Keep Schools Safe

Planning plays a key role in preventing school violence

Scott Poland

Violence in school is a widely misunderstood issue that breeds contention and fear in educators, parents, and the community. School violence is rare: FBI data shows that students are far safer in schools than they are even at home.

However, when horrific tragedies occur, school officials, parents, and the community tend to do one of two things: underreact or overreact. Underreacting comes from the mindset of "this couldn't happen here" and suggests complacency. Overreacting leads to calls for excessive security measures, including a movement to arm teachers.

I've been responding to school crisis and violence for 30 years and have personally responded to 15 school shootings. I've found that balanced plans that prepare students and staff for emergencies while avoiding traumatizing them are the ones that keep schools the most safe.

PREVENTING TRAGEDY

In the aftermath of school shootings, some administrators take every necessary measure to safeguard their students. However, what seems sensible is often overzealous from an objective viewpoint.

The most pertinent example is the concept of active shooter drills. I've seen schools stage shootings with real firearms and fake blood. One even cast two students in the role of "shooter," an action that could trigger trauma in those students, especially those who have experienced violence at home.

What is the goal of a school violence policy? No one would say that the primary objective is to invoke fear. Unfortunately, that may be the primary takeaway for students in the face of overzealous strategies.

Many school shootings may have been prevented with a smart, practical plan in place that routinely discusses safety with staff and students and gets their commitment to it. Oftentimes, active shooter scenarios are missing that crucial foundation.

Furthermore, a poor or unbalanced school violence protocols actually can contribute to violence in schools by failing to focus on an effective safety program's most basic criteria—student and staff involvement.

For example, the University of Colorado Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence and the University of Northern Colorado's Department of Criminal Justice recently released a report on the 2013 school shooting at Colorado's Arapahoe High School.

The report said an anemic threat assessment program, poor record keeping, and a "culture of silence" were among the gaps in school policy that allowed shooter Karl Pierson to enter the school, armed with the intent to kill.

The shooting spurred Colorado lawmakers to pass legislation bearing the name of Pierson's victim, 17-year-old Claire Davis. It allows lawsuits against schools in the state when there are shootings or other violence.

This is a wakeup call for schools across the country. Do we think that similar legislation won't be put into place in other states? Do we want to take the chance?

VIOLENCE POLICY GOALS

Schools need to pay attention, and the opportunity to thoughtfully and meticulously plot every step of a school violence and crisis prevention strategy is relevant now more than ever. To get started, we have to answer the central question posed earlier in this article: What is the

goal of a school violence plan?

In active shooter scenarios, many schools fail to ask precisely what they expect students to learn or how students are expected to behave. Simulated gunfire, stage blood, and students cast as villains don't teach anyone anything useful. The No. 1 goal of any effective active shooter/crisis drill should be to instruct students to listen to the nearest adult and do what they say, and then to practice it. Simulating a "realistic" school shooting doesn't teach students that.

Additionally, what kinds of measurement and data collection inform this policy? For any administrator considering crisis drills, a pre-test and a post-test to find out if students feel safe in school is an essential step. Do your students feel safe in your school? Compare the data to that collected after the drill. Do they feel safer? If not, are crisis drills the right strategy? If they feel safe already, do you need to simulate one at all?

At Colorado's Arapahoe High School, a theme of school life before the shooting was a "culture of silence" that prevented information from being gathered and shared. This is not an uncommon concern. We need to get to the heart of why schools might not contact law enforcement and why students don't tell adults at their schools when a peer is threatening violence.

Statistics show that the vast majority of school shooters told someone what they were going to do beforehand. The most common fear among educators and staff of reporting threats of violence is privacy concerns. The Arapahoe report discusses FERPA privacy concerns as a barrier to reporting on the part of the school. Many schools fear potential loss of funding by sharing information. Yet FERPA regulations state that, in an emergency, schools are allowed to share such information.

The most common fear of reporting threats of violence among students is retaliation. They don't want to get involved or don't think something bad can actually happen. Some kids say that they don't have trusting relationships with adults at their school. Do students at your school feel valued? Do they trust teachers?

Students and their sense of safety and recourse when threatened must be at the heart of any school violence prevention policy. Administrators need to survey their students and find out what their concerns are regarding school violence. Further, schools need to be proactive in getting them involved by committing them to safety pledges and providing them with resources they can use to safely report threats.

COMMUNITY INPUT, HELP

An established and vibrant threat assessment team should be in place to govern these strategies as well. Each threat should be evaluated and managed appropriately. It is the foundation of sound prevention policy.

Such a team should be comprised of trained, multidisciplinary school professionals, including law enforcement. Schools must welcome community and parental input on how to improve school safety. Do any of your students have law enforcement officials as parents? Do you think they have a vested interest in the safety of their child's school?

Many states have well-funded safety centers that can help. Administrators can connect with county and state agencies, even with local law enforcement agencies, for help. Asking a local police officer to visit the school and make safety recommendations is a good place to start, and there's no associated cost.

Schools often have a "bunker" mentality. Once, before a planned school presentation, an administrator asked me to remove slides on safety topics ahead of time. "We've got that covered," he said. My response? Nobody has that covered. New ideas come out all the time, and we need to be constantly open to new strategies.

Basic strategies—like where to move students, making sure that doors can lock, barricading and blocking windows—do not exist in protocals in many schools, nor are all educators trained in these foundational concepts.

Often, in response to a high-profile school shooting, schools rush to implement an overzealous plan without making these basic safety checks. Every school is different, and administrators know their school's vulnerabilities and safety gaps. Proactive, preventative plans can help. No plan at all is not a good strategy.

Fortunately, the foundation of an effective school safety program is simpler to implement than are elaborate active shooter drills. Be resourceful and be transparent. If your school safety program is working, then we'll never hear about it in the news.

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