



A Measured Approach

After a series of deadly shootings, experts urge schools to take thoughtful steps to ensure safety

Naomi Dillon

The 2006-07 school year began darkly, marred by a trio of deadly attacks that left nine people dead, dozens of grieving families, and a country unnerved by a phenomenon that just won't go away.

Statistically, school violence is rare (only 1 percent of all youth homicides are school related) and declining (the number of incidents dropped by almost half from 1992 to 2003), but emotionally it's difficult to reconcile with the fact that anyone would purposefully inflict harm on schools and students.

Two of the three fatal shootings in September and October were perpetrated by adult males with no known relationship to the schools, a fact that has left educators and communities wondering what schools can do to protect themselves. But, as has happened since the first round of school shootings in the mid-1990s, there was no shortage of suggestions—some measured and some more extreme.

In Boston, where a group of teens fired a shotgun at three students walking to school, Mayor Thomas Merino vowed to bump up police presence and install metal detec-

tors in each of the city's high schools. Meanwhile, at press time, Pennsylvania lawmakers were contemplating a statewide school safety policy that could require all schools to be on permanent lockdown and to post staff at all building entrances.

The most outlandish proposal, by far, came from Frank Lasee, a Republican state representative in Wisconsin. His solution? Give guns to teachers, principals, and school security.

"To make our schools safe for our students to learn, all options should be on the table," Lasee told the *Associated Press*. "Israel and Thailand have well-trained teachers carrying weapons and keeping their children safe from harm. It can work in Wisconsin."

Safety experts advocate a more thoughtful approach. And fortunately, they say, much of the information to base school safety policies upon is already out there.

An ounce of prevention

Hardly anything was new or surprising at a hastily assembled presidential summit on school safety on Oct. 10. The summit, which brought together school violence researchers, law enforcement, safety advocates, and victims of previous

Above: The funeral procession of Anna Mae Stoltzfus, age 12, a victim of the Amish school shootings, makes its way through the town of Nickel Mines, Pa. Inset: Mourners stop at the one-room Amish school house where the shootings took place.

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tragedies, was convened by the White House one week after Carl Roberts entered a one-room Amish schoolhouse in Pennsylvania and shot and killed five girls, before turning the gun on himself.

But at the conclusion of the six-hour conference, President Bush remarked astutely: "It seems to me like a lot of our focus ought to be on preventing, not just recovery." Bush's observation, while not earth-shattering, underscored one of the most important strategies for district and school administrators.

From fostering a positive and inviting school climate, to teaching and modeling good behavior, to encouraging students and staff to be the eyes and ears of the building, schools can do a lot to make themselves unsuitable targets for unstable individuals.

Following the 1999 Columbine High School shooting in Colorado, which with 15 fatalities and 23 injuries remains one of the deadliest incidents of student-perpetrated school violence, the U.S. Secret Service and U.S. Department of Education examined 37 school-based attacks and interviewed 10 killers.

The report was adamant that no common profile existed among the shooters, but the study found that nearly "three-quarters of the attackers felt bullied, attacked, threatened, or injured by others." Since the report's release in 2002, anti-bullying programs have proliferated.

Delbert Elliott, head of the University of Denver's Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, said during the White House summit that these programs can help curb students' desires to resolve conflicts in a violent manner. When children are bullied and the school doesn't apply rules evenly, Elliott says, "guns are brought to school."

But beyond discouraging poor behavior, Elliott says schools should aim to build a healthy and supportive environment by encouraging good behavior through community service projects and school programs, and by explicitly teaching social skills like to how listen and communicate, manage anger, and resolve conflicts.

Everyone in the school must assume the role of hallway monitor, keeping an eye out for suspicious behavior and reporting it promptly. The Secret Service and Department of Education found that in about 80 percent of the attacks, at least one person had knowledge of what was going to happen. "Our first line of prevention is really having good intelligence," Elliott says.

Of course, all these measures should be supported through district wide safety policies, clearly defined rules and penalties for adults and students who make threats and harass and

intimidate others, and training for faculty, staff, and even students on how to recognize a troubled individual. Student services personnel—counselors, psychologists, and social workers—play critical roles in crisis prevention as well.

Plan, plan, and plan more

The odds are slim that a homicide will occur at or near a school. According to a 2004 Justice Department report, violent crimes are more likely to happen at home or on the street than at school. Still, preparing for the worst is the best thing a school can do.

The first step is to draw upon the talents and expertise of security personnel, teachers, building administrators, student services personnel, and emergency responders to articulate what to do in the event of a crisis. "You can't learn to dance the night of the ball," says Frederick Ellis, who oversees safety and security for Virginia's Fairfax County Public Schools. "The next best thing to living through an experience is getting experience through drills and exercise."

Practicing lockdown and evacuation procedures for a variety of possible scenarios is critical. Likewise, knowing how to help students with physical and developmental disabilities during these crisis situations should be thought out and rehearsed. The International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) also suggests establishing phone trees and creating crisis kits, which include, among other things, hand radios, batteries, and first aid supplies, which are then placed strategically around the school.

Recognizing an impending crisis, and responding to it in an appropriate and timely manner, can mean the difference between preparing for an emergency and dealing with an emergency. An alert eye, an open ear, and a steady head can avert a threat and keep school running as usual.

IACP recommends forming a team to identify and respond to potential hazards while providing them with guidelines and procedures for how they can accomplish those tasks. For instance, should the team be able to screen mail and packages, go through lockers, or examine student records? Many school districts have established anonymous tip lines and found them useful.

Little more than a week after being in the headlines, Park County Sheriff Fred Wegener said at the summit that he still thinks schools are safe places. "This is just one of those times when an individual got in," Wegener said of the 53-year-old man who held six female students hostage, before killing himself and one of the girls in Bailey, Colo. "It's a very sad event ... we're not supposed to lose our kids at school." ■

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