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While students away, it's crunch time on campuses

Students pouring back onto school campuses today are unlikely to notice the amount of work that went on while they were on the holiday break, and that is by design, says Jim Elson, the San Angelo Independent School District's director of maintenance.

"No matter what, whatever we start, the classrooms have got to be ready for the kids," Elson said. That's a tall order, considering Elson had a list more than six pages long of projects to tackle while students, teachers and administrators were on vacation.

In addition, with the Christmas and New Year's holidays all employees would be taking, the amount of time the maintenance department staff had to work on the list was five or six days. "We crunch it," Elson said in an interview before the holiday break began.

Elson, who has been the district's maintenance director for six years, also said a lot of preparation goes into the list. Tasks range from cleaning floors and air conditioning vents - chores easier to do when fewer people are around - to renovations like replacing showers at Glenn Middle School and repainting the cafeterias at Glenmore Elementary School and Central Freshman Campus.

"We start about three months out creating the list," Elson said. "Mr. (Jeff) Bright (assistant superintendent of business support services) will review my list and anything he thinks can wait, he'll take off the list."

Elson's staff includes 39 tradespeople such as plumbers, electricians and carpenters, 98 custodians and 18 groundskeepers. He said a lot of the work overlaps and part of the planning is deciding which division will take the lead role on a project.

"It's a lot of work. I really rely heavily on my custodian supervisor, Bill Gould, and Jimmy Pounds, grounds foreman. They'll be overseeing everything," Elson said. "Admin is completely shut down. They have to handle making decisions, spending the money or not."

The groundskeepers, for example, have 550 acres to maintain, Elson said. They were scheduled to do winter cleanup, such as trimming trees, and were to start getting baseball fields ready for the upcoming season.

"We look at playground safety, we inspect the playgrounds," Elson said. Elson said even his two dispatchers get in on the list. "We still get calls, maybe a gas smell or a toilet flushing constantly," he said. "But it's always a good time to catch up on filing and paperwork, while phones are not ringing so much."

The dispatchers are also in charge of watching the weather and keeping people informed about it. "If a winter storm comes in, we have to act a little more aggressively, go in, make sure no pipes froze, no roof is damaged," Elson said. He said his staff also have to support contractors working on projects at various schools that are part of the \$117 million bond package, from unlocking and locking doors to possible emergencies.

"We have our own work we're doing, and then there's the bond projects," Elson said. "They'll be digging and hit a water line, and who do you think they call?" Such emergencies can be hard on the list, he said.

"All this stuff had to be put off to the side last year," Elson said. "Atmos (natural gas company) found a major gas leak at Glenn Middle School. We had to pull all the crews to work on that project, 200 yards of digging to replace a pipeline."

On Dec. 22, the second day of "crunchtime," Central High School's sprawling campus was still and quiet, its parking lots mostly empty. But the peaceful appearance was deceptive.

Near Holmes Hall, Dale Dye of the district's plumbing team was standing in a freshly dug pit ankle deep in cold water. He was installing a valve on a 3-inch irrigation line at Central, the first step to repairing a leak in the line under a sidewalk. "People don't realize how much gets done," Dye said.

He said the leak repair was something that was postponed until the Christmas break. "There have been times we've had to turn off the water with the students here," he said. "It all comes with the job."

Robert Vitez, head custodian at Central High School, said the list of tasks he'd like to tackle kept growing. "When I walk around the campus, there's a lot more I want to put on the list," he said. "I wish we had time to do more."

The district's largest school, with more than 2,000 students and 28 buildings, has 13 custodians. The number of custodians per campus is based on square footage and the number of students, Elson said. Vitez said he and his staff typically work from 2:30 p.m. to 11:30 p.m.

"We can get most cleaning time when the kids are gone but there's after-school activities - games, concerts, community events. This place is always busy," he said.

Leo Buentello and Jeremy Hill were assigned a job that would likely take two days during the holiday break: cleaning, then buffing the floor at Central's Trevino practice gym. "I want them to take their time, this is a gym the public sees a lot," Vitez said. Vitez has been head custodian at Central for four years, after a year in the same role at Lincoln Middle School and five years at Alta Loma Elementary School. "(Central) is the hardest job, both for size and student population, but also because of the after-school activities," he said. "Even I have assigned buildings. I don't just supervise."

If all goes well and the weather cooperates, students returning today will find desks freshly sanitized with a mix of Clorox and water and deep-cleaned restrooms. There will be new carpet at Austin Elementary School, and some of the carpets at Central and Lake View High School will be cleaned. The fence and batting cage at Nathan Donsky baseball field - damaged when a car ran off the road - will be repaired. There will be a newly repaired wall at one school, a wall removed at another and countless other changes, small and large.