

Captain Rick Francis
Seminole County, Florida

Captain Rick Francis's first career was with the Navy, where he served as an advanced emergency medical technician and combat medic before entering the Army Reserves as a flight medic. After his time there, he spent a few years in corporate America—but soon realized that his calling was for serving the people.

Captain Rick Francis started with the Seminole County Sheriff's Office in 2007. He oversees the School Safety Division as the School Safety Director and is responsible for 67 public/charter schools with approximately 68,000 students and 8,000 staff members. He is also responsible for school resource deputies at several private schools and the local State College.

Captain Francis is a subject matter expert on school safety and security matters. He has studied prior school shootings (dating back to 1764) and adverted school shooting incidents. He has examined each incident's lessons learned and best practices to apply them to his efforts in Seminole County.

Throughout his time at the Sheriff's Office, Captain Francis has served in various roles, including patrol and major crime investigations. He was then promoted to Patrol Sergeant and later assigned to domestic security. In April 2014, he was promoted to Lieutenant, where he served as a Watch Commander up until his current assignment in the School Safety Division. Captain Francis has served as a member of SWAT as a team leader and the High-Risk Incident Commander. He serves as an adjunct professor in Criminal Justice and Homeland Security at Seminole State College.

Captain Francis attended the FBI Law Enforcement Executive Development Association Command Leadership Institute, the Police Executive Research Forum Senior Management Institute for Police, and the Southern Police Institute Command Officer Development Course. He is a member of several Boards, including Crimeline, School Health Advisory Board, Youth Commission, Positive Behavior Pathways Committee, Opioid Task Force, several state school safety workgroups, and the Domestic Security Task Force.

Captain Francis earned his Master of Science degree in Criminal Justice (with Honors) from Andrew Jackson University and a Bachelor of Arts degree in Criminal Justice and Administration (with Honors) from Columbia College. He is a member of the Delta Epsilon Tau Honor Society.

Seminole County has such a unique arrangement for school safety that began long before any state or federal mandates. The fact that his physical office is close to the Superintendent shows how the school safety operation plan between the Sheriff’s Office and the school district is designed and implemented.

Shortly after taking command, Captain Francis quickly placed a School Resource Officer/Deputy (SRO/SRD) in every school in the district. He revised all contracts in their entirety so that the roles were standardized across the board and restructured training to include; Basic School Resource Officer, SRO wrap around, Crisis Intervention, Instructor Techniques, Project Youth, Trauma-Informed Care, Swift Assisted Victim Extraction, K-12 Reunification, Cyber Safety-Social Media Dangers and Awareness, Autism Awareness, Bullying Prevention, Exceptional Student Education Awareness, Mental Health Intervention, Stop the Bleed, Student Threat Assessment, Cultural Diversity/ discriminatory training, AlerT threat response model, School Safety, Legal, Diversion, Young Active Killers, and training addressing active threats, close-quarter combat, shoot house tactics, tactical handgun, hostage situations, bomb threats, de-escalation, and incident command.

Retraining SROs was just the beginning of Captain Francis' school safety overhaul. By applying the same best practices that were used in universities across the U.S., he began enhancing and revamping Seminole County Public Schools’ safety plans. He created option and scenario-based drills so that teachers, administrators, and even law enforcement officers were put in situations where they had to make quick decisions. He improved threat assessments and training so that problems were identified early on and handled correctly. He has trained staff on critical incident response and provided medical training to staff to ensure that they could help a student in a potentially life-threatening emergency.

However, Captain Francis may be most well known for being ahead of the curve by leveraging new technologies to enhance school safety. When he began evaluating different technologies to implement, he wanted a solution that allowed for interoperability, provide timely notifications, increased the speed toward a resolution, and could be placed in the hands of every teacher and staff member in the school district.

Seminole County Public Schools was the first in Florida to enact a soft panic button with interoperability. Captain Francis continued to seek innovative technologies that would work in his district. Currently, Seminole County also uses a digital reunification process and proactive social media threat monitoring so that the schools can be as prepared as possible to respond to an incident or threat. In addition, he currently has several new applications in beta tests, such as a vaping sensor, concealed weapon scanner, and the first responder live tracking for critical incidents.

With the assistance of Seminole County Public School software developers, Captain Francis designed and developed a hybrid student threat assessment digital dashboard tool that utilizes best practices from the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines, the U.S. Secret Service Enhancing School Safety-Threat Assessment Model, the Department of Homeland Security K-12 School Security Guide, the Federal Bureau of Investigations Violence Prevention in Schools and the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Safe and Supportive Schools. The digital comprehensive student threat assessment tool (STAT) was implemented in the 2019-20 school year and has truly helped the school district navigate this complicated process and help identify students on a potential pathway to violence.

Captain Francis also implemented digital reunification technology and large scale reunification best practices in Seminole County schools. The Marjory Stoneman Douglas School Safety Commission recently published its findings on Florida school safety measures in a comprehensive report. The study contains several recommendations, including Florida schools, which should emulate the family reunification protocol co-developed by the Seminole County School District and the Seminole County Sheriff’s Office.

Yet Captain Francis knew that not all the tech in the world could prevent threats and acts of violence alone. From the beginning, he operated on an 80/20 rule. He believes that only 20% of school safety can be attributed to physical barriers or technology, such as access control, strategic fencing, cameras, or the like. The other 80% need to be based on creating a positive school climate. Mental health, behavior, threat mitigation, and suicide prevention are taken seriously, kids are involved in their safety, and a sense of community prevails.

To achieve the other 80%, he implemented several initiatives to help kids be engaged and feel welcome at their schools—such as a K-12 school safety curriculum to start learning about safety from a young age. The curriculum begins in kindergarten and continues to build as years go by, ensuring that every kid knows about safety at every level. The program starts with the basics, such as stranger danger, and works its way up to see something, say something, and active threat response.

Captain Francis has given presentations to numerous other organizations, including the National Tactical Officers Association, Florida Sheriff’s Association, Crime Stoppers, Florida School Security Summit, Florida Superintendent’s Association, International Chiefs of Police Association, and Florida School Finance Officers Association. He has been featured or published in Police Executives Research Forum (June 2019), Life Magazine, School Safety (July 2019, April 2018, and July 2017), and Marjory Stoneman Douglas Public Safety Commission Nov 2019 report. He has also contributed to the Homeland Security Information Network (schoolsafety.gov) and School Safety Specialist. He has presented to the Texas House of Representatives Committee on Public Education to discuss the ways his schools have become safer. Captain Francis has gone before the Marjory Stoneman Douglas Public Safety Commission on three separate occasions to discuss emergency drills, reunification, and school safety policies. As a result of the feedback received and recognized need, he co-authored a white paper on the K-12 Reunification Process. He has presented his work to the Florida State Senate and House and donated the materials he has developed over his years as Director of District School Safety and Security so that his colleagues can readily have access to them.

In February 2020, Campus Safety Magazine announced Captain Francis as a finalist for the 2020 Campus Safety Director of the Year.