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Eastern York teaches situational awareness

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Photos

Eastern York Middle School sixth-graders interact with Emergency Planning and Response Management Coordinator Mike Bookser, of the Center for Safe Schools based in Camp Hill, while he speaks during a Situational Awareness Training assembly at the school in Wrightsville, Monday, Oct. 31, 2016. Dawn J. Sagert photo (Photo: The York Dispatch)

When Timothy Justin Hannah Jr., 23, of York City, impersonated a student to enter Eastern York School District's high school last month, Assistant Superintendent Rita Becker knew everyone in the district needed some additional training.

While she was looking into additional training sessions for the faculty and staff, she noticed that there isn't a lot of training on situational awareness for students. She found this troublesome because students often notice something wrong before any adults do.

Becker began working with the Center for Safe Schools to have a presentation on situational awareness, or just knowing what's going on around them. The purpose was to encourage students to be more aware of their surroundings and embolden them to report any suspicious or uncomfortable behavior.

"Students notice things in situations but they don't feel their voice will be heard," Becker said. "This is so that they know their voices are powerful."

Mike Bookser, the emergency planning and response management coordinator with Center for Safe Schools, said that he and his colleagues worked on the presentation that they give to teachers to make it more suitable for kids. As far as Becker is aware, there is no other presentation like the one given by Bookser that focuses on situational awareness for students.

Bookser explained that in the week his group took to create the presentation for students, the staff had to be cautious not to give them inspiration to do anything illegal or dangerous themselves. The presentation didn't talk at length about school shootings, for example, but it took the time to talk about preparing for extreme weather, fire drills and seeing strangers near the school who look menacing.

"They have to understand that bad guys are out there," he said. "They have to be judgmental."

Bookser explained to the students that there are three stages in situational awareness: perception, comprehension and prediction. He spent time with the students demonstrating their awareness by asking them questions like where the nearest fire alarm was, where the closest first aid kit was and the number of cameras that are videotaping them in the hallway.

"There's people out there that do bad things all the time," Bookser said. "Report them to your teacher or principal."

He also explained that there are three types of predators — the opportunist, the stalker and the true predator — so that students are aware of the different types of people who might be trying to take advantage of them.

The presentation made several references to the incident with Hannah in September to hopefully stop anything similar from happening in the future.

Eastern York Middle School Principal Keith Shoemaker said he hopes the training will make students more aware of their surroundings in an age when they are often distracted by technology.

"Middle school students today are so engrossed in their electronic devices that they hardly take a second to look up and see what's going on around them," Shoemaker said. "Students need to be aware of one's surrounding to be able to identify potential threats and dangerous situations."