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School Safety: Working Together to Keep Schools Safe

Pickett Dean Safe Schools, Safe Communities, [July 2001]

In the summer of 1999, the Federal Bureau of Investigation pulled together over 100 educators, law enforcement officials, victim assistance advocates and mental health professionals for an in-depth discussion of school violence. The discussion was based on incidents of school violence that had taken place during the decade throughout our nation. The communities have become known to the American public through their tragedies.

- Fort Gibson, OK (1999)
- Conyers, GA (1999)
- Littleton, CO (15 deaths, 1999)
- Springfield, OR (2 deaths, 1998)
- Fayetteville, TN (1 death, 1998)
- Edinboro, PA (1 death, 1998)
- Jonesboro, AR (5 deaths, 1998)
- West Paducah, KY (3 deaths, 1997)
- Stamps, AR (1997)
- Pearl, MS (2 deaths, 1997)
- Bethel, AK (2 deaths, 1997)
- Moses Lake, WA (3 deaths, 1996)
- Redlands, CA (1 death, 1995)
- Blackville, SC (3 deaths, 1995)
- Lynnville, TN (2 deaths, 1995)
- Grayson, KY (2 deaths, 1993)

The purpose of this gathering was to learn from those tragedies. The participants sought to identify common behaviors and tried to gain insight into the motivation of the children involved. In addition, participants worked to determine steps that can be taken in the future to reduce the likelihood of such tragedies recurring in our nation's schools.

The following comments are not the official transcripts or notes from that group, nor are they legal advice. They represent a summary of information and insights gathered from these events.

The focus here is on prevention because it is the most responsible placement of resources. Consider the public health model. There are three levels of prevention and response measures — primary, secondary and tertiary. Primary prevention stops the injury before it occurs. Secondary measures reduce the injury. Tertiary measures include rehabilitation from the injury. Tertiary measures are the most expensive and least effective. Crisis management is tertiary. Responding to an incident in progress is secondary. Primary prevention manages the threat before the incident begins. As such, we need to focus on primary prevention, not crisis management, the tertiary response.

How can this happen?

This is the \$64,000 question. As summarized by one expert:

Who are these youngsters? What is causing this violence among "good" kids from "good" homes? . . . Many researchers, psychologists, and other mental health practitioners believe that many factors impinge on the mental and emotional well being of today's youth. While it would be easier to believe that school violence is primarily an outcome of emotional and physical abuse, there are many contributing factors, beginning with early childhood attachment opportunities, parenting skills and mentoring by adults who play a significant role in a child's life, developmental traits, psychological and cultural factors, and contributions of the media. It has been found that when several of these factors are combined in a single child's life experiences, a potentially lethal situation may develop, with stress, and the

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biochemical consequences of that stress, creating "time bombs".

P. Edmister, *Jrnl. of Phillips Graduate Institute* 19 (Summer 1999).

Sociology of Violence

Children are fundamentally mimics. They learn and develop by watching and imitating adult behavior. In some ways, this is good; we never have to teach them how to answer a telephone. Unfortunately, they mimic the bad as well as the mundane. We are, or have become, a violent society. We make violence a daily and nearly hourly event through our news and recreational media. We have surrounded our children in violence and then stand in amazement when they turn to violence themselves. Granted, it is not the violent nature of our society alone that creates violent individuals, but it is one element which, added to the mix, creates the opportunity for them to exist. (See Appendices M and N for more information on the effects of violence on children.)

Bully-victim Dynamic

One theory of school shooters is that they are victims who have been repeatedly bullied. Their rage at this injustice erupts in a final fit of violence. Bullying is unfortunately prevalent in our school communities and often overlooked as an inevitable part of growing up.

Although it is the bully who commits the initial acts of aggression, in many cases it is the victim who carries out the final lethal acts — who seeks (and may become) the bigger bully. Once the roles of bully and victim become "fixed" and the victim feels trapped in that role, the stage is set for violence carried out by the victim.

The role of the bystander in the bully cycle is often overlooked, but the bystander defines and directs the performance; the bully is seeking to have the victim show discomfort in view of the bystander. Enlisting the bystander as reporters of threats is a critical component in protection. More important is for the bystander to reject the bully. To combat bullying, a change in school culture is needed — to saturate the school with messages to everyone, especially the bystander that the highest social status is afforded to the non-bully. Attention must be focused away from the bully, rather than putting him in the limelight.

Kids know which of their peers are troubled and a potential threat to their safety. Parents, teachers, administrators and schools need to create an atmosphere where students feel comfortable telling adults/authority figures when they feel that their safety is in jeopardy. (See Appendix O for more on bullying in schools.)

Psychopathy

Another theory of school shooters is that they are psychopaths. We do not know what causes psychopathy, but do know that psychopaths think and behave in abnormal ways. They hold anti-social attitudes, and their behavior results less from social forces than from an inherent sense of entitlement and an incapacity for emotional connection to the rest of humanity. For these individuals social rules have no constraining force, and the idea of a common good is merely a puzzling and inconvenient abstraction.

Psychopaths use charm, manipulation, intimidation, and violence to control others and to satisfy their own selfish needs. Lacking in conscience and in feelings for others, they cold-bloodedly take what they want and do as they please, violating social norms and expectations without the slightest guilt or regret.

Although their numbers are small — perhaps 1% of the population — psychopaths account for a large proportion of the serious crime, violence, and social distress in every society. Psychopathic depredations affect people in all races, cultures, and ethnic groups, and at all levels of income and social status. As many as 15% to 20% of prisoners are psychopaths; the disorder is common among drug dealers, spouse and child abusers, swindlers and con men, high-pressure salesmen and stock promoters, gang members, mercenaries, corrupt politicians, unethical lawyers and doctors, terrorists, cult leaders, and black marketers. Dr. Robert Hare, unpublished manuscript, (University of British Columbia, 1999).

How do WE address school violence?

Share Information

- Why Sharing Is Important

As stated by Stephen Band and Joseph Harpold, organizers of the FBI event

First and foremost, all aspects of a community need to work together. School violence is not the sole responsibility of the school system. Law enforcement, local government, civic groups, corporate entities, schools, and parents must form a partnership to combat these violent acts. Schools must prepare for these attacks. Law enforcement must develop response plans for handling such incidents. And, communities must work with both to prevent such tragedies from occurring.

FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin (Sept. 1999)

A wall exists between many schools and local law enforcement agencies when they knowingly, or unknowingly, don't communicate with one another. Most crimes committed within the school setting are not reported to local law enforcement.

When law enforcement and schools share information about students, it is easier to see problems and patterns emerge that suggest the need to prevent future violence. Schools must provide information to law enforcement about troubled children, activities in the schools and simple things like floor plans and schedules. Law enforcement must reciprocate by sharing similar information with school officials. It is easier to deal with the problem of violence together when information and responsibilities are not seen as the sole province of one agency or another. (See NSBA Proposed Amendment to the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)).

- Affect of FERPA

Whether schools and law enforcement share through formal or informal methods, schools must ensure that they comply with FERPA. Under FERPA, subject to several exceptions, schools cannot reveal education records of a student without the consent of the parents of that student, or the student himself if he is eighteen years of age or attending college. It is important to understand what FERPA will allow schools to share so that it does not become an obstacle to appropriate communications between schools and other agencies.

Educators often receive information from students in a variety of ways — conversations, reports of conversations, essay assignments, student journals, notes being passed, video assignments, and the like. Anecdotal information, such as observed threats or notes passed in class, would not constitute an "education record," that would trigger the application of FERPA. Assigned student work, such as essays or journals, however, are interpreted by the U.S. Department of Education to be "educational records," governed by the confidentiality requirements of that law. This means student work which may reflect the trouble children feel inside often remains known only to the student and the teacher. Before Michael Carneal gunned down three classmates in Kentucky, he wrote that he wanted to cut people's heads off and display them on a pole. Luke Woodham wrote of killing principals and teachers before he stabbed his mother to death and shot his girlfriend and her friend outside a Mississippi school. Before the shooting, one of the Columbine shooters was asked to write a school essay depicting himself as an inanimate object. He chose a bullet.

- FERPA Exceptions

Two exceptions to FERPA's prohibition on disclosing education records are especially important. First, education records may be disclosed within a school or school district "to other school officials, including teachers . . . whom the [school] has determined to have legitimate educational interests." 20 U.S.C. §1232g(b)(1)(A). Where information is being shared in order to undertake threat assessment and planned intervention, there is little doubt that this exception permitting disclosure among school officials would apply.

The second exception allows a disclosure to be made without consent "in connection with an emergency." 20 U.S.C. § 1232g(b)(1)(I). Such disclosure is acceptable if knowledge of the information is necessary to protect the health or safety of the student or other individuals, and may be made within the school, to school officials in other schools determined to have legitimate educational interests in the behavior of the student, and to law enforcement personnel.

The health or safety emergency provision is a common sense acknowledgement that there may be situations when the immediate need for information to avert or diffuse certain unusual conditions or disruptions requires the release of information. Educators determine what constitutes an "emergency" but FERPA requires that they construe the term strictly. For example, on-campus disruptions that constitute criminal acts, particularly those involving weapons and drugs, fall within the scope of the term, as do crisis situations off campus that affect school campuses or the public's health or safety. When a health or safety emergency exists, schools may share relevant information about students involved in the emergency with appropriate parties — that is, those whose knowledge of the information is necessary to protect the health or safety of the student or other individuals.

U.S. Departments of Justice and Education, *Sharing Information: A Guide to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act and Participation in Juvenile Justice Programs* (1997).

In addition, where a school or school district has designated a local law enforcement agency as the schools' "law enforcement unit," additional authority exists to share information between agencies. 20 U.S.C. § 1232g(a)(4)(B)(ii). Such an approach is advisable where the local law enforcement agency is prepared to reciprocate in the sharing of information. This approach requires a well-crafted agreement with the local law enforcement agency.

Create a visible law enforcement presence in the schools

There is no one perfect plan or program that can be implemented in every community to prevent violence. Prevention measures must vary according to community culture, needs, and resources. However, most communities could benefit from some general prevention procedures, policies, and programs.

One recurrent theme of prevention that received unanimous endorsement and praise was the use of local law enforcement personnel, in uniform, as full time school resource officers. This presence will not guarantee safety, but resource officers can help to prevent tragedy and to react immediately if a crisis occurs.

The visible presence of law enforcement on a school's campus also enhances the proactive nature of the school's violence prevention efforts and can positively impact its security and safety on several levels. See Center for the Prevention of School Violence, *Starting a School Outreach Program in Your Community: An Effective Practices Outline for the School Resource Officer Approach* (1999). This gives students an opportunity to develop trust and to talk to law enforcement in a neutral, non-threatening atmosphere. In addition, the school resource officer can serve as a conduit between the school and the community. In many of the shootings that took place around the country, the students were talking about the pending violence not only in their schools, but also in the community. Hence, the need for a strong law enforcement/school relationship is paramount. Selection of the right officer is crucial to the success of the program. Proper training of the school resource officer is equally important.

Before securing the services of either police officers or school security officers, schools districts are advised to consult with their school attorneys. The U.S. Supreme Court has previously ruled that school districts have greater flexibility in conducting searches and seizures upon students than law enforcement officials enjoy. Specifically, school officials are required to demonstrate that they have "reasonable suspicion" to conduct a search. This standard affords greater deference to school officials than the probable cause standard upon which law enforcement officials are required to justify their searches. To the extent a search is conducted upon a student by a police officer or school security officer, a student may raise

the claim that the search was not justified at its inception because the officer lacked possible cause. If successful the student might be able to exclude evidence of any "illegally" seized contraband in either a school disciplinary action or in a criminal context. Therefore, prior to employing security officers or working with the police, districts would be wise to have full knowledge of the impact such decisions will have upon their ability to justify searches conducted in school.

Create communication link to receive information from students

A school must create a culture of mandatory reporting by all members of the school community, including students and parents. This is not a new task for already overworked educators. Violence, and threats of violence, have been confronted in the classroom and reported to the principal's office throughout the history of education. This culture of reporting must be broadened to include warning signs that constitute a threat of school violence. Likewise, those who are obligated to share this information must be expanded to include students, school officials and law enforcement officials.

In all but one of the school shootings to date, the shooters had told other students about their intentions. But students seldom feel comfortable or safe conveying this information to school officials or law enforcement. It is generally contrary to the school community norms to "snitch" or "rat" on another student. And sometimes when students do report, adults do not take the student seriously at the time. In light of this, an anonymous tip line or similar program might facilitate the flow of information from students to law enforcement and school officials. There are a number of anonymous reporting programs currently in use — Crime Stoppers® being the most widely implemented. A good working relationship must exist between school authorities and law enforcement to ensure that the information received through such programs is reviewed and conveyed in a timely fashion. Also, incorporating peer mentors or counselors into schools might be helpful because students could go to a peer confidante instead of an adult.

Adopt a zero-tolerance policy and mentality

Schools should establish reasonable zero-tolerance policies for students who commit violent acts, make threats of violence or bring weapons to school. Such a policy might include expulsion or suspension of students who threaten to kill or assault others. The policy should provide for immediate referral for psychological evaluation or intervention for these students when appropriate.

We, as the school community, must recognize and convey to students that making threats is a crime. When adults take threats seriously, students will realize that violence is not acceptable within the schools. Students who make a threat must be dealt with under school policies. Where appropriate, this activity should be reported to local law enforcement. School policies should be clear and distributed to all personnel, students, and their parents or guardians. Inviting input from the community and from parents regarding acceptable behavior might help reduce resistance to such policies. If the community has ownership in the policy, it is more likely to believe in the policy. (See Appendix E, Zero-Tolerance Policies, Statement of Julie Underwood before the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights).

can we predict violence?

While society can minimize the risk of violence, we can rarely, if ever, predict it because of the numerous human variables involved. We can only analyze the risk. This is often referred to as threat assessment. In assessing the level of threat, we move from the general to the more specific, examining the social context, the school dynamics and the individual. The appropriate focus for threat assessment is to identify and understand risk factors, often seen in the form of recurring behaviors, and not to try to match a student to a predetermined "profile".

General Warning Signs

Children who commit violence in schools are really a small subset of vulnerable children. We should watch for these children and put into place mechanisms to refer them for screening, support, or external mental health assistance. General warning signs or personal background indicators include:

- A history of violence
- A close family member who has committed a violent act
- A history of alcohol or drug abuse
- A precipitating event, such as a failed romance or the perception of a failure
- The availability of a weapon or the means to commit violence
- A recent attempt to commit suicide or an act of violence
- A lack of coping skills or strategies to handle personal life crises with no controls to prevent anger or positive ways to release it
- No apparent emotional support system
- A lack of involvement in extracurricular activities

(See Appendices K for U.S. Department of Education, *Early Warning Signs and Principles for Developing a Referral Process.*)

Descriptions of Previous Shooters

Several factors exist that may indicate that individuals have the potential to commit violence. While these indicators are by no means certain or present in every case of violence, children who exhibit these symptoms should receive additional oversight and assessment or counseling services in an effort to prevent the potential of future violent acts. These are not absolute predictors, and many children may possess one or more of these traits. However, these are

cries for help that may necessitate intervention. Most of the school shooters have shared the following characteristics; they

- demonstrate low self-esteem. They feel disrespected by their peers and family.
- have committed previous acts of cruelty to animals.
- have a fascination with firearms and weapons.
- are "injustice collectors," *i.e.*, they attract and accumulate injustices — ridicule, teasing, bullying — until they reach their tipping point.
- see violence as the only alternative left to them.

(See Appendix A for more information on common characteristics of some school shooters.)

Response to warning signs

- Work Together

We believe communities should deal with potential violent students as a subset of troubled youth. Many of our children need more support and guidance than they are currently receiving. It is impossible for families or schools to provide sufficient support and guidance alone. They must work together and in concert with the total community to assist children as they develop, mature, grow. The most troubling aspect of our conversations was realizing the barriers that we have placed between our institutions. These barriers increase costs, lessen efficiency and in the end harm our children. We must work together.

- Share Information

When law enforcement and school personnel encounter a child who may be abused or neglected, they have a state statutory duty to act. That statutory duty includes the responsibility to share information with others — child welfare, juvenile justice, schools, and law enforcement. Unfortunately, because of our overemphasis on student confidentiality, we often paralyze ourselves and do not respond similarly when we perceive a child who is at risk in other ways. This harboring of information inhibits us from seeing the whole picture, collaborating with others to provide assistance, and from possibly picking up on early warning signs. We must overcome this barrier. One way is to have a clear understanding of confidentiality laws so that we know what can be shared and under what circumstances. In many jurisdictions though, confidentiality statutes must be amended to allow for appropriate sharing of information.

Develop intervention strategies

School personnel should think of a continuum of events and possible reactions in responding to warning signs; at the same time, school personnel must use sound judgment and their instincts, when serious conditions demand immediate intervention, including assistance of police to save lives.

In non-emergency situations, a procedure such as the following may be useful to adopt:

1. Recognize warning signs.
2. Report to other school officials. The central person for receiving information will depend on the particulars of the school.
3. Gather information from teachers, students, parents, other school staff, law enforcement officials, juvenile justice system, and the student who is perceived as at risk.
4. Use team approach to assess the potential that the student may do something violent. Makeup of the team will vary, but would generally include the student's parents, teachers, counselors and /or mental health professionals, the principal and law enforcement professionals.
5. Use team approach to plan an intervention. This form of intervention will vary depending on many factors, including the characteristics of the student, the perceived risk of violence, and the level of perceived violence.
6. Intervene.

It must be understood that this approach may in some circumstances have to occur extremely rapidly as an immediate priority for school and law enforcement personnel. (See Appendix G, U.S. Department of Education, *Early Intervention Strategies*.)

CONCLUSION

In short, this synthesis of the work done at the 1999 FBI school safety gathering* clearly reveals that there is no universal, "one size fits all," solution or program. A successful plan for assessment and intervention must be flexible, ready to adapt quickly to each situation. None of the ideas and suggestions described above alone will insulate a school from lethal acts of violence. Thoughtful consideration of adoption of many of them in your schools, however, will provide systems that may deter future acts of violence. Their careful consideration will also bring together and sensitize communities, including educators, parents, students and law enforcement personnel, to the need for principles of threat assessment and prevention to guide the design and planning of programs for our schools and the children who learn in them.

Unfortunately, we must accept the fact that horrific incidents will happen in our society, and even in our local public schools. Communities must come together to deal with this problem in a multidisciplinary approach. This phenomenon is complicated and requires our collective wisdom and actions to deal with it. Meanwhile, we must develop comprehensive plans to prevent it and alternatively to address the worst when it occurs.

Perhaps Misty Bernall, the mother of Cassie Bernall — one of the students slain in the Columbine shooting — captured it best. A few days after her daughter's death, she spoke with some friends who had just been traveling in Israel. They had attended a service to

remember fallen soldiers at which they heard the following chant in Hebrew: "My death is not my own, but yours, and its significance depends on what you do with it." What we as a society do in response may give additional meaning to the too short lives of the students who have died in school shootings in our nation.

Graphic content and footnotes not included.

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