



**Written Testimony Submitted by Ben Fernandez to the
Federal School Safety Commission on the
Effect of Media Coverage on School Shootings
June 21, 2018**

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.

This is an important topic. Modern media platforms, tools, and cycles enable access to current events, including highly traumatic experiences, in real time and in multiple formats, often simultaneously on multiple devices. This includes ALL mechanisms by which people get the news: television, radio, and print outlets as well as Internet providers and companies, and social media. The viral, interactive, and more intimate nature of media today, particularly social media, can make these events feel more personal and visceral to the public. This presents both dangers and opportunities. Opportunities include increased attention to school safety. Dangers include the potential to traumatize vulnerable persons and perpetuate the false narrative that schools are dangerous places, when in fact they are objectively among the safest places in our society.

I have been a school psychologist for 22 years, and next year I will assume the role of Coordinator of Prevention Services in Loudoun County Public Schools here in Virginia. In my tenure as a school psychologist, I have been a school- and district-level crisis team leader. Additionally, I am the Chair of the National Association of School Psychologists School Safety and Crisis Response Committee, and a NASP PREP@RE School Safety and Crisis Preparedness Trainer. Much of my work focuses on helping individual practitioners, administrators, schools, and districts implement evidence-based policy and practices to promote school safety, prevent violence, and appropriately respond when a crisis does occur. This appropriate response

includes providing guidance to school administrators about how to effectively respond to media requests and how to use the media to convey accurate and necessary information and dispel rumors. Additionally, NASP's School Safety and Crisis Response Committee has put out guidance for the media regarding best practices for covering traumatic events.

I'd like to focus on three primary points today. These are balancing physical safety with psychological safety, best practices in media coverage of school associated crisis events, and, finally, what school leaders can do to promote productive media coverage.

First, it is imperative that we balance physical and psychological safety in schools.

School policies and practices are most critical to this in terms of balancing building security measures with creating safe school climates and providing needed mental health services, as well as having appropriately trained school safety and crisis response teams. But the media also plays a role in contributing to the perception of safety by how they shape the overall understanding of, and focus on, specific crisis events; the tone of coverage and messaging; and the attention to facts. Mass school shootings such as those that occurred in Parkland, Florida, and Santa Fe, Texas, are horrific and totally unacceptable, and we need to pay attention to them. But they are not the norm. From the most recent data provided by the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice (Indicators of School Crime and Safety 2017; Musu-Gillett et al., 2018) we estimate that the odds of a student age 5–18 years being a homicide victim at school are 1 in 2.8 million. 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.

The misperception of schools being unsafe places can have a negative impact on student attendance. For example, improper characterization of school safety could lead to students skipping school out of fear they will experience violence, despite data suggesting **fewer** students having carried a weapon on school property, having been threatened or injured with a weapon on school property, or having been in a physical fight on school property. It is imperative the media highlight this fact and other school data that dispel the myth that schools are unsafe places and that reinforce a general sense of psychological safety. To this point, 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. When leaders speak, it creates news, so what you say can contribute to how the media is covering the event and its aftermath.

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. This means understanding factors and variables affecting a person, such as exposure to the crisis, existing risk factors, and other vulnerabilities that increase the risk of trauma for an individual. School psychologists, when working with groups or individuals, also commit to using best practice approaches that are empirically informed and developmentally appropriate. NASP believes that the media, both traditional and social media, should apply these principles when covering incidents of school violence. Responsible media coverage can benefit the community, prevent harm, aid recovery, and advocate for positive change.

I want to stress that the reporting of school safety incidents is important. People need to know the facts and have a clear understanding about what those in charge are doing to respond to an incident and to facilitate recovery. The media can play a critical role assisting with crisis recovery, if they follow best practices of reporting that serve to promote mental wellness, advocate for schools and students, and utilize messaging that can promote help-seeking behaviors. So, the goal is not to censor or limit the media but rather to provide guidance on what is required to do no harm.

In addition to the issue of psychological safety that I have already discussed, doing no harm includes attending to the potential for more immediate harm in terms of impact on crisis survivors and other victims, and in terms of possibly triggering individuals who are at risk of becoming violent. Unfortunately, certain media coverage practices can cause more harm, perpetuate fear, and hamper recovery. Irresponsible media coverage includes speculative reporting in the absence of verified information, over dramatization in terms of how information is being conveyed, asking students to relive the crisis or recount their experience immediately after exposure to a crisis event, and reporting personal information of students and families. These practices can cause harm to those viewing or reading media coverage and to those who experienced the crisis directly. There are many dangers in emphasizing or repeatedly recounting details of a crisis, particularly in cases involving personal loss or suffering of children. From my review of the literature (including NASP publications such as Brock et al., 2016), as well as my own applied experiences, some examples include:

- Intensive, detailed coverage of the event can raise children's anxiety levels. Troubled youth and those directly affected by the event may internalize the information and be at renewed risk of severe trauma reactions, such as problems at home or school, extreme anger, aggression, depression, suicide, substance abuse, or the impulse to harm others.
- Forcing children or youth who have directly experienced violence to comment on their loss or relive their experience can cause serious psychological setbacks. The trauma

research is clear that individuals should not be asked/forced to recount their experience before they are ready.

- Asking students or staff to comment on a situation they do not fully understand can put them in a position where they feel compelled to make observations or statements that are not accurate or even personally held. Children are particularly vulnerable and may assume an enormous sense of guilt if they feel that they have said or done something inadequate during a media interview. This can also contribute to misinformation spreading widely.
- Excessive or intrusive media coverage can impede the ability of individual students and the school community to move forward with the healing process. Inappropriate coverage of memorial activities can undermine the purpose or healing value of the activity.
- Focusing on the fear and trauma caused by an event perpetuates the misperception that children are not coping. In fact, in most cases, the opposite is true, and emphasizing this image can unnecessarily raise children's threat perception.
- Finally, according to the ALERRT Center at Texas State University (n.d.) coverage that focuses on details related to the perpetrator(s) background and actions can potentially serve as a trigger to vulnerable individuals at risk of becoming violent. For example, we saw how the extensive coverage of the Parkland shootings, particularly attention to the shooter, has been associated with increases in threats against schools across the country. Some of this resulted from heightened attention to reporting of threatening behaviors, but some incidents proved to be genuine copycat threats.

Importantly, many of these issues related to coverage of mass violence also apply to suicide. And while today's meeting is focused on mass violence, overall school safety (the focus of this Commission) must attend to the impact that media coverage can have on suicide contagion. Here again, the research is pretty clear that coverage of suicides contributes to copycat behaviors, and schools are far more likely to be dealing with a suicide risk than the threat of a violent attack. I urge the commission to keep this in mind.

There are responsible media and social media practices that can prevent harm. These include:

- Not using the alleged perpetrators' images or likeness
- Refraining from providing intensive and graphic details in the coverage of the incident
- Avoiding highlighting the method, plans, photos, videos, writing, or other manifestos created by the perpetrator
- Refraining from using simplistic or speculative language
- Reporting only verified information from official spokespeople of the school district or law enforcement agency

- Respecting the privacy of students, staff, and families by not asking them to relive the event or comment on their loss (especially in the event's immediate aftermath)

The media can help prevent overreaction to a crisis event by:

- Focusing on how students, staff, and families are coping factually and avoiding overdramatizing crisis impact
- Respecting school community wishes for privacy
- Focusing on balanced coverage rather than reporting in a manner that saturates, desensitizes, or creates an atmosphere of fear and panic
- Seeking out experts and facts related to school safety and crisis intervention services to provide factual and best practice recovery information

An important role of the media is to promote positive messaging and adaptive coping/assistance for school community members. They can help aid recovery by:

- Communicating available resources, at the local and national levels, for those who may be impacted by the event
- Reporting on expected reactions and the steps students, staff, and families are taking toward recovery and healing
- Reporting on stories of hope and recovery
- Emphasizing that schools are safe and reporting on appropriate, evidence-based measures schools are taking to make schools even safer, including:
 - providing increased access to school mental health services and school employed mental health professionals like school psychologists
 - establishing anonymous and non-anonymous systems to report concerns
 - having well-established threat assessment procedures
 - employing reasonable physical security measures like secured entrances and exits, lighted hallways, and appropriate supervision during school hours
 - employing positive discipline practices

My third point this afternoon is that school leaders themselves 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. A communication plan should consider the following.

- **Before an incident occurs**

- Establish and make clear to the media, staff, and other agencies who can speak officially on behalf of the district.
- Include appropriate cautions to school staff, students, and families about speaking with the media in the aftermath of a crisis. These cautions should include guidance against speculating on specifics that have not been officially confirmed and information about the potential negative mental health effects of recounting personal traumatic experiences in the public forum. However, these cautions should not imply any prohibition of speaking to the media as individuals.
- Build relationships with local media and your district's public information officer.
- Establish a sense of community within your schools through the district's social media efforts.
- Through the district's social media efforts, encourage positive posting behaviors and communications.
- Establish and teach appropriate social media behaviors and expectations to staff and students.
- Establish an approach for monitoring and identifying crisis warning signs or threats of violence.
- Develop a communications plan that identifies who is responsible for communication, when updates will be given, how information will be obtained and then disseminated, and what are the expectations for the media at schools.
- Establish and maintain information on local mental health resources and hotlines.
- Understand district social media policies.

- **During an incident**

- Collaborate with partner agencies and establish a joint information center to assist with the coordination of public information related to the incident.
- Obtain verified factual information and quickly communicate with the school community.
- Quickly address any rumors or misinformation via all communication mechanisms.
- Disseminate the district's list of local mental health resources and hotlines for others to access assistance, and provide this list to media.
- Share best practice guidance of media coverage of crisis events with the local press.
- Promote local mental health resources and hotlines and information to assist parents and caregivers in supporting their children.
- Monitor warning signs and additional threats.

- Remind students and staff of district policies and cautions related to talking to the media.
- **After an incident**
 - Through traditional media and social media, provide accurate updates regarding the crisis situation.
 - Engage the school community by communicating information about public services or planned memorial events.

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 following a school crisis to both gather information disseminate verified facts, and connect with members of the school community. Additionally, we can provide guidance to the press and social media outlets about how to provide responsible coverage of violent school events in a manner that promotes healing and prevents harm. 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. Irresponsible reporting can hinder recovery, create undue panic, and cause harm. However, by engaging in responsible reporting, the media can be a valuable asset to both helping a community stay informed and helping them heal. I want to stress once again that NASP does not support limiting or controlling the media. However, we support efforts to begin a meaningful dialogue on how we can improve the media’s attention to what practices are helpful and what practices are potentially harmful, as well as equipping schools to implement best practices related to media engagement. We also urge you, as critical leaders in this work, to ensure that your relationship with the media is focused on promoting the fact that schools are safe and on highlighting the evidence-based methods for improving school safety that I mentioned earlier. As public figures, when you speak, the media pays attention, and your words and actions become part of the news cycle. You, too, play a role in ensuring that the content of media reports is evidence-based, accurate, and focused on promoting the well-being of our students and communities.

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