

As Plum students return to school this week, district leadership prepares and the community comes together

Administrators say they'll be monitoring to make sure students are OK in aftermath of house explosion that killed six, including a 12-year-old



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As more than 3,500 students start the 2023 school year in Plum Borough this week, district leadership and others are preparing to help students navigate a return to classes in the aftermath of a community tragedy.

Students will head back to classrooms less than two weeks after a house explosion in the Rustic Ridge development took the lives of six people, including 12-year-old Keegan Clontz, a member of the Plum Youth football team and a student in the Plum Borough School District.

Denise Sedlacek, assistant superintendent of the district, said her focus is ensuring those students, teachers and administrators can start the school year as smoothly as possible when classes resume on Wednesday.

"Returning to that sense of normalcy, that sense of structure, is critical at this time," Ms. Sedlacek said.

Since the Aug. 12 explosion, the community has held fundraisers, vigils, and other events, with more planned in the coming weeks.

A celebration of life was held on Sunday to honor Kevin Seburnia, 55, the popular neighborhood handyman who died in the explosion.

The other victims were the owners of the home that exploded, Heather, 51, and Paul Gravitz, 56; Casey Clontz, 38, father of Keegan; and neighbor Michael Thomas, 57, who lived at 139 Rustic Ridge Drive .

Ms. Sedlacek said school leaders will be keeping a close eye on students as they return to classes — especially those who were close friends, family members, or relatives of the victims. Private providers in the community have reached out to offer counseling services to supplement the resources from the school district, she said.

“Plum is a very unique community, not unlike, I’m sure, other communities in Western Pennsylvania,” she said. “When tragedy strikes, we come together.”

Kimberly Blair, a psychologist with UPMC Western Psych, said each child’s reaction will differ, depending on how close they were to the victims, their age, and how much they feel they want to talk about their feelings about the tragedy. She agreed that the normalcy of a school building can help students heal.

There is a balancing act of letting students talk about how they’re feeling, while also trying to establish old routines and activities that will create a comfortable environment, she said.

“Grown-ups should be aware that their own behavior, own anxiety, and own fear can affect kids,” Ms. Blair said. “Kids are pretty perceptive.”

It will be important for teachers and administrators to look for signs that students are struggling. Children who are experiencing post-traumatic stress can have a hard time focusing on work, have headaches or stomach aches, or are more aggressive in the weeks that follow such an event, said Ms. Blair said.

Presenting accurate information about what is going on, along with giving them the space to talk about their concerns, is vital, she said. If students still have issues more than a month or two after the incident, further intervention like therapy and counseling may be appropriate, according to Ms. Blair. “It does feel like a lot of your personal power has been taken away, and finding ways to be active and engaged and have some control of the situation and contribute positively to the community, that helps,” Ms. Blair said.

One of the planned fundraisers to benefit the families of the victims filled up so quickly that volunteers had to expand it. Brian Dunaway, head coach of the Plum High School varsity boys golf team and head golf professional at Willowbrook Country Club, planned a golf outing for Sept. 17. The afternoon session filled up so quickly organizers had to add a morning session to keep up with demand. There are now 72 groups of four scheduled to play, and with those registrations and gift baskets to raffle, Mr. Dunaway expects the total raised to exceed \$50,000.

Mr. Dunaway said he's run thousands of golf events, but doesn't have as much experience fundraising. The donations coming in, in less than a week, have been overwhelming, but "it's a great problem to have."

Multiple churches in the area are also planning services to pray for the lives lost. Rev. Joshua Obermann, pastor of Calvary Lutheran Church in Murrysville, said some of his congregation hails from Plum, including from the Rustic Ridge development. One of them is George Emanuele, who helped rescue people from the scene. Another Plum resident who attends Calvary is Richard Hrivnak, the borough's former mayor, he said. A vigil mass and collection will be held at the church on Sept. 9 at 10 a.m.

At a vigil at Rustic Ridge on Tuesday, he stressed the importance of the community coming together to support one another.

"I think as I spoke to people that night, so many people just mentioned that all of a sudden they're just hurting," Rev. Obermann said. "They were doing OK for a couple days, running on adrenaline ... and now, they're looking for that community to help them through."

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