30 Kentucky school districts, said Keller, who recently retired as the executive director of Kentucky's School Boards Association.

"Thursday and Friday's sessions will serve as an introduction to campus safety evaluation," said Mike Hurt, the secondary supervisor of Logan County Schools.

"Sometimes we think that nothing will ever happen to us, but when you watch the news, that's the first thing everyone does say when something does happen," Hurt said. "We want to stay ahead of the game and just make sure we can do everything possible to make sure our students are safe."

Frank Schwab, the assistant superintendent of Simpson County Schools, said the training represents a way to further existing safety plans and communication.

"It gave us an opportunity to get some training for our folks and for community agencies that would respond in the event of a major emergency or crisis," Schwab said, "and it would give us an opportunity to do more planning as a total community."

Each district assembled safety teams composed of first responders, like police and fire departments, and school administrators. Agencies not affiliated with the school systems signed collaborative agreements with the districts, Keller said.

Keller said national experts from **Risk Solutions International**, an operational risk consulting firm, will provide vulnerability assessments for two schools in each district, and then equip the teams to evaluate the remaining schools. The districts will also receive updated safety manuals and participate in simulation exercises with emergency responders.

"They'll get software, tools and training," Keller said.

GRREC partners with the Kentucky Center for School Safety and the Kentucky Office of Homeland Security, he said, so school districts will receive a rundown of the federal emergency response framework.

The grant is a unique opportunity, Keller said, because most districts are not able "to do the breadth of this"; training. He said the education department awards grants to roughly one-fifth of all applicants and this one is the biggest in Kentucky, although other safety and education related grants were awarded to Pulaski, Bourbon and other counties.

"I think the biggest reason why GRREC was able to get this grant facing stiff competition was they constructed their grants built on partnerships at the local and state levels,"; Keller said.

The leadership of GRREC's executive director, Liz Storey, who lives in Bowling Green, was vital to securing the grant, he said. Also, the track record of the school districts and individuals like David Young impressed the education department.

After understanding the gist of the grant, Young, the safety and alternative education director for Allen County Schools, said his district signed up to be proactive.

"Even though our plans are updated and in place, we thought we could possibly learn from the experts that are coming in," Young said.

Keller, a Bowling Green native who lives in Shelbyville, said other regional school districts chose not to participate due to time constraints or confidence in existing safety plans.

Future training will feature half-day sessions on crisis communications, according to a GRREC release, and topics will include "Terrorism and Schools"; and "Disaster Recovery."