

Managing Threats: Safety Lessons Learned from School Shootings

By Marleen Wong, Ph.D.

Schools in the United States represent one of the most enduring institutions in our country and yet schools' ability to achieve their mission of providing quality education to all children is in doubt.

In urban and rural communities, the achievement gap is a grim reality that prompted the formulation of the No Child Left Behind law, in hopes that all students, regardless of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic or other differences would be able to demonstrate grade level competence in reading and math. Lost in the formula of high stakes testing and dire consequences is the appreciation for the complexity of child development, diverse ethnic and youth cultures and the interaction of school, community and familial elements.

Into this mix we can add events that have changed education and school culture forever. For example, over the past 20 years, there have been almost 600 school shootings, not including planned or attempted shootings that were prevented. In the early 1990's, shootings occurred with horrifying frequency in small communities or in rural areas. After the tragedy at Columbine High School, a number of national surveys were conducted among high school youth. These students were asked if a shooting, like the one at Columbine, could happen at their school. In one survey, over 35 percent of students concurred that it could and some of the students identified peers that they believed were most likely to perpetrate such a crime. This is a significant generational issue. People who attended high school from the 1950's through the 1980's did not go to school with the fear of school shootings.

Most recently, the deaths of young Amish students in Pennsylvania and high school students in Bailey, Colorado in September 2006 represent a disturbing mutation of the original phenomena. In the hundreds of school shootings which preceded the events of September 2006, students with grievances against other students perpetrated the shootings. In the school violence in Pennsylvania and Colorado, the violence was perpetrated by adult intruders with no relationship to the students or staff at the schools.

Social and Psychological Effects

The impact of school shootings is similar to that of acts of terrorism. The effects of both go far beyond the survivors or grieving families of one school. After Columbine, every school in the country began to re-examine its safety measures. Educators wondered how school shootings could be prevented, and school crisis intervention teams became the rule, not the exception.

Students who have experienced school shootings or other traumatic events, such as witnessing violence at home or in the community, will tell you: They express the fear that they are "going crazy" and they do not feel safe.

Academics and clinicians describe the symptoms of psychological trauma as follows:

- Re-experiencing the event through play or in trauma-specific nightmares or flashbacks, or distress over events that resemble or symbolize the trauma.
- Routine avoidance of reminders of the event or a general lack of responsiveness (e.g., diminished interests or a sense of having a foreshortened future).
- Increased sleep disturbances, irritability, poor concentration, startle reaction and regressive behavior.

In young children, this translates into confusion about when the danger is over, anxious attachment to parents that prevents children from returning to school and staying in school, regression to behaviors associated with an earlier developmental stage, such as thumb sucking or bedwetting.

In adolescents, psychological trauma may be exhibited in aggressive, hostile behavior in males or withdrawal and depression among girls. Alcohol/substance abuse, risk taking behavior or defiance can lead to expulsion, suspension or dropping out from school.

Whatever the symptoms of psychological trauma, fear that the trauma will happen again and loss of control over ones physical, social and emotional world is life changing. These were lessons learned from studies of youth in Oklahoma City after the bombing of the Murrah Federal Building and the terrorist attacks in New York City.

What Can be Done at the School/What Should Educators Look For?

Since June 1999, the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools and the U.S. Secret Service have worked together to better understand and ultimately help prevent school shootings. The results of their efforts have found that some school attacks may be preventable. Their collaboration over an initial three year period produced "The Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the Prevention of School Attacks in the United States." Their findings indicated that incidents of targeted violence in school were rarely impulsive; the students who perpetrated these attacks usually planned out the attack in advance – with planning behavior that was often observable; and that, prior to most attacks, other students knew that the attack was to occur and may have participated in the planning of the attack or the identification of the victims.

Subsequently, a second document was published to assist educators to prevent school attacks. "Threat Assessment in Schools: A Guide to Managing Threatening Situations and to Creating Safe School Climates" takes the initial findings one step further by delineating a process for identifying, assessing and managing students who may pose a threat of targeted violence in schools. This process – known as threat assessment – was first pioneered by the U.S. Secret Service as a mechanism for investigating threats against the President of the United States and other protected officials.

The guide was a distinct departure from other guidance materials developed for educators. It included specific ideas for developing a threat assessment team within a school or school district, steps to take when a threat or other information of concern comes to light, consideration about when to involve law enforcement and mental health personnel, issues of information sharing, and ideas for creating safe school climates.

The discussion of what constituted violent behaviors in schools included a range of observable and reportable behaviors, such as:

- Threats and intimidation
- Bullying
- Stalking
- Relationship violence
- Weapon possession
- Suicidal behavior
- Physical assault

A psychologist who worked with the FBI suggested that aggression, if unchecked with students that demonstrated early signs of “sociopathic” predatory behaviors, went on to ever higher levels of violent behavior, and in the case of the school shooters, led ultimately to the act of homicide.

From the perspective of the U.S. Department of Education, educators should be far more concerned about stopping and preventing bullying behavior, threats and intimidation which occur far more frequently than a school shooting and can seriously undermine school attendance, discipline policy and classroom learning.

Dispelling Educational Myths

The law enforcement and mental health fields served to inform the Secret Service report, particularly in dispelling widely held beliefs among educators about targeted school violence.

Myth #1: It won't happen here. The reality of what was uncovered by the Secret Service about school shootings is that it can happen anywhere. Often, there were many “red flags,” including outright statements in student essays or journals, as well as direct threats. Another “reality” is that an attitude of denial leads to the ignoring of important warning signs. Only a realistic awareness and acknowledgement of threatening behavior, without “paranoia,” can increase school safety.

Myth #2: Sometimes people just snap. Both law enforcement personnel and mental health professionals agreed, “The Snap Theory is a fairy tale.” The reality is that violent behaviors are progressive and that there are observable signs along the way.

Education Policy, Practice and Partnerships in the Service of School Safety

There is much more information than can be provided in this article. To view “The Threat Assessment in Schools: A Guide to Managing Threatening Situations and to Creating Safe School Climates” in its entirety, go to the website of the U.S. Secret Service at http://www.secretservice.gov/ntac/ssi_guide.pdf

However, it is important to note the major contributions to the report and guides have made.

Education Policy: The guide and accompanying training strongly suggests that schools take threats seriously. Not all threats rise to the level of credibility or plausibility, but may indicate that some form of help is necessary to help a troubled student. In addition, it is necessary to establish a formal policy identifying roles of the three Threat Assessment Team members – an Administrator, a Law Enforcement Professional and a Mental Health Professional – who have been delegated the authority to conduct a threat assessment.

Education Practice: When conducting a Threat Assessment, the Secret Services advises that educators and team members take on an investigative and inquisitive mindset, viewing all information with healthy skepticism in order to determine the real facts of the situation. The focus should be on the student's behavior, not the “reputation” of the student or what is known about the student's family. Students can be “profiled” in both negative and positive ways. The public perception may be that profiling serves to over-identify certain socio-economic or ethnic groups for negative behavior but

dismissing a student's violent threats because "he comes from a good family" has led to tragic consequences as well.

Education Partnerships: Threat Assessment and Management is a safety measure that requires the establishment of multi-systems relationships. The educator, law enforcement professional and mental health professional brings unique and often contradicting attitudes, skills and knowledge. These differences are valued in the process of threat assessment because no one person should make a decision about whether a student poses or does not pose a credible threat to the safety of the school. What is valued is a team member who can build and maintain relationships across disciplines and agencies with respect.

The Role of Media, Cell Phone Technology, and the Internet in School Safety

Since the inception of the U.S. Department of Education/Secret Service School Safety Initiative, thousands of threat assessments have been conducted and an untold number of tragic school shootings have been averted.

However, it is important to note that the role of the media, cell phone technology and the Internet have played a large role in both preventing and facilitating school violence.

As children grow into adolescence, independent, unsupervised access to media, technology, and the Internet poses special problems. Through the media, both positive and negative images, role models and information can be conveyed. The media can become a de facto caregiver that indiscriminately stimulates and tutors children in behaviors and norms that may be at odds with those of parents. It has been noted that the movie, *The Basketball Diaries*, provided images that eerily presaged the massacre at Columbine. The protagonist in the movie wore a black trench coat, and in reaction to his grievances, went on a killing rampage.

As the increasing technological sophistication of children at a young age increases their access to the "World Wide Web," the virtual reality of cyberspace poses more than the threat of exposure to information, it can expose children and adolescents at risk with ideology that supports and encourages hate and violence. School shooters in various parts of the country and in Canada reported to authorities that they had planned their attacks by studying what happened at Columbine via the Internet.

One of the most disturbing details that emerged after the shooting in Red Lake, Minnesota was that the 16-year-old student, who killed eight people at school as well as his grandfather and his grandfather's girlfriend at their home before killing himself, had consulted and posted comments on a neo-Nazi website. Allegedly, the student identified himself with his name and his residence at the Red Lake Indian' Reservation. Prior to the shooting, his comments on the website state that he disliked interracial mixing among the American Indians on the reservation where he lived. This young man's connection with various hate websites shrouded his motivation from the view of family and his Native American community.

The Internet has the potential to compound the effects and outcomes of school violence. On the first year anniversary of the Columbine tragedy, copycat threats were conveyed across the country on multiple websites, threatening to replicate the shooting at specific schools. Bomb threats also abounded with the result that thousands of students were absent from school on April 20, 2000 because they feared for their safety.

Cell phone policy has become the *bete noire* of school districts. On one hand, parents and students feel a sense of security that they can communicate instantly should an “unsafe” situation occur. However, the abuse and misuse of cell phones on school campuses is difficult to control. In some areas, the possession of a cell phone places a student in greater jeopardy because the cell phone becomes a target for robbery. Cell phones that are used or ring in the classroom disrupt learning. In the school yard, some students have used cell phones to organize fights or warn students engaged in unlawful or dangerous activities when adults or police are approaching.

Emergency Response Crisis Management

The Joint Safe Schools Initiative of the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Secret Service is but one of the programs that have been instituted at the federal level to provide guidance to schools in security the safety of students and staff.

The U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools currently offers training to provide schools and school districts with information and resources on emergency management. The training was designed to provide an opportunity for school personnel to receive critical training on emergency management issues, resources and practices, especially in light of the terrorist attacks in New York City. On 9/11, almost 9,000 students and staff were placed in life threatening danger due to their proximity to the World Trade Center. Emphasis for the training will be placed on emergency management plan development and enhancement within the framework of the four phases of emergency management: prevention and mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery, specific to their locales. For some school districts, natural disasters may be the most frequently encountered hazard for students, staff and families.

This year, the U.S. Department of Education is expected to open a competitive grant process that will provide funding to those districts that score highest to enhance their safety plans. Further information about practical steps schools can take can be found at <http://www.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/emergencyplan/index.html>

Crises as Part of Daily Life

“There cannot be a crisis today, my schedule is already full.” This quote has been attributed to Henry Kissinger in a light moment in the midst of a national crisis. It may well be the motto of most educators and administrators whose day is filled with so many tasks and so many roles beyond what “traditional education” has defined.

Yet one more task has fallen to today’s teacher, assistant principal, principal or superintendent and that is maintaining the safety of students. The reality is that we are involved in war in the Middle East. Although we have escaped terror on American soil since 9/11, Homeland Security encourages vigilance and funds billions of dollars for the training and preparation of local, state and federal law enforcement agencies. Although we have been fortunate that the war is not in our backyards, we have young men and women who will be changed forever by that war when they return home.

And here is the big picture for education: Over 70 percent of all school age children attend a public or private school in the United States five days a week for at least six hours per day. Their presence on campus or in the supervision of school personnel can extend that time if the students are engaged in after school activities. If we add up the numbers of children, their parents and siblings, teachers, administrators, educational

aides, office workers, custodians, cafeteria workers and all manner of school support staff, over 50 percent of the U.S. population is in some way connected to a school.

For this reason, schools and school staffs must be prepared should a crisis – act of violence, natural disaster or act of terrorism – occur during the school day or during a school sponsored activity.

We no longer have the luxury of maintaining the myth that it won't happen here.

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