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UCHS Principal John Hill had his entire faculty gather for a group photo just before classes began on the first day of school



A young UCPS student waves goodbye as her father preserves the moment in pictures, capturing forever her arrival on the first day of school for the 2016-2017 school year

"We probably had 30 or 40 kids at the school early this morning. They're pretty enthusiastic to get back and get to work. It's nice to see that the kids are excited about being back. The staff is excited about being back to work, too."

Principal Hill's favorite aspect of getting back into the swing of things is re-connecting with the students and staff, something he finds to be one of the most rewarding facets of his job.

"It seems like, hands down, this is going to be our best year ever academically," said Principal Hill. "The different ways we're able to serve different students is exciting. We have over 100 students dual-enrolled, and we have all kinds of exciting

programs to suit everybody's hobbies and interests. I think it's going to be the best school year ever, by far."

Union County High School is starting off the school year not only with enthusiastic kids, but also with an astounding number of them - 880 students, the highest enrollment in the high school's history.

Union County Schools Superintendent Dr. Fred Rayfield, who is in his first year at the helm of the school system following the retirement of Gary Steppe, expressed his keenness to start the 2016-2017 school year.

"I'm very excited about this school year and also the opportunity to be here, serving in Union County," said Superintendent Rayfield. "We had what I would call a very smooth start to the school year today. To be perfectly honest, it was extremely smooth except for the normal traffic issues that always come with the first day."

"For me, the best part about starting a new school year is that it's the time of year when you get to see a tremendous amount of excitement and anticipation on both sides."

"You get to see the teachers and the professional staffs begin to get excited during pre-planning and

the beginning of the year celebration.

"Then, during Open House and the first day of school, you get to see the excitement with the children and the families. Either they're just starting school, or they're going to a new building or new grade."

"This time of year, you have the majority of the feelings out there being excitement, joy and readiness to get things started."

During the Open House on Thursday, Aug. 4, students in kindergarten through ninth grade were able to go in to their respective schools early, meet their teachers and get a feel for how the rest of the school year would go.

While students were excited to meet their new teachers - and more excited to see classmates and friends - teachers showed the most enthusiasm to share freshly decorated classrooms and a jumpstart into the new year.

Fourth-grade teacher Alicia Franklin has been teaching for 16 years, and she said her love for teaching grows stronger with each year.

"I love the kids and having that great love for them," said Franklin. "It's wonderful to be able to make a difference in their lives. I'm always excited to meet my new students and get to know them."

With Open House and the first day of school marked off the list, all students and staff in the Union County School System are more than ready to take on another wonderful year of learning and growing.

"I think this year will be an excellent school year," said Superintendent Rayfield. "The strategies that we formulated over the summer through our school improvement efforts are ready to be put in place for our students."

"Of course, we performed very well last year, so we're just looking forward to building on that for the coming year."

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plans to fight, and it might be someone who's not used to fighting, but there are weapons available all over the place. Realistically, you're only buying time until the cavalry arrives."

A call to 911 was actually made, and it was the job of Union County's 911 dispatchers to notify law enforcement, who were waiting at a predetermined staging area at First United Methodist Church.

"If something like that ever happens, we're trained to be ready and get over the tunnel vision," said UCSO Capt. Chad Deyton. "There is so much going on with so many lives at risk in a situation like that, you've just got to go to the threat and try to eliminate that threat as quickly as you can while keeping casualties down."

To make the exercise more realistic, officers began arriving at the scene, one-at-a-time, each separated by two to three minutes.

Officers arrived with pellet rifles that were designed specifically for the simulation. The gunman inside was also using a BB pistol and wearing protective goggles and a helmet to prevent being shot in the face or the eye.

Each officer entered the campus at a different location with protective goggles and helmets since pellets were actually being fired.

According to Edge, the ammunition used during the exercise were plastic BBs that travel 300 feet per second.

"They can put your eye out, and if they hit your skin it feels like a wasp sting," he said. "If it hits your knuckle it will take the hide off it, so we're trying to be as safe as possible."

Those portraying students were not actually shot by the gunman. Instead, Dyer would notify them verbally that they were shot - the victim would immediately stop, get down on the ground, and remain there until paramedics arrived.

Once the threat was neutralized, which included the gunman and a search for other potential hazards, paramedics began entering the building, and victims were taken via ambulance to the hospital for about an hour, where the treatment of their gunshot wounds were also simulated.

"The biggest thing is, each individual officer needs to be ready for anything at any point," Capt. Deyton said. "You've got to stay mentally focused in the line of duty, because you don't know what that next 911 call is going to bring."

"In an active shooter situation, you can't ever have enough training. Training like this was extremely valuable all the way around. Getting with the (fire department) and EMS was really great since we all work hand-in-hand."



First responders work diligently to get victims to safety during the NGTC Active Shooter drill