Good afternoon members of the Commission. Thank you for inviting me to speak to you on behalf of the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) regarding the effects of media coverage of mass shootings and the role that the media can play in helping to inform the public and prevent further violence. My name is Benjamin Fernandez. I am a school psychologist and Chair of the National Association of School Psychologists School Safety and Crisis Response Committee.

Modern media enables access to current events, including highly traumatic experiences, in real time and in multiple formats. The viral, interactive, and more intimate nature of media, particularly social media, can make these events feel closer to home and more personal. This presents opportunities to increase attention to school safety but at the same time perpetuates the belief that schools are dangerous places, when in fact they are safe.

I’d like to focus on three primary points in my time today. I also refer you to my written statement for more detail.
First, by balancing physical and psychological safety - Schools are safe.

School policies and practices are most critical to this. But the media also plays a role in contributing to the perception of safety by how they shape the overall understanding of specific crisis events. Mass school shootings are horrific and totally unacceptable, and we need to pay attention to them. But they are not the norm. Yet, too often, coverage of mass shootings has perpetuated the misperception that schools are dangerous. Schools are overwhelmingly very safe places, and since the 1990s the overall trend is that they are becoming safer, despite the unusual number of mass shootings this year. I am reminded of my own daughter’s fear after the Parkland shooting. Based on information she saw on social media, rumors in her school, and what she saw on the news, she was very concerned about the safety of her school. Fortunately, she came to me seeking guidance on what is really going on. After honest conversation and pointing out the physical and psychological safety approaches of her school, she began to understand the situation which calmed her fears. It’s important the media convey factual information about the reality of day-to-day school safety because coverage can infuse all of our perceptions.

Importantly, national, state, and local leaders have a responsibility to convey the facts, reinforce best practices, and balance reactions to a specific event with assurances that schools are among the safest places for our children to be. Everything you and other leaders say contributes to the news cycle.

Second, best practices for media coverage of traumatic events must include the commitment to do no harm.
School psychologists operate by the principle of do no harm in our practice. NASP believes that the media should apply these principles when covering incidents of school violence. Responsible media coverage can benefit the community, prevent harm, and aid recovery.

I want to stress that the reporting of school safety incidents is important. People need to know the facts and have an understanding of response and recovery efforts. The media can play a critical role assisting with crisis recovery, if they follow best practices of reporting. The goal is not to censor or limit the media but rather to provide guidance on what is required to do no harm.

Doing no harm includes the understanding of how actions, images, video, and words may contribute to the difficulties of crisis survivors and victims, and possibly triggering others who are at risk of harming themselves or others. Unfortunately, certain media coverage practices can cause harm, perpetuate fear, and hamper recovery. Irresponsible media coverage includes speculative reporting in the absence of verified information, over dramatizing how information is conveyed, asking students to relive the crisis or recount their experience immediately after exposure to a crisis event by asking them questions like “what you were thinking when you saw your classmate shot in the back?”, and focusing intensively on the perpetrator. Such practices can increase anxiety, fear, and perceptions of threat; create the potential for further impact of crisis victims and possible triggering of troubled youth; and perpetuate misperceptions of coping and recovery.

As Dr. Johnston has noted, many of these issues related to coverage of mass violence also apply to suicide. I urge the commission to keep this in mind because schools are far more likely to be dealing with a suicide risk than the threat of a violent attack. For more information on avoiding coverage that can
cause harm, I recommend the “Five for 5 Challenge: Reporting on Suicide Matters” video on YouTube created by Fairfax County in Virginia.

The good news is that there are responsible media practices that can prevent harm and promote positive messaging. These include:

- Refraining from providing intensive and graphic details of the incident
- Avoiding focusing on the method, plans, photos, videos, writing, or other manifestos created by the perpetrator as well as using images or likenesses of the perpetrator.
- Focusing on students, staff, and families who are positively coping and avoiding overdramatizing crisis impact
- Seeking out experts and facts related to school safety and crisis intervention services to provide factual and best practice recovery information
- Emphasizing that schools are safe and reporting on appropriate, evidence-based measures schools are taking to make schools even safer

My third point this afternoon is that school leaders can play a role in how media coverage will contribute to useful public understanding or may contribute to confusion or harm.

Collaboration with other agencies, such as law enforcement, community health and mental health departments, and others as well as the media can help guide recovery after a significant event such as mass violence. For school leaders, it is important to develop a plan on how to communicate with the media that helps accomplish this goal. Such a plan should consider the communication practices before, during, and after an incident and may include:
o A process for determining who is responsible for communication, when updates will be given, how information will be obtained, verified, and then disseminated, and what are the expectations for the media at schools.

o Using only verified factual information, to quickly communicate with the school community, and address rumors and misinformation.

o Providing regular accurate updates regarding the crisis situation

o Engaging the school community by communicating information about public services, planned memorial events, and resources for recovery.

Specific Recommendations for the Commission

As you consider specific recommendations about school safety—and specifically, the role of the media—I would like to offer the following recommendations. Federal leadership in this area is critical. Collectively, we can uphold the first amendment and support a free press while also providing education, guidance, and technical assistance to help schools better understand best practices around media engagement and to the press and social media outlets about responsible coverage of violent school events. The Federal Commission on School Safety could assist by disseminating guidance (much like NASP’s document entitled Responsible Media Coverage of Crisis Events Involving Children and Youth) that clearly articulates best practices in covering school crisis events.

Conclusion

Media in all its forms can play a valuable role in how information about school crises is communicated. While irresponsible reporting can cause harm, responsible reporting can help a community heal. I want to stress once again that NASP does not support limiting or controlling the media. However, we support a meaningful dialogue to promote best practice reporting, as well as best practice media engagement
for schools. We all play a role in supporting school safety and when we speak the media listens. We become a part of the news cycle and have a responsibility to promote accurate, evidence-based information that supports the well-being of all students and communities. Thank you. I am happy to answer questions and NASP is happy to serve as resource.

References