

ABSTRACT

Knox County, Ohio—a rural county with 64,000 residents and 8,500 school-aged students— has created a countywide School Reunification Team to support family reunification after school emergencies. Managed by Knox County EMA, the plan ensures schools aren’t solely responsible for reunification. Each of the county’s six districts and one neighboring district selects up to 10 trained staff—mostly counselors, office staff, and administrators—to join the team. Teachers are minimally included to focus on student care. The ADA-compliant reunification site is centrally located and scalable. Team members receive quarterly messaging and annual training, including full-scale or functional exercises. Law enforcement and EMS operations are overseen by Mount Vernon PD and FD. This cross-district approach builds capacity, strengthens partnerships, and ensures reunification is handled efficiently and compassionately.

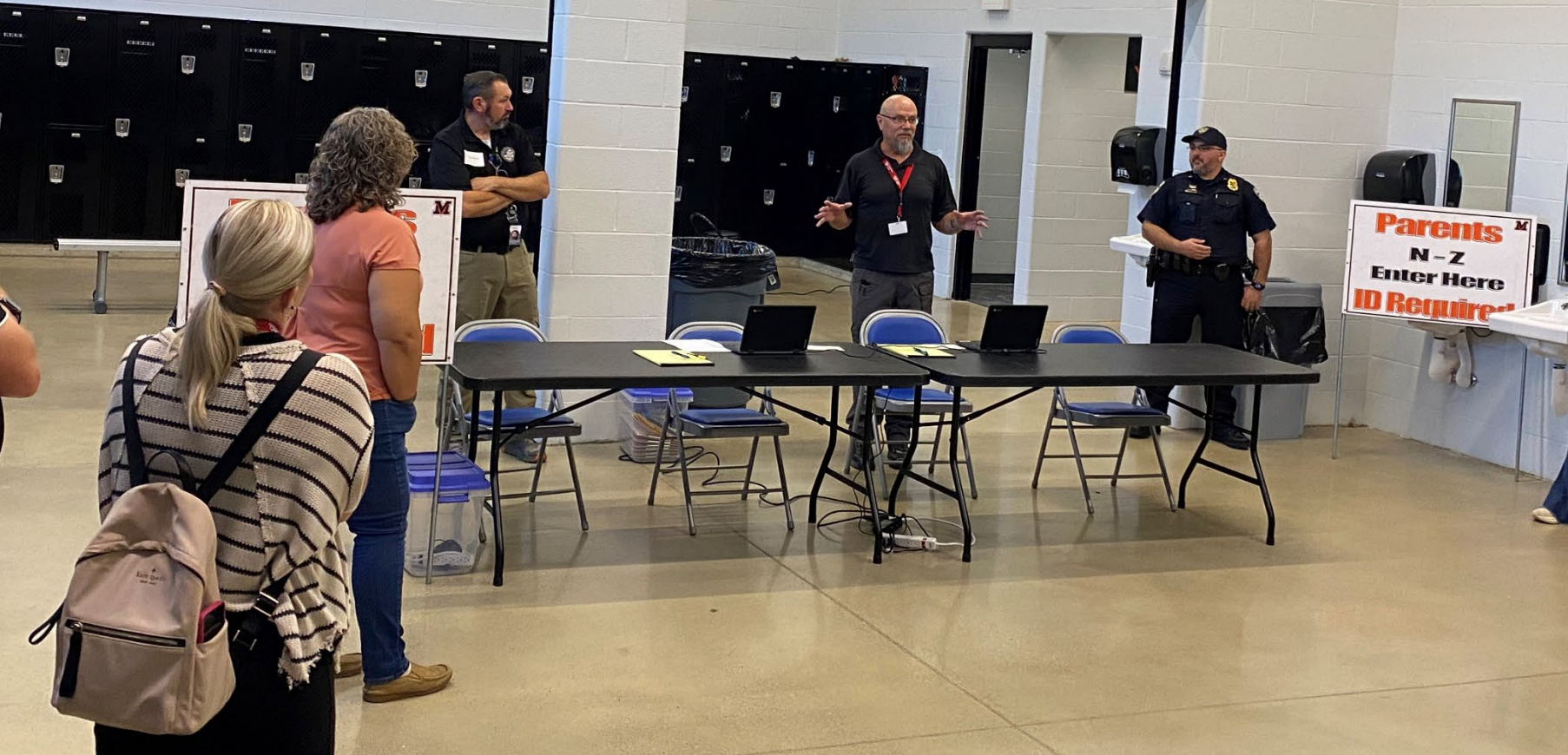
Why a Countywide Site and Team Are Better Than Leaving Reunification to a Single School

- Consistency**
Families experience the same process across all schools
- Efficiency**
Workload is shared by a trained countywide team
- Scalability**
A central site can manage large numbers of students and parents
- Resource Sharing**
Staff, equipment, and space are pooled for stronger coverage
- Family Confidence**
A unified approach builds trust with parents and the community
- Resilience**
Reunification continues smoothly even if the impacted school cannot host



Energy Fieldhouse – West (Front) Entry

Parent/Guardian Access Only – line forms on the west side.
Entry: Parents use **left or right doors**.
Center Doors: Reserved for reunification staff, first responders, and administrators.
Accessibility: Parents with mobility issues may use center entrance with assistance.
Support: Signage and staff guide families, ensuring safe and orderly flow.

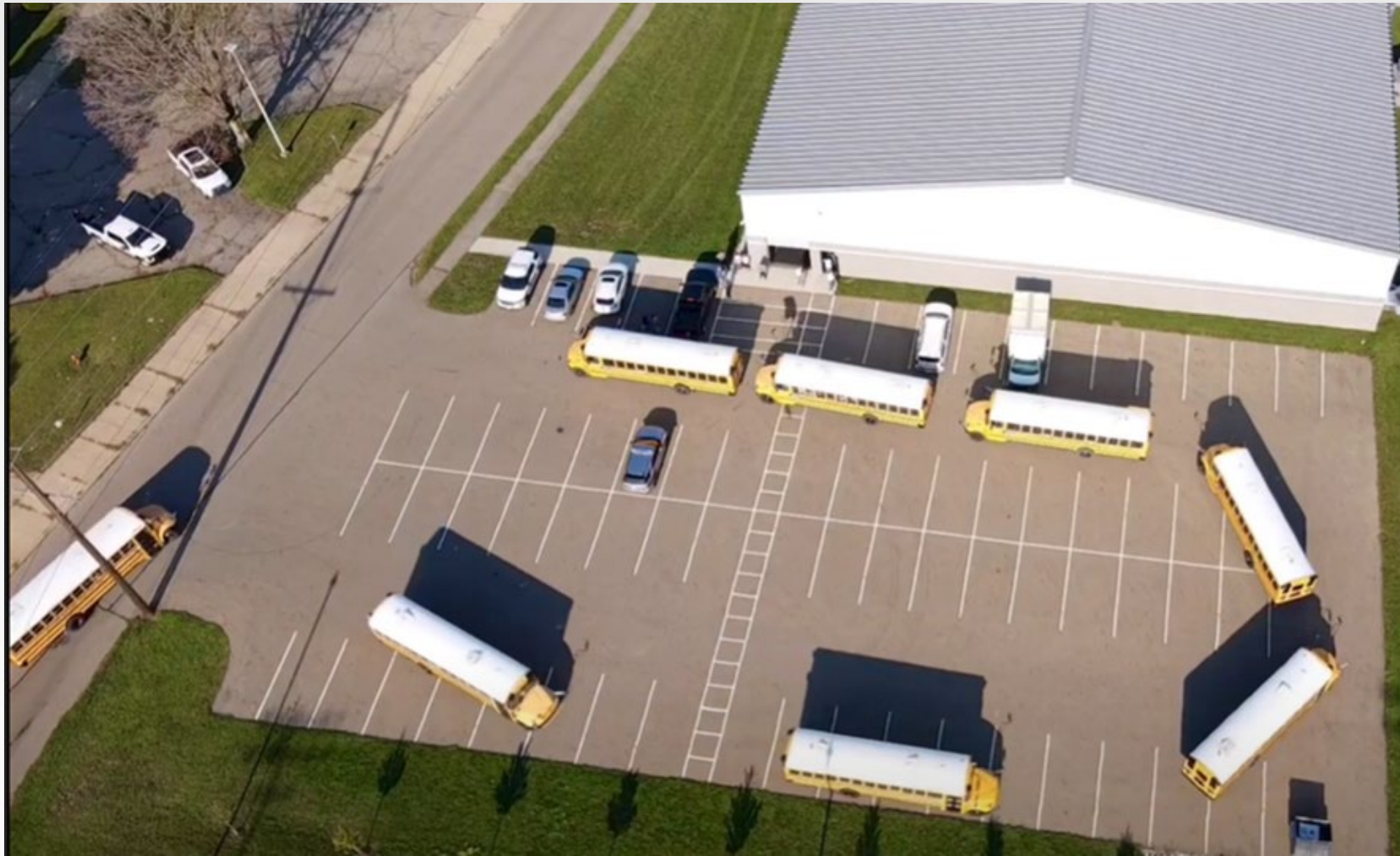
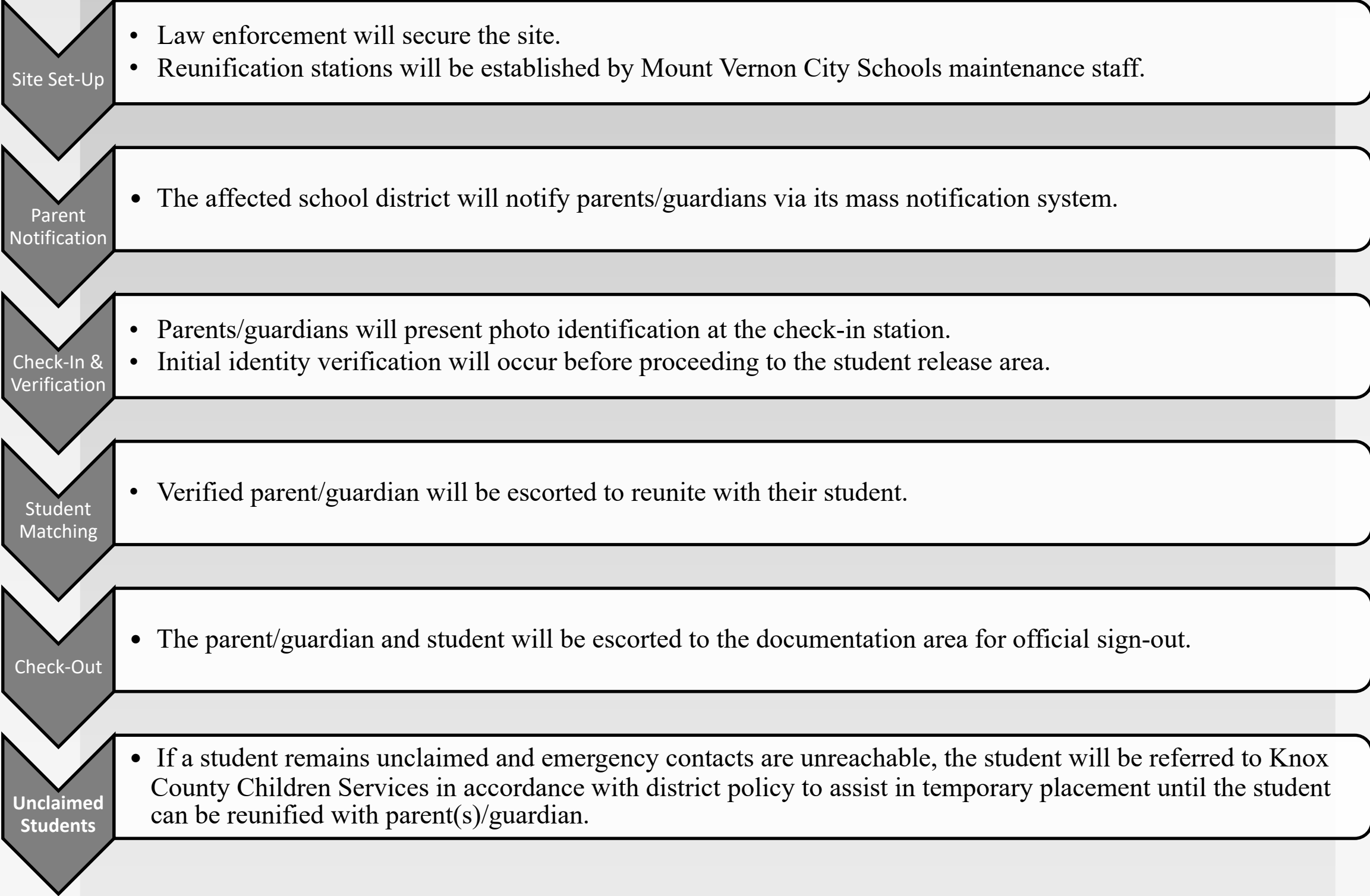


DIRECTION AND CONTROL

- Incident Command Structure**
Reunification follows the Incident Command System (ICS).
- Chain of Command**
The school superintendent or designee holds authority; if unavailable, a designated administrator assumes command.
The County. Reunification Team manages site operations with law enforcement, EMA support.
- Unified Command & Coordination**
Works alongside first responders; EOC may activate; communication via alerts, social media, and press releases.
- Authority to Activate**
Activation is decided by the superintendent or designee in coordination with first responders. EMA or Dispatch issues a mass notification alert, and team members report within a designated time. As they arrive, roles are assigned per a pre-established ICS chart.



REUNIFICATION PROCESS



The **east side (back)** of the Energy Fieldhouse is designated for:
Student and teacher drop-off by district buses
Secure, law enforcement-monitored student intake
Once the reunification process begins and students are matched with their authorized parent or guardian, **families will exit the building through the east side**.
This separation of **entry and exit points** helps reduce congestion, improves flow, and maintains site security and accountability.

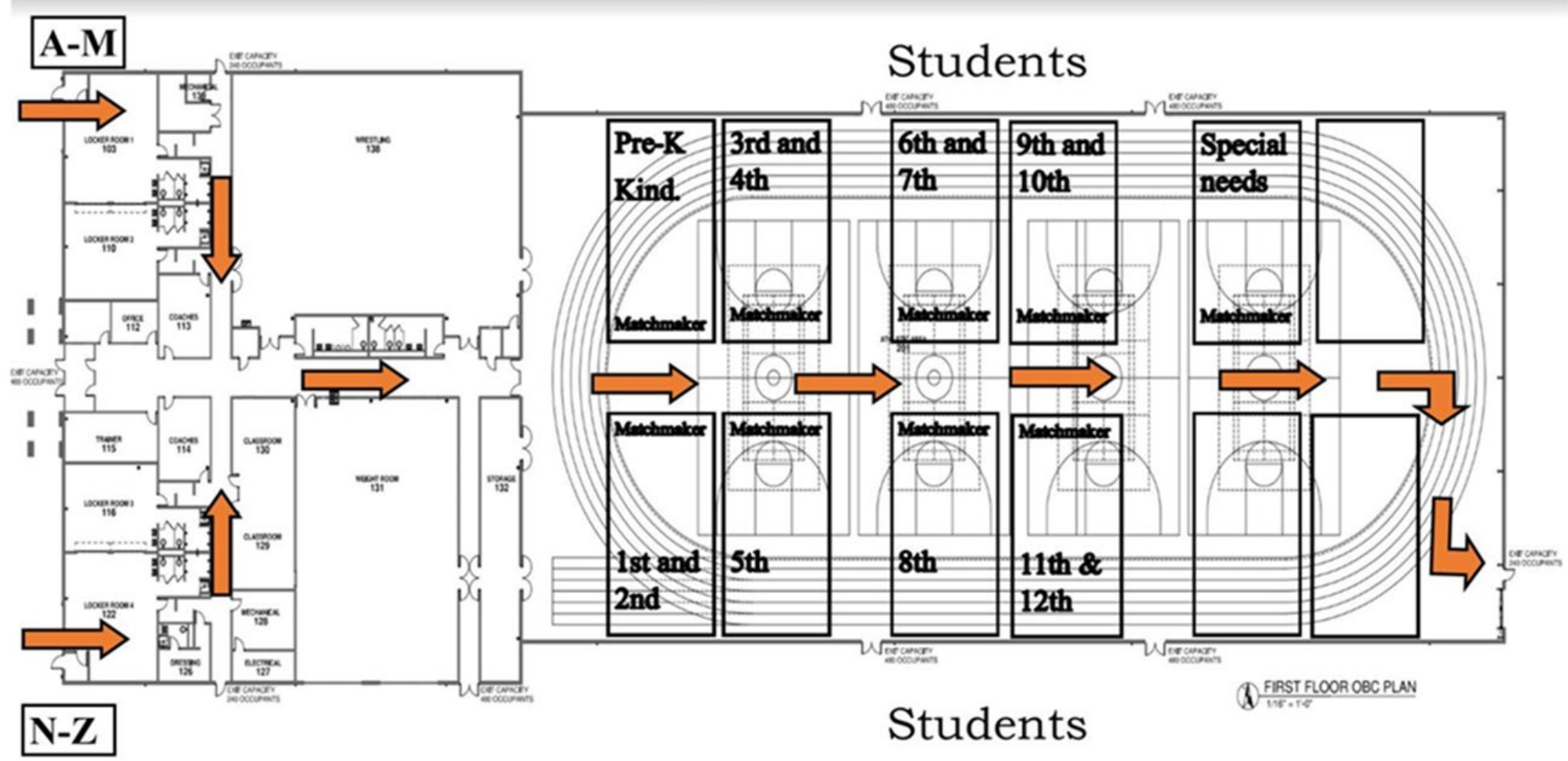
REUNIFICATION CONCEPT OF OPERATIONS

- Parent/Guardian Check-In & Student Release**
 - Valid ID required; verified through PowerSchool/DASL (OHLEG if no ID).
 - Only individuals listed on student’s release form may pick up students.
 - Four families admitted at a time; all releases documented for accountability.
- Technology & Data Security**
 - PowerSchool/DASL for verification; manual rosters as backup.
 - Secure, encrypted Wi-Fi with hotspot/manual protocols if needed.
 - All staff trained, background-checked, and privacy-compliant.
- Special Considerations**
 - Family Resource Center for deceased, injured, or missing students.
 - Counseling, interpreters, and special needs support available.
 - ADA tools (wheelchairs, sensory kits, etc.) on site.
 - No spontaneous volunteers accepted.
- Staff Credentialing**
 - All staff wear Reunification ID badges and role vests.
- Scalability & Contingencies**
 - Fieldhouse supports any district; other sites identified for backup site.
 - Portable restrooms, food, water, and generators available if extended.
- Behavioral & Media Management**
 - Safe Room with counselors and law enforcement for crisis response.
 - Media staging at Memorial Park; controlled access to site.
- Medical & Law Enforcement**
 - EMS, school nurse, public health, and hospital coordination on site.
 - Police lead site security, traffic, access control, and notifications.



Energy Fieldhouse

Parents will move through the building following the orange arrows.



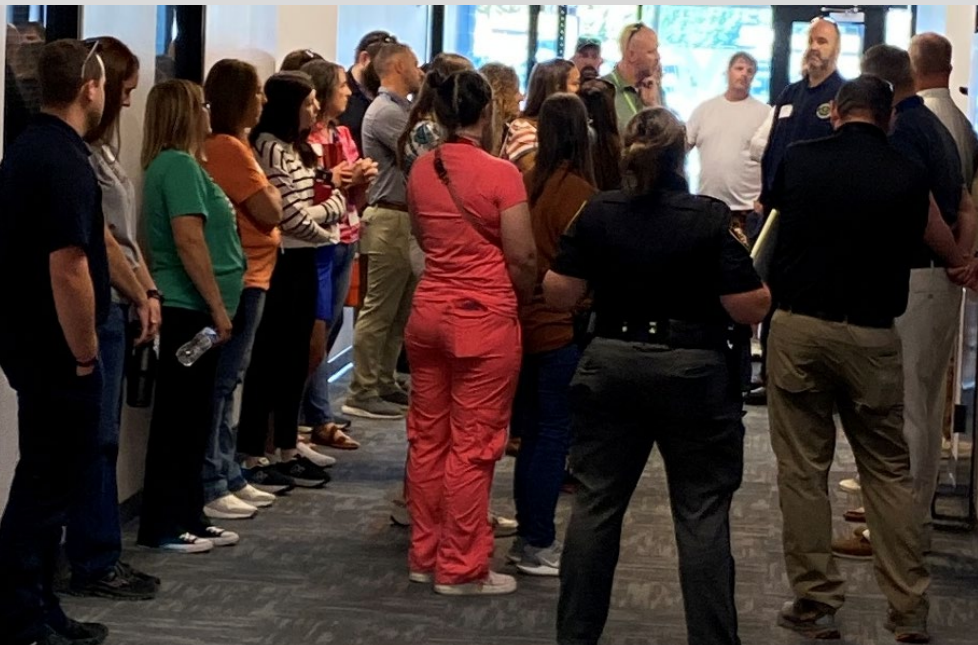
Energy Fieldhouse Reunification Layout

- Parent Check-in & Entry**
 - Parents enter based on last name:
 - A–M enter through the north side.
 - N–Z enter through the south side.
- Verification Stations**
 - Locker rooms and offices along the entry hallways are used for ID checks and parent verification.
 - Once verified, parents are guided into the gym by a wrangler.
- Student Grouping Inside the Gym**
 - Students are organized by grade level in designated sections of the gym floor:
- Exit Flow**
 - After reunification, families exit together through the far east side of the Fieldhouse, keeping the flow one-directional to avoid congestion.

If a student has a different last name than their parent, they may still be picked up in the same line. This helps keep lines balanced and moving smoothly.

EXERCISE OUTCOMES

	2024 Findings	2025 Findings
Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Strong teamwork among schools, LE, EMS, EMA.ID badges improved security at entry.PowerSchool & OHLeg effective for verification.Location was ADA accessible, EMS had clear sight lines.Wranglers/matchmakers managed stressed families.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Hands-on reunification exercise highly valued.Radio/dispatch training praised.Breakout groups and round robin mini-trainings strengthened learning.Training rated 4.7–5/5 relevance & value.Year-over-year improvements noticed by participants.
Areas for Improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Role confusion (wranglers, matchmakers, etc.).Need clear ICS chart & job action sheets.More LE presence required at intake/checkpoints.Backup notification system needed.Checkout station for accountability missing.More counselors/resources needed during reunification.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Desire for rotating roles & more practice in check-in/check-out.Action sheets needed at checkout; video training requested for those absent.Still need more law enforcement presence at key doors/points.Supply management: more pencils, clipboards.Request for multiple training date options to cover more staff.Continued emphasis on counselor placement & parent emotional support.
Confidence	Avg. ~3.5/5 — participants improved but wanted more realism & staffing.	Avg. ~4.5/5 — most feel prepared; “best training so far,” though reunification will always be “organized chaos.”



REFERENCES

- FEMA, Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans (2013)
- DHS, Homeland Security Exercise & Evaluation Program (HSEEP) (2020)
- NASP, Best Practices for School Reunification (2017)
- REMS TA Center, School Reunification Planning Guide (2020)
- “I Love U Guys” Foundation, Standard Reunification Method (SRM) (2021)
- Knox County EMA, School Safety & Reunification Planning Materials (2025)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS AND CONTACT

Thank you to Mount Vernon City Schools and Rick Shaffer for providing the Energy Fieldhouse as our reunification location and who started the work on the countywide reunification plan. Special thanks to the School Superintendents of Knox County for trusting your staff to support and participate in this important process. We also recognize the efforts of law enforcement, first responders, and county agencies who partnered to make this exercise and plan a success.

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