

School Safety: A Learning Matter

By Cathy Paine

How do we keep our children safe at school? This question captivates the nation's attention every time a high-profile act of school violence shatters a community and shocks the country. Our collective fear and outrage at the school shootings this fall generated extensive media coverage, prompted crisis-team meetings and lockdown drills in schools nationwide, dominated PTA and school listserv discussions, and spurred the White House to hold a hastily organized summit on school violence prevention in October.

Such intense reaction is understandable, given the horrific and heartbreaking details of the multiple shootings. It will be of little long-term benefit unless we focus on the right issues.

We face the difficult balancing act of reassuring the public that schools are indeed safe, while also advocating for the resources and programs necessary to make them safer. Solutions that may seem the most obvious and simple, such as more metal detectors, may not be most effective. Violence prevention is a day-in, day-out responsibility that infuses every aspect of school life, such as playground safety, Internet-use policies, gang prevention, classroom management, and the identification of and early intervention with students who are struggling psychologically. Effective efforts both protect the physical safety of students and staff members and promote positive learning and social development. Our challenge is to not let increased anxiety over these recent tragedies obscure the proven fundamentals of violence prevention. Instead, we must become more unified, vocal advocates for policies that support what schools can do effectively.

Intruder-based armed violence, such as occurred this fall in Bailey, Colo., and Lancaster County, Pa., is extremely rare and difficult to prevent. According to the School Violence Resource Center, violent deaths of any kind at school are rare, and have declined annually since the 1997-98 school year. Not coincidentally, we began to learn a great deal that year about the importance of integrated violence prevention, early intervention, and crisis recovery, when the nation experienced six deadly shooting incidents perpetrated by students. They included an incident in my school district of Springfield, Ore., in which a freshman at Thurston High School shot and killed two students and wounded 22 more in the school cafeteria. The student was mentally unstable and had been suspended pending expulsion the day before for having a gun at school. Close examination of this and similar tragedies has contributed to the development of a set of practices that can vastly enhance the safety and well-being of students and staff members, not just in terms of prevention of deadly violence, but on a daily basis.

Recognizing what schools cannot do is paramount. We know with certainty that schools cannot barricade against all possible harm, and trying to do so is counterproductive to maintaining a normal learning environment. Appropriate security measures such as locked exterior doors, lighted stairwells, monitored hallways, and visitor-identification requirements are critical to school safety. But excessive building security does not promote a genuine sense of safety or well-being, nor does it provide a guarantee when armed intruders are willing to die. Ultimately, the security of our schools depends on the security of our communities. Policymakers, law-enforcement officials, and community leaders need to take a long, hard look at how our laws and public-service programs are responding to potentially dangerous behavior that could infiltrate our schools. Truly preventing this form of "terrorism" may require limiting access to guns in the community, the leading risk factor for deadly violence, and increasing access to mental-health and violence-prevention services for those at risk.

Educators should concentrate on violence-prevention strategies that are child-focused and support learning. We must balance building security with efforts to foster student resiliency, connectedness, and social competence. The core principles of such a plan are the same as those underlying sound

educational policies and practices that address the quality of the learning environment and the needs of the whole child.

Specifically, schools should do the following: Create a welcoming, nurturing school climate; enforce positive behavior and discipline for all students; support student mental health and wellness; develop and regularly review crisis and threat-assessment plans; train staff members in crisis procedures and identifying risk factors for violence; maintain appropriate building security; develop collaborative relationships with local law-enforcement and community-services providers; and strengthen home-school connections.

Central to this effort is helping students and their families feel valued and personally invested in keeping their school safe. This involves their cooperation in codes of conduct, bullying prevention, conflict resolution, and strategies that promote personal responsibility, respect, and compassion, as well as their help in developing trusting student-adult relationships in which young people feel free to report potentially dangerous activity. Students are in the best position to know when their peers may hurt themselves or others, and they need to feel comfortable telling an adult. One of many examples underscoring how important this kind of trust is was the student tip in September that kept three classmates from bombing their high school in Green Bay, Wis.

Equally critical to school safety is being able to respond to students in distress with appropriate early intervention and mental-health services. The importance of school-based mental-health services is well documented, starting with the "Report of the Surgeon General's Conference on Children's Mental Health: A National Action Agenda" in 2000, and including the report from the President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health in 2003 and, most recently, "School Mental Health Services in the United States," from the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2005).

Research shows that 20 percent of students will experience a mental-health problem in the course of their school life. Some of these young people will turn to violence and other high-risk behaviors as an outlet. Whether it is fighting, driving drunk, harming oneself, or suicide (the third leading cause of death among youths), all such behaviors are forms of violence that undermine student safety. By integrating mental-health supports into the learning environment, and by teaching prevention strategies, such as problem-solving and stress management, we can help students before their emotional problems explode into violence.

Staying focused on student needs and outcomes also makes our efforts more effective at the two ends of the violence-prevention-program spectrum: threat assessment and crisis recovery. Assessing the threat is one of the most difficult areas of violence prevention, because there is no single profile of who may pose a threat, and no sure way to predict whether a student will become violent. As we realized in Springfield, a troubled student can commit an act of violence without making a direct threat beforehand. But trained school mental-health professionals can help assess the multiple factors that put a student at risk of violence and work with other members of the crisis team and professionals in the community to provide appropriate interventions. A process that focuses solely on identification, without intervention, will neither help the potential offender nor necessarily improve safety.

Prevention is the goal, but being prepared for the unpreventable is an integral part of school safety. We have seen time and again the pivotal role that schools play in the healing process after tragedies of all kinds. Crisis recovery involves the entire school community and should engage all facets of student support, including families and local social services. It is not unusual to see increases in academic problems and mental-health problems such as depression and post-traumatic stress disorder, as well as an increased risk of suicide and other harmful behaviors. Although every effort should be made to help students return to a normal routine as soon as possible after such an event, the recovery issues involved when a school experiences a violent death are particularly complex and difficult. The nature of the crime can destroy the safety and security of the school and often has a pervasive, communitywide impact. The

grieving process includes experiencing feelings of violation and fear, and the involvement of the criminal-justice systems, insurance companies, and media can rekindle initial reactions to the trauma. Recovery can be long and arduous.

As with most challenges in education, there is no single or simple solution to making our schools safe. It is a multifaceted, continuous process that requires commitment and participation from all stakeholders, including federal and state lawmakers. Panelists at the White House summit on school safety, of which I was one, reiterated many of the proven strategies and urged federal officials to provide the policies and funding necessary to implement them in all schools. Ironically, federal Safe and Drug-Free Schools funds have declined from their previous levels at a time when they are needed most, as have grants for secondary and elementary school counseling programs.

Any act of violence at school is unacceptable; so too is failing to act with clarity and diligence on the lessons learned from Springfield and other tragedies, as well as from our successes. We know what works. The challenge is to put that knowledge permanently and universally into practice.

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