

## Recovery and Hope at Red Lake

*By Rich Lieberman and Ted Feinberg*

The tragedy at Red Lake High School raises hard questions. How does a boy become so isolated and despairing as to end ten lives including his own? Can we truly discern what is in the hearts and minds of our most troubled youth? How do we deal with the reality that caring adults, thoughtful planning, and metal detectors cannot always prevent tragedy?

Equally important, how does a small community wrenched by violence recover and reestablish itself as a place of safety and hope for its children? And, how does the school, the scene of such devastation, return to a place of learning and growth? Schools that experience violence like this bear the unusual role of being both the focus of the tragedy and the nexus of its recovery. In normal times schools serve as a centerpiece for community activities and provide key services to students and families. School staff in Red Lake will play a pivotal role in helping students, their families, and each other cope with the aftermath of Monday's shootings.

As members of the National Emergency Assistance Team, a group of school psychologists trained to respond to school crises, we have witnessed the anguish of communities similarly impacted by profound acts of school violence. We have also seen the incredible resilience and nobility of the human spirit in people's capacity to help each other and overcome their trauma with proper support and time.

Four of our colleagues were invited into Red Lake to work with the school staff and tribal leaders to help assess the mental health needs of the community. Our volunteer role is to facilitate the first stages of healing and equip the school staff with the initial skills, planning and resources to do the hard work in the months ahead. Critical to this process is respect for the specific character, values, and traditions of the community, as the healing process must necessarily emanate from and be supported by this culture.

A number of priorities drive the first stages of crisis response. First is reestablishing a sense of emotional equilibrium and security. Although the violence is over, children need reassurance that they and their loved ones will be all right. And, much like the oxygen mask on the airplane, adults need their own emotional safety net secured in order to help the children in their care. Reconnecting families, counseling, and spiritual activities are essential to this process.

Second is giving people the opportunity to tell their stories. Administrators and teachers, struggling with their own emotions will continue to perform in the roles of caregiver and decision maker: attending meetings, holding discussions for students and parents, and coordinating with community services and public safety officials. Balancing these needs is precarious. One of the roles of crisis responders is to give caregivers, as well as students and families, the chance to express their feelings individually or in groups. This process can be emotionally draining (at Columbine, we went through 24 boxes of tissues during three days of staff meetings) but inevitably beneficial.

Third is the imperative to bring the students back to school (even if in another building) as soon as reasonably possible. Family is the first source of support for most youngsters but youth also need to be with their peers, to share their reactions, and to connect with their teachers. Isolation is a real risk after a crisis, especially in communities where natural support systems may be fragile due to poverty, rural issues, extended families, or other risk factors. Red Lake principal Chris Dunshee eloquently described the need "to gather these children and hold them close to us, let them know they are loved."

Fourth is training adults to recognize symptoms of severe psychological trauma. Reactions to trauma vary from person to person and can change over time. Children and adults may experience symptoms of numbness, difficulty sleeping or eating, fearfulness, depression, confusion, anger, and increased aggression. Some will suffer recurring, intrusive thoughts of the tragedy, such as one girl after a different school shooting who asked, "How do I stop the VCR in my head?" The risk of suicide and violence can also increase, requiring vigilance over the coming months to identify and safeguard those at risk. Anniversaries, birthdays, and graduations will all be particularly vulnerable times.

These are not easy challenges. Within them the business of learning and living must go on. School staff and students will return to math and reading but in the context of healing. They will continue to grapple with the hard questions we all share about creating safe and truly embracing school environments. The journey for Red Lake will be long and at times painful yet illuminated by the hope of other communities that have come through similar tragedies. Our heartfelt wishes and offer of continued support go out to them.

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