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Rethinking School Safety: Schools and Communities Working Together

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Introduction

There are two types of schools in America today: those that have had a crisis and those that are going to. My name is Cathy Kennedy-Paine, and I am a school psychologist in Springfield, OR, where I have served for 34 years. I also chair the National Emergency Assistance Team for the National Association of School Psychologists. This team is composed of school psychologists from across the United States who have training and extensive experience in school crisis response. Our team has supported schools in crisis since 1996. I recently spent several days in Sparks, Nevada supporting the Washoe County School District, site of a tragic shooting this past October where a seventh grade student killed a middle school math teacher and wounded two students. The shooter then took his own life. Our purpose there was to use our experience to help leaders of the school community look ahead and provide the staff with strategies to facilitate the long-term recovery of the district. That recovery will be long and arduous.

As a school psychologist with 23 years of school crisis response experience, I have helped to guide schools across the country as they recover from traumatic events. I am all too familiar with the devastating effects traumatic events like these can have on schools, yet I have also seen how schools can help their communities move forward and in doing so help students and staff learn how to adaptively cope with tragic events. I have seen this in my consultation work and at my own school, where I was the lead school psychologist following a tragic mass shooting in 1998. When school safety is breached, there is a huge and long-lasting effect on the school and the community. Just ask anyone in Springfield, Oregon, Newtown, Connecticut, Danvers, Massachusetts, or Sparks, Nevada.

Overarching Point

I come before you today with this important message: Ensuring school safety is a day-to-day responsibility that is critical to student learning and well-being. Most crises and school safety issues do not rise to the level of a mass shooting. On the contrary, schools need to prepare for, and intervene with, more common crises, such as an accidental staff death, a student suicide, a threat, or a natural disaster. This foundation of preparation supports a response if a major crisis does strike. School safety and positive school climate are not achieved by singular actions like purchasing a designated program or piece of equipment but rather by effective comprehensive and collaborative efforts requiring the dedication and commitment of all school staff and community members. Building solid, ongoing school–community relationships is essential to ensuring supports and reinforcing student safety, wellness, and learning. Schools must not be passive, for it is never a question of if, it is always a question of when a school will be required to respond to a school-associated crisis event.

Schools today require three things: (a) effective strategies for prevention and wellness promotion; (b) systems and trained staff in place to immediately respond to a variety of crises; and (c) adequate, appropriate, and sustainable school-based mental health services. I know of no better way to illustrate this message than to tell you what happened in Springfield, Oregon.

Thurston High School Experience
On a sunny spring morning 15 years ago, the students and staff of Thurston High School in my school district experienced the most horrific school crisis imaginable. In a few short moments, we were transformed from innocent, unsuspecting individuals starting a normal day to traumatized victims of a school shooting spree. When the shots were fired, our sense of safety and security was shattered along with our innocence.

The day began like any other at Thurston High School but turned deadly at 7:56 a.m., when a freshman entered the school with three concealed weapons—a semiautomatic rifle and two handguns. He passed the perimeter fencing, surveillance cameras, and campus monitors, and sprayed 50 rounds of ammunition throughout the cafeteria. What was first thought to be a prank turned into a nightmare in which two students were killed and 25 others were wounded.

As the lead district psychologist, I received the emergency call just a few minutes after the shooting. I rushed to the school, passing one ambulance after another as they raced by with their innocent victims. Eleven ambulances left Thurston High that morning—one ambulance every 4 minutes for 45 minutes. Throngs of frightened parents and neighbors filled the sidewalks and pressed past the gathering media to reach the school. A dazed teacher directed traffic—the same teacher who, moments before, had administered first aid to wounded and dying students.

It was a chaotic scene of parents, reporters, police, and emergency workers all trying to learn what had happened, trying to find their children. Three hundred students who had witnessed the shooting—and survived—gathered in the library while they waited for police questioning. When the principal stood at the church across the street and read the names of the wounded, he saw shock and disbelief on the faces before him. Parents who had never before met one another literally helped hold each other up.

The nightmare intensified an hour later when we learned that the parents of the 15-year-old shooter had been found dead in their home, apparently shot by their son. His parents, Bill and Faith, both Springfield teachers loved by their students, were long-time residents and friends of us all. Faith, a popular high school Spanish teacher, had just been named “Outstanding Educator of the Year,” but had not lived to receive her award.

This tragedy affected the 11,000 students, the 1,200 employees of the district, and the entire Eugene-Springfield community. When President Bill Clinton phoned that morning, we knew this would affect the state of Oregon and the nation as well. Our sense of safety and security was shattered along with our innocence, and no longer could we say, “It can’t happen here.” We also learned the hard way what worked and what did not in terms of our prevention and response efforts and what it takes to recover from a seriously traumatic event.

**What Schools Need**

And so, let me speak in more detail about the needs of our schools.

**1) Schools Need Effective Strategies for Prevention and Wellness Promotion**

Despite the horror that we all feel after a tragic shooting, schools remain one of the safest places for children in the United States. As I mentioned earlier, most crises that schools face don't involve deadly violence but instead events like the accidental or illness-based death of a student or staff member, self-harm, or suicide behavior. The foundation of school crisis preparedness lies in prevention and wellness promotion programs that support student well-being as well as learning and student success. We should place particular focus on efforts that proactively facilitate resiliency, address students' mental health challenges, promote positive behaviors, and encourage a sense of belonging at school. Why? We know that when these are in place, then student academic learning increases.
It is critical to enhance school connectedness and trust between students and adults as well as to reinforce the importance of reporting concerns about someone hurting themselves or others. We know that such reporting is one of our most effective preventive measures. School psychologists play an integral role in working with administrators and teachers to ensure that building systems and policies are in place that support student safety.

In collaboration with school mental health professionals, each school should be required to develop a plan to identify and support those students at risk for violence to themselves or others, or who are experiencing mental health difficulties. It is critical that schools have the staff and resources for early identification and referral of potentially violent youth. This includes a formal threat assessment team including a trained mental health professional, school administrator, and safety officer. Critical to this process is collaboration with other education, mental health, and law enforcement agencies. This process is the foundation for supporting resilience, connectedness, positive behaviors, and school climate.

(2) Schools Need Systems and Trained Staff in Place to Immediately Respond to a Variety of Crises
Because we cannot prevent all crises from occurring, schools must have trained school safety, mental health, and crisis intervention teams to develop and implement a school crisis response plan. Many crisis events have the potential to overwhelm both adults’ and students’ coping capacities. The effectiveness of recovery is extremely dependent on the quality of prior planning and preparation as well as the character and connectedness of the school climate. For instance, the death of a student or staff member will mostly likely require targeted response efforts to support their closest friends and colleagues, while a mass school shooting can overwhelm the entire school-based response system due to the large scale impact. The school’s capacity to begin and follow through with steps toward recovery is shaped by the school’s preparedness and culture. As we learned at Thurston High, having a district crisis plan allowed us to quickly take action and begin supporting the students and staff. Our administrators, school psychologists, and school counselors immediately implemented their clear roles and responsibilities, thus facilitating the recovery process.

We also discovered that when students and community members were informed of the response plan, even though it might be adjusted, they tended to view recovery as possible (which in turn potentially minimized psychological trauma). Having an organized team and plan in place enabled people to feel a sense of confidence in a situation over which they otherwise felt little control.

Most schools do not have sustainable funding for continuous crisis and emergency preparedness, response, and recovery planning and training. This includes, at a minimum, establishment of a school safety and crisis team, a balanced focus on promoting and protecting both physical and psychological safety, a plan based on the Incident Command System, and funding for professional development on evidence-based response strategies. Due to typical annual staff turnover, one-shot training is not adequate. Annual training and plan evaluation is necessary to be effective, which requires continuous, sustainable funding for emergency preparedness.

(3) Schools Need Adequate, Appropriate, and Sustainable School-Based Mental Health Services
Only a fraction of students in need actually receive mental health services. Among those who do, the majority access them at school. Nevertheless, the availability of school-based mental health professionals remains inadequate to meet the needs of our children and youth. School counselors, school psychologists, and school social workers, specifically, provide critical services to meet a range of mental health needs and enhance social–emotional learning while coordinating with community resources.

There are two important reasons mental health supports are needed in schools. First, access to mental health services and supports in schools is vital to improving the overall physical and psychological safety and well-being of our students and schools. Schools provide for easy access to services, and there is
often less stigma associated with receiving these services in school rather than in the community. School-based services that are linked to learning also improve academic performance and problem-solving skills. Positive mental health is built early in life, and educators play a significant role in ensuring that a child’s experiences in school contribute to positive mental health. Providing quality, comprehensive services for students beginning in the earliest years requires that schools have an adequate number of appropriately trained school counselors, school psychologists, and school social workers, as well as close collaboration with community providers.

The perpetrator of the school shooting in Springfield was diagnosed with mental illness subsequent to his arrest. Though we will never know for sure, perhaps if he had had an early diagnosis and treatment, 25 students would not have been shot, and the students and parents who died would still be alive.

Second, failing to provide appropriate professional mental health supports can perpetuate crisis symptoms that can undermine student and staff well-being and the learning environment. To be clear, in large-scale crisis events, schools cannot respond alone. Just as establishing relationships with law enforcement and first responders is critical to effective incident response, establishing relationships with trusted community mental health providers is critical to supporting short- and long-term recovery needs. However, outside support is not a substitute for school-employed mental health staff members who know the students and teachers, are fully integrated in the school, and can provide ongoing continuity of services. In my district, years of federal, state, and local budget cuts have eliminated elementary school counselors and severely reduced secondary school counselors. This has resulted in a reduction of direct emotional–behavioral support to students.

At the one year anniversary of the Thurston shooting, one of the wounded students addressed the gathered crowd. Teresa was our most seriously wounded student, shot in the head and given just a 10% chance of survival. She has life-long challenges but made a remarkable recovery. She issued this simple plea: “Please, stop this violence.” One year later, the shootings at Columbine occurred, and 15 years later the violence continues.

After the Newton shootings one year ago, there began a nationwide discussion on how to prevent and respond to these horrific events. The President put forth a plan, Now Is the Time, that included, among other things, increased access to school mental health supports and school crisis planning. NASP and five other leading education organizations released “A Framework for Safe and Successful Schools,” providing one voice on a direction forward. The U.S. Department of Education released federal guidance in their Guide for Developing High Quality School Emergency Operations Plans (K–12) document. Organizations like Sandy Hook’s Promise have worked hard to keep conversations about school safety and gun violence in the public and policy eye. We know what works. But without funding, a serious commitment from Congress, we will be here again next year or the year after. And our students, staff, and families will continue to struggle unnecessarily with consequences of violence and other harmful behaviors. Our children and their safety can’t wait. The time for action is now.

**Conclusion: What Congress Can Do?**

Policy makers at all levels, including Congress, can and should provide ongoing and sustainable funding for prevention and wellness promotion; for school-based mental health services; and for continuous crisis and emergency preparedness, response, and recovery planning and staff training. This funding could help seed school safety and violence prevention initiatives for districts that need to develop or improve their capacity to deliver effective services.

Secondly, Congress can assist districts in providing an adequate number of appropriately trained school counselors, school psychologists, and school social workers to provide quality comprehensive prevention and intervention services for students. There are several federally funded grants and proposed initiatives that would serve this purpose and are included in your materials. Specifically, the Elementary and
Secondary School Counseling program helps schools set up mental health programs by providing funds to help build the structures for these programs, including having sufficient personnel to deliver needed services. As I mentioned, the President’s plan proposed a number of initiatives designed to help schools and communities increase access to mental health services, improve school climate, and make schools safer. However, without the proper funding, these policy proposals will not be translated into practice.

In 2008, our county received a federal “Safe Schools Healthy Students” grant that provided funds for all 16 districts in the county to train staff using evidence-based programs in school crisis response. The training would not have happened without that funding. Similarly, Project SERV (School Emergency Response to Violence) grants have proven very useful. As in our case, one-time grants can be incredibly beneficial; however, it is not enough. In order for change to occur and to endure, there must be a consistent allotment of funds available that allow schools and districts to employ the proper school mental health professionals, improve access to mental health services and supports, and maintain effective partnerships with community members.

Thank you for your attention and commitment to our children.