

# **School Security and Emergency Preparedness Resources**

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# Communicating Safety

When a crisis occurs, do you have a plan for letting parents, media, and the community know what is happening in your district?

**Kenneth S. Trump**

**T**he caption under a picture of a lone wolf trying to blend in the middle of a pack of hounds reads: “When you are in deep trouble, say nothing and try to look inconspicuous.”

This advice may work well for the wolf, but it is not a good practice for school boards and administrators to follow in communicating school safety and crisis issues to parents, the media, and the broader school community.

Parents will forgive you if test scores go down one year. But they are much less forgiving if something happens that could have been prevented. As school leaders, your reputation and credibility are at stake.

Actual incidents and rumors of violence disrupt school communities. Overnight, attendance can decrease dramatically. Threats, rumored or real, can result in school clo-

sures. Student text messages and cell phone calls help to fuel rumors and misinformation, often creating more anxiety and panic than actual threats themselves.

A number of superintendents and boards have been plagued by security and crisis-related incidents that triggered local news stories that did not go away quickly. How you communicate with internal and external constituents can contribute significantly to your success in responding to, and recovering from, a school safety incident.

## Getting out in front of problems

Parents send their children to school under the impression that all possible steps—from prevention to security to preparedness—have been taken. When an incident occurs,

many parents then question whether the trust they have placed in school leaders has been violated.

Effective school-community relations can be defined as “Good behavior, well communicated.” To effectively communicate about safety issues, you must make sure your schools have well-developed and exercised safety and crisis plans and your staff is trained to implement the plans.

“Getting out in front” on safety issues is also important, because parents and the media increasingly know the tough questions to ask. School board members and administrators historically have taken a “downplay, deny, deflect, and defend” approach, but that simply will not suffice today.

Parents basically want to know the answers to two broad questions:

- What measures are in place in my child’s school to prevent or to reduce the risk of crime, violence, and other safety hazards?

- Are school officials prepared to respond and manage incidents that can’t be prevented?

Prevention measures can include improvements to school climate, violence prevention programs, mental health and other student support services, proactive security measures, staff training, and numerous other strategies.

Preparedness measures include crisis plans that are well developed and exercised, staff members trained on these plans, strong partnerships with first responders and community agencies, and related efforts.

Board members, superintendents, principals, and other school representative should be able to articulate district and building-level measures that are in place at any time—before, during, or after a crisis. Telling parents and the media that school safety is “our top priority” is not enough. Parents and reporters are much more educated consumers of best practices, and generalities will not suffice.

### What not to say

Proactive school leaders view communicating about safety as a positive public relations tool, not a communications disaster. By talking about safety issues before a crisis occurs, you can enhance your credibility prior to an actual incident.

What not to say can be as important as what to say. After a student died during a school-sponsored event a number of years ago, a high school principal said: “Look at the amount of times we’ve had something tragic occur and compare it to the number of times when nothing has happened. ... It’s

# Safety communications tips

## Stay out in front

- Model prevention, security, and preparedness best practices daily.
- Create a board subcommittee or work group on school safety.
- Dedicate board meeting time for safety updates.
- Create a school safety committee within the district and building-level parent organizations.
- Develop a crisis communications plan in addition to traditional emergency plans.
- Host parent awareness training on school and youth safety topics.
- Encourage student-led activities to promote school safety.
- Use student school newspapers to promote safety stories.
- Incorporate safety into annual professional development programs.
- Spend three to five minutes at each faculty meeting reviewing safety and crisis plans.
- Include safety communications in par-

ent newsletters.

- Create district and building Web pages with school safety information.
- Promote methods for students and parents to report concerns.

## Manage rumors and threats

- Anticipate your district will someday face a fast-spreading rumor or threat.
- Have a solid crisis communications plan in place before an incident.
- Maintain well-trained threat assessment teams and evaluation protocols.
- Educate students on reporting rumors about threats to adults.
- Report threats to police and work collaboratively to evaluate the threats.
- Train administrators to monitor for and respond to rumors.
- Have and enforce policies prohibiting and/or restricting cell phone use.
- Provide accurate, timely, and redundant communications to dispel rumors.

- Avoid closing schools unless school and public safety officials believe it is required due to a credible threat.

## During and after a crisis

- Provide timely updates of accurate information to key constituencies.
- Use multiple mechanisms (websites, news media, letters, mass notification systems, etc.) to communicate the same messages.
- Work with public safety and community partners to send consistent messages.
- Show compassion and support those impacted by the crisis.
- Highlight actions and plans that worked well during the response.
- Tell the truth. Acknowledge and explain mistakes and lessons learned.
- Hold community meetings and allow parent, student, and staff concerns to be heard.
- Identify steps for preventing and preparing for future incidents.

like traveling in an airplane. There are occasions when a plane crashes, but traveling on an airplane is the safest way to travel.”

This statement shows no compassion for the victim, and sends a message of a school culture of “downplay, deny, deflect, and defend,” where officials are more concerned about protecting images. This is not a message today’s parents and media expect to hear.

Some other examples of sound bites commonly used by boards and administrators include:

■ **“We have a new zero-tolerance policy against school violence.”** Zero tolerance has become such a rhetorical and political buzz phrase that it has lost meaning. It also begs the question: “What did you have before now, a 50 percent tolerance for violence?” School leaders should instead speak about specific prevention and preparedness measures in place.

■ **“This is an isolated incident.”** Amazingly, board members and administrators still use this phrase following high-profile stabbings, shootings, and even deaths. Calling a tragic act of violence with major injuries an “isolated incident” shows no concern or compassion for victims and their families or about school safety in general. Instead, it suggests more concern about protecting image over protecting children.

■ **“Schools are the safest place in the community.”** This statement is often used to downplay safety concerns after high-profile incidents. Such a statement belittles the seriousness of an incident. It also fails to acknowledge concerns and questions that parents have.

School leaders cannot always divulge details that violate student privacy rights, impede ongoing criminal and administrative investigations, or jeopardize safety. But in general, parents expect and deserve honest, truthful, and timely communications about the safety of their children at school.

### Managing rumors and threats

Today’s students are part of “Generation Text” because text messaging, cell phones, e-mails, and other communications are integral to their interactions. Many parents use these methods for communicating with their children and peers as well.

Today’s tech-savvy students and parents, for better or worse, have a distinct advantage in getting their messages out much faster than do school officials. While school leaders typically need time to investigate rumors and verify information, many students and parents will forward to each other information they mistakenly believe to be true.

Bad news spreads quickly and a delay in your response can result in an expedited flooding of phone lines, hundreds of parents at the school office trying to pick up their children, and media trucks on the front lawn. A good cri-

sis communications plan can help you reduce delays and deliver timely and accurate messages when a rumor breaks.

Text messaging and cell phones also play a major role in spreading misinformation during real school emergencies, not just in times of rumors. School office phone lines are almost guaranteed to overload. Parents and media will typically be at the school doorstep in very short order. And all of this will be going on in addition to the actual crisis situation itself.

School administrators typically know that addressing parents and the media are two of the most demanding aspects of managing a crisis. Once the incident itself has ended, parent demands and media inquiries often create “the crisis after the crisis.” Depending on the incident’s nature, school leaders should be prepared to respond and discuss safety issues for weeks or even months.

Ironically, two of the weakest areas in many school crisis plans are how to reunite and communicate with students and parents and how to deal with the media. Evaluations and tabletop exercises conducted by school safety experts consistently find huge gaps in planning in these areas, and an unrealistic understanding of the scope and magnitude of what is required to manage such dynamics.

Combined with great overconfidence by school staff, problems that occur in parent and media management during a crisis can create shockwaves that will require extensive communications and confidence rebuilding with both groups in the months ahead.

### Maintaining your credibility

Successful communications during and after a crisis require that you listen, respond to concerns, and show compassion. Be truthful above all else. Messages must be accurate and timely and communicated with redundancy through multiple mechanisms.

Plan to partner with credible, authoritative, and independent experts as part of your recovery process. Be prepared to work with law enforcement, fire departments, emergency medical services, emergency management agency officials, mental health agencies, local government officials, and other groups. You might want to consider hiring an independent consultant who can bring neutral opinions and expertise to your district.

The time to prepare for a future crisis is now. School safety is a leadership issue. By making prevention, security, and preparedness an ongoing district priority, boards and administrators can protect children and staff, the district’s reputation, and the credibility of the district’s leaders. ■

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# School Emergency Planning: Back to the Basics

*“Nuts-and-bolts” details make or break schools in a crisis*

By Kenneth S. Trump, MPA

*T*en years after the attack at Columbine High School, school officials continue working on refining school emergency plans for responding to and managing unavoidable crisis situations.

*The bad news is that funding for school safety programs has been cut dramatically over the past decade. Given the pressures upon educators to improve academic achievement, time is an even more precious commodity than money. Add apathy and denial to the shortage of time and money, and the picture can be less-than-encouraging for those struggling to keep proactive, preventative school safety and emergency planning efforts on the front burner in their districts.*

*The good news is that there are many best practices and practical things school leaders can do to improve their security and emergency plans. Many of the things school officials need to do to improve school emergency preparedness require more time than money. And while many product vendors and opportunists continue to seek a quick-fix solution to school violence, lessons and observations from the front lines instead suggest a need exists to go “back to the basics” and focus on the fundamentals of school emergency planning.*

## Why Plan?

A principal of a large high school that experienced two bomb threats within one week was recently asked why the two very similar threat situations were handled in two very different ways. On the first threat, school leaders evacuated the building and sent students to several district middle schools. Upon receiving a similar threat within a week, school officials took additional threat assessment steps and decided not to evacuate the school.

"Cognitively I knew what I should do, but emotionally..." the principal said in explaining why the school was evacuated on the first threat but not upon the second threat.

Educators are very caring people who typically put the best interests of their students ahead of everything else, including their own personal safety. Given their responsibility for the safety of hundreds and even thousands of students, school leaders can easily allow their emotions to override their cognitive, analytical decision-making processes. Unfortunately, emotional decisions are not always the best types of decisions for managing life threatening emergencies.

A solid school emergency plan provides a good vehicle for cognitive, not emotional, responses to school emergencies. Well developed and exercised emergency plans in the hands of a well-trained school staff can help school administrators and their crisis teams avoid making emotional decisions. A cognitive-based decision-making process, rather than an emotionally driven process, can mean the difference between life and death.

## Distinguishing "Emergency" from "Crisis"

The words "emergency" and "crisis" are often used interchangeably in schools. Chuck Hibbert, a retired Indiana school district security administrator and national consultant on school emergency planning, recommends distinguishing an emergency from a crisis for the purpose of developing written guidelines:

*Emergency Guidelines* - Actions taken **immediately** to manage an event which may threaten the safety of all parties. The goal is to stop or minimize the event.

*Crisis Guidelines* - Actions taken **after** an emergency situation is under control to deal with the emotional needs of all parties impacted by the event.

Too often, school emergency plans are grossly oversized documents that many frontline school staff have never read and/or could not possibly remember in an emergency situation. One reason for such

voluminous plans is that post-incident mental health and related healing guidelines are lumped into the same document with immediate actions to be taken to stop or minimize the event as it unfolds.

By separating emergency guidelines from post-incident crisis guidelines, school staff have access to more manageable, user-friendly guidelines to reference while under pressure in a real emergency situation. The less convoluted the document, the greater the chance of it being reviewed, understood, and used by school staff in an emergency.

## Plan Development and Content

School districts should have two levels of emergency plans: district emergency plans and building level emergency plans.

District emergency plans should provide an overarching direction for managing emergency events. The district plan should provide guidance to central office staff on their roles and specific actions in responding to an emergency. The district plan may also be used in the tailoring of individual school plans to each site.

School site emergency plans should be tailored specifically to each building and support facility. The district plan should not be used in the place of having a unique building site plan. School site plans should include specific actions and roles for specific individuals/positions in managing an event at their unique site.

Plans should reflect an "all hazards" approach to school emergency planning. Potential events should include situations such as weather, natural disasters, hazardous material spills, and power outages, as well as man-made acts of crime and violence such as suicides, stabbings, hostage situations, shootings, and other worse case scenarios. Roles of administrators, teachers, support staff, and others should be clearly delineated in the plans.

District and building plans must be developed by school officials in cooperation with first responders and other community partners such as local and city government agencies, mental health support services, and other key groups. Fill-in-the-blank templates or plans from other districts with name changes offer increased risks to safety and potential increased liability. Expert consultants can provide training, facilitate plan development groups, conduct tabletop exercises to help test written plans, and provide commentary on existing

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plans, but the plans themselves should not be written for the district by consultants.

Schools should work with their county emergency management agency and/or local fire department to make their plans compliant with the concepts of the National Incident Management System (NIMS). Key components include a focus on use of “plain language,” not codes, and developing incident command structures for managing emergency situations.

All plans should be reviewed and updated at least annually. The date of the review and update should be recorded on the plan itself.

### **Crisis Teams**

Most schools have “crisis teams,” as they are typically called, on paper. Yet school safety consultants often find that these teams hold limited (and sometimes no) meetings, are undertrained, fail to formally debrief from incidents, and typically have not reasonably exercised their written plans to see if what is in writing would work in a real emergency.

Who should be on the team? At the district level, key support services must be a part of the team. This includes security and/or school police, transportation, food services, student services (psychologists, counselors, social workers, nurses, etc.), facilities/operations, media and public information, and other key district support staff. While we typically do not find superintendents and assistant superintendents serving as formal crisis team members, their participation is encouraged as their leadership and decision-making will play a big role (for better or worse, depending upon their training and familiarity with the plan) in an actual emergency.

Building level teams generally consist of administrators and staff who do not have a role in the direct supervision of students during an emergency. Team members should also represent diverse perspectives in order to bring depth and different considerations into the planning process. Such individuals may include the principal, assistant principals, deans, mental health staff (psychologists, counselors, social workers, etc.), nurses, school security and/or police, custodians, food services, secretaries, parents, and others.

Teams should meet at least several times over a school year to review school safety, security, and emergency preparedness issues, and to update their building plans at least annually. Minutes of each meeting should be kept to document the process and actions taken.

### **Emergency Preparedness Training**

Too often, we see school officials define school emergency “training” as solely being a review of portions of the emergency plan at the first faculty meeting at the opening of each school year. Such a review is a good step, but not the only step, in the training process.

In addition to the yearly opening faculty meeting review of plans, principals should take at least five minutes in every faculty meeting to review one component of the school’s emergency plan and/or at least one issue related to school safety. Five minutes of each monthly faculty meeting would provide roughly 50 more minutes of attention to school safety and emergency planning. Including at least an hour, and as much as a half day or periodically a full day, of school safety and emergency planning training to professional development days would further advance staff training.

School safety consultant, Chuck Hibbert, also implemented a process in his prior school district where this “five minute rule” was recommended as a part of department, grade, and/or team level meetings. This rule asked teachers and staff to add school safety as the last agenda item to each of their meetings for a five minute review of one component of the school’s emergency plan and/or other school safety issue of concern. The reason for the item being at the end of the agenda is that when placed at the beginning of the agenda, safety discussions often consume the entire meeting and other planned instructional issues are not covered.

District and building level crisis team members along with cabinet level administrators and board members should receive advanced training on best practices in school emergency preparedness. Locally, outside experts from the community such as law enforcement, fire department, emergency medical services, county emergency management agency, mental health professionals, and others could provide training. Periodic training by national experts and specialists on best practices and latest developments in school safety, security, and emergency planning should also be made available to district and school crisis team members to build upon their in-house reviews and training by local community resources.

School support staff sorely need security and emergency preparedness training. School secretaries, custodians (day and evening), food services staff, and transportation personnel are grossly undertrained, frequently forgotten in planning, and often absent from



school crisis teams. Yet these staff members are on the frontlines in our schools and provide critical services in emergency situations, in addition to their day-to-day role with children and teachers.

Funding outside training providers has become more difficult due to cuts in school safety budgets and grants. But it is not impossible. Federal funding sources potentially include Title 1, Safe and Drug Free Schools, Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (REMS), Safe Schools/Healthy Students, and similar programs. Joining with other area local school districts and county/regional offices of education to share the costs of expert training workshops is another frequently untapped option.

School districts must also establish line items in their operating budget for school security and emergency preparedness issues. School safety should not be viewed as a grant-funded luxury. Having a tight budget is not an acceptable excuse for neglecting safety needs in the eyes of parents, the media, judges and juries when an

incident occurs that could have been prevented by reasonable risk reduction and preparedness measures.

## Emergency Drills and Debriefing

In a post-Columbine and post-911 world, new drills have been added to traditional school fire, tornado, and related drills. Lockdowns, evacuations, shelter-in-place, and other exercises are now part of the routine for many schools. Some states have actually legislated requirements for local schools to now conduct non-traditional drills, such as lockdowns.

Unfortunately, too often we see schools conducting drills when they are most convenient, rather than to reflect reality. For example, lockdown drills are typically conducted during regular class periods, not during lunch periods. Yet it is during lunchtime that schools are often at higher-risk of an incident occurring.

Schools should start off with simple, straightforward drills and increasingly diversify their drills to be more challenging and complicated. An administrator or school resource officer (SRO), for example, could block exits, unannounced to students and staff, during a fire

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drill. Lockdowns could be conducted during a lunch period, upon student arrival in the morning, during class change, just prior to school dismissal, and at other “challenging” times of the school day.

Unannounced checks of building security also provide another method for testing a school’s security. Unfortunately for many schools, local media investigations around the country have recorded how far a stranger can walk through a school unchallenged. Several school districts have engaged outside individuals to test themselves in such a manner, being proactive by getting documented examples of weaknesses in access control, failure of staff to challenge and/or report strangers, and related security gaps.

Drills should receive detailed evaluations and critiques by school administrators and their school safety, police, and related partners. One high school principal recently provided a detailed, room-by-room, and name-by-name critique of his staff’s response to an unannounced lockdown. The principal demonstrated true leadership and commitment to school safety by calling out by-name specific staff members who failed to follow lockdown procedures and safeguard themselves and their children.

While such an action may be “politically incorrect” in the eyes of some administrators and staff, it is such by-name accountability that parents, the media, and parents will pursue if adults responsible for children drop the ball in a real crisis. If schools are to be serious about drills, this includes identifying what worked well and which adults failed to follow procedures.

Debriefing sessions should share lessons learned from drills and exercises with building crisis teams and staff, district crisis teams, and administrators from other district buildings.

### **Tabletop Exercises**

While full-scale drills are very educational, they are also time and labor intensive to plan and conduct. Many schools, faced with the challenges of instructional demands and staff limitations, are not yet ready or able to plan and carry out a full-scale exercise. This leaves many schools doing the bare minimum drilling required, and emergency plans are often left sitting on a shelf collecting dust without being exercised at all.

One of the most meaningful, practical methods for filling this gap is the tabletop exercise. Tabletops bring district and school crisis teams, along with first responders and other community partners, to the table

to learn whether written plans on paper may actually work in a real emergency. In as little as a half-day in a professional development setting, a hypothetical scenario can be unveiled via PowerPoint and group discussions facilitated to discuss how school and community partners might respond to the situation.

Tabletop debriefings and evaluations have been very revealing. School safety experts often find, contrary to the expectations of many, that school crisis teams overreact rather than under-react in many scenarios. Situations warranting an analytical, methodical approach often unfold with school teams hastily calling for evacuations, going unnecessarily into lockdowns, and wrongly anticipating that first responders will handle parents and other aspects of the emergency that they, as school officials, would actually be expected to handle.

Parent and media communications, parent-student reunification, and numerous other elements of effective school emergency plans are often discovered during tabletops to be sorely lacking in realistic planning and expectations.

The results of tabletop exercises often include significant revision of written emergency plans. Tabletops produce meaningful results in a relatively informal setting during reasonable blocks of professional development time. Tabletops provide a happy medium for districts unable to do full scale exercises but unwilling to do nothing.

### **The Future**

A great deal of progress has been made in school safety and school emergency preparedness in the ten years following the Columbine High School attack. Yet many gaps remain. A wave of new administrators, teachers, and support staff warrants revisiting the fundamentals of school emergency planning and refocusing our efforts back on the “nuts-and-bolts” of school security and emergency planning.

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# Columbine's 10th anniversary finds Lessons Learned

Substantial strides have been made in school security, but glaring gaps remain.

BY KENNETH S. TRUMP

**W**HEN SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS HEAR that the 10th anniversary of the Columbine High School attack will arrive on April 20, 2009, most shake their heads in disbelief. They are amazed that 10 years have passed since this watershed event, which changed the landscape of K12 school safety.

Anniversaries typically mark a time of reflection. A decade later, what lessons have truly been learned from the Columbine attack? Did these lessons result in any substantial changes in the safety of our nation's schools?

## **The State of School Security and Emergency Preparedness**

The good news is that in general, our nation's schools today have a higher level of awareness of safety issues and preparedness for emergencies than they did prior to April 1999.

Administrators and boards have reduced access to schools, implemented visitor management systems, improved communications capabilities, boosted the number of surveillance cameras, and taken security into account with new school design and remodeling. School leaders have also zeroed in on school climate improvements, engaged students in school safety programs, created threat assessment protocols, implemented new drills, exercised and tested emergency plans, trained teachers and support staff, and formed ongoing partnerships with first responders and other community partners.

The bad news is that much of the progress made in the months and early years following the Columbine incident has stalled and even slipped backward in recent years. Funding for the Safe and Drug-Free Schools state grant program, the COPS in Schools program that put police officers in schools, and even school emergency planning dollars have been dramatically scaled back ►



*Unidentified family members of the 13 victims killed at Columbine High School in April 1999 view the wall of the new Columbine Memorial in Clement Park, adjacent to the school building. Tragedies are now being memorialized instead of forgotten as in decades past. Inset, 213 doves are released over Clement Park during the dedication ceremony.*





Associated Press Images



# Lessons Learned

or eliminated over the past decade.

School officials also face increasingly limited time for school safety efforts. The academic demands resulting from No Child Left Behind have left school administrators with less time for noninstructional activities, such as the delivery of prevention support services and staff training on school security and emergency preparedness issues.

The most challenging obstacle in many school communities is complacency. Time and distance from a major high-profile tragedy breeds complacency and fuels denial. Absent a major school shooting in the news or a politically hot school safety situation, it has become far too easy for day-to-day education activities to overshadow safety, security, and emergency preparedness planning.

The result is a mixed bag of many lessons learned and implemented, as well as many remaining gaps in security and emergency preparedness. How schools stack up in school safety best practices varies from district to district and from school to school within each district. It also varies over a period of time and with changes in school leadership and staff.

## Security Lessons Learned

Schools around the nation have beefed up their security in a number of areas. Common strategies for improving physical security include:

- **Reduced school access.** Administrators struggle with maintaining a warm, welcoming and reasonably accessible school for legitimate users while reducing access to school facilities by those with ill intentions. School leaders have reduced the number of doors that can be opened from the outside during school hours, designated main entrances clearly marked by signage, replaced older doors and locks with newer door hardware and locking systems, and installed electronic access control devices such as proximity or swipe card readers. They have also trained students not to open doors for strangers and have trained staff to greet, challenge, and/or report strangers on campus.

- **Visitor management systems.** A growing number of schools are employing visitor management systems to identify and record visitors to schools. While some schools use relatively basic sign-in logs and visitor identification badges, others have invested in technology that allows the scanning of drivers' licenses to check visitors against sexual offender databases and produce visitor identification cards.

- **Surveillance cameras.** The main entrance of many schools, in particular elementary

adapted to schools. Results include reconfigured main entrances that funnel visitors to and through the main office, improved lines-of-sight in hallways, and new washroom designs in elementary schools that feature washbasins positioned outside of the doors leading into separate toilet areas to enhance adult supervision capabilities. Enhanced lighting, intrusion detection systems, and other measures have also received closer attention by school districts in the post-Columbine era.

People will always be the weakest link in school security and emergency plans. The question is, how weak will we allow them to be?

schools, are now equipped with cameras and accompanying speakers and electronic door openers to better monitor the schools' primary entrance points. Cameras often monitor entranceways, hallways, stairwells, and other common areas such as cafeterias and parking lots.

Many school districts provide local law enforcement agencies with emergency remote access to their school cameras for potential use in a tactical response situation. School bus cameras help deter misbehavior by those students who can be deterred, and serve as evidence against those who choose to violate school rules and/or the law.

- **Communications enhancements.**

Improvements have been made to facilitate classroom-to-office communications, strengthen two-way radio communications capabilities among key administrators and staff, maintain public address systems and speakers, and expedite communications messages from schools to parents in an emergency. A number of schools have enhanced communications links between their schools and local law enforcement.

- **Renovation and new school design.** Many schools now have school renovation and new school construction projects reviewed by security experts. Lessons from the field of crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED) have been

## Improved Preparedness

The attack at Columbine High School served as the impetus for improvements in school emergency planning nationwide. Emergency planning strategies include:

- **Crisis teams and plans.** Most schools have some type of written crisis plan and school safety/crisis team.

- **Drills and exercises.** Lockdown, evacuation, and shelter-in-place drills have joined traditional fire and tornado drills. First responders are given access to schools to conduct tactical training when school is not in session.

- **Computerized floor plans and blueprints.** Mapping system technology is being used for improved school and first-responder access in an emergency.

- **Threat assessment training and protocols.** Schools have created threat assessment teams and protocols, trained staff, and partnered with police to better evaluate threats.

- **Training for professional development.** Administrators, teachers and support staff have received professional development training on school security and emergency planning details.

- **Relationships with community partners.** Schools have strengthened proactive partnerships with police, fire, emergency medical services, emergency management agencies, mental health agencies, and other community partners.

# Ten Years Post-Columbine Conversation with Cynthia Stevenson

BY ANGELA PASCOPELLA

IT'S 10 YEARS AFTER THE TRAGEDY AT COLUMBINE HIGH SCHOOL in the Jefferson County Public Schools (JeffCo) in Colorado. Two students fatally shot 12 students and a teacher and wounded 23 others before committing suicide on April 20, 1999. The district will sponsor on that day a ceremony that the victims' parents are planning, a remembrance that is about them and their children.

In 2000, as a result of those attacks, the state of Colorado mandated every school to have a safety plan. At JeffCo, school staff is trained regularly on safety procedures. Staff and students practice evacuation drills. And schools try to minimize problems before they start with positive behavior and anti-bullying programs. Superintendent Cynthia Stevenson, who became schools chief in 2002 but has worked in the district for three decades, reflects on the 10 years since Columbine and the safety measures that have evolved in the district, which has

the examples is the random intruder. Five years ago, we didn't have intruder crises and tragedies such as those [in 2006] at the Amish school [West Nickel Mines School in Pennsylvania] and Platt Canyon High School [in the Platt Canyon School District #1 in Colorado] where students were killed.

The school safety plan is quite extensive, and all schools have emergency response as part of those plans. The plans themselves differ from school to school. For example, depending on the layout of the buildings, they all have different evacuation points. If you have to evacuate a building, it's sometimes just on to the playground. But sometimes you need to get kids off site. It might be a nearby church or other government building.

And as far as the relationships with law enforcement go, in middle and high schools, we have school resource officers who work with law enforcement. If a student is a threat, we join with our local law enforcement agency. When we do threat assessments, we determine how serious the threat is and if law enforcement needs to be involved. If we're concerned over a custody fight, they will increase police patrols in the area.

## ***Your policies stress respectful environments. Can you elaborate?***

This has to do with how, within a school, do we have an environment where everyone feels welcome. We are focused on developing cultural proficiency in all of our schools so that our kindness, understanding of diverse cultures and tolerance of differences is increased. We're expected to have norms and knowledge of different races and cultures and programs that welcome parents. And we have student programs that are research-based around conflict management and bullying. For several years, we've also run a student survey, Make Your Voice Heard, and ask kids, do you feel safe, secure and valued in your school building? It's about improving student perceptions. Every school sets goals and strives to improve student feelings of safety and caring every year.

## ***Any changes in staff and student safety training over the years?***

All staff members undergo yearly training in both crisis response and threat assessment. And we use more national FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency] courses now. We have people trained in the Incident Command System [a standardized approach to disasters that integrates communication, personnel and procedures] and how to respond to a crisis. More than a few staff members and I have undergone the training. And we do table top training exercises for our safety and security teams in schools to simulate a crisis. Teams are comprised of seven to 10 teachers, principals, assistant principals and others, who are trained and understand the system. Staff members know their roles and are ready for crisis situations.

[www.DistrictAdministration.com](http://www.DistrictAdministration.com)

Read more about Jefferson County schools' safety plans.



*Cynthia Stevenson,  
superintendent*



*A scene from April 20, 1999, outside Columbine High School after the attacks.*

150 schools stretched over 750 square miles. DA first spoke with Stevenson in 2004, and she commented on the five-year anniversary of Columbine and what measures had been taken.

## ***You've been in the JeffCo system for 34 years. Can you explain your feelings on that horrible day when you were deputy superintendent?***

As you might imagine, the horror of the day grew with each passing hour. My emotions began with disbelief and ended in despair. By the next day I knew that there was no time for despair so that emotion was replaced with incredible sadness for the families and for the entire organization while I simply put one foot in front of the other and did what needed to be done to keep Jeffco going.

## ***When we spoke in 2004, you said that since the tragedy, JeffCo schools have detailed crisis plans, regular safety drills and strong relationships with local law enforcement. Has anything changed?***

We've implemented a new school safety plan this year. You have to redo and refine as you learn more and as the world changes. One of

Administrators work hard to improve school climate and culture, upgrade mental health support for students, encourage student reporting of safety concerns, and strengthen prevention and intervention resources to prevent crises.

## **Glaring Gaps**

Even with all of the positive strides over

the past decade, glaring gaps remain. Some of the more common gaps include:

- **Staff, student, and community awareness.** The first and best line of defense is always a well-trained, highly alert staff and student body. The time and funding for staff training have steadily decreased, particularly following the introduction of No Child Left Behind. People will always

be the weakest link in school security and emergency plans. The question is, how weak will we allow them to be?

- **Crisis plans on the shelf.** Most schools have crisis plans, but many are outdated and collecting dust upon school shelves. Plans are still not being put together by diverse teams, nor are they reviewed and updated annually, which is a best practice. ►



# Lessons Learned

- **Emergency plans with questionable content.** Many school plans reviewed by school safety consultants have questionable content. Schools typically know, for example, that parents and the media will add the greatest pressure in a school emergency response. Yet parent-student reunification and media management are often two underdeveloped areas in many crisis plans.
- **Exclusion of support staff in training and planning.** School support staff tend to be grossly undertrained and underutilized in school emergency planning. Food service employees, office support staff, day and evening custodians, and school bus drivers are often not included in faculty meetings, on crisis teams, and in drills and exercises. Yet these support staff groups can play critical roles in a school emergency.
- **Decreased funding for school violence prevention, security, and emergency planning.** Federal and state legislators rode the “school safety bandwagon” in the

months following the Columbine incident, providing new laws and funding streams for school safety. Following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, most legislators jumped to

ter prepared for emergencies today than they were prior to the Columbine attack in 1999. But glaring gaps in prevention, security, and preparedness remain.

## Many school plans reviewed by school safety consultants have questionable content.

the “homeland security bandwagon.”

Unfortunately, they have never come back to school safety and, in fact, have actually repeatedly cut funds for school violence prevention, security, and preparedness. Combined with complacency, denial and school-community politics, these and other gaps remain as obstacles for improving school crisis preparedness and can leave a school vulnerable.

### Future Directions

Schools in general are more secure and bet-

ter prepared for emergencies today than they were prior to the Columbine attack in 1999. But glaring gaps in prevention, security, and preparedness remain.

*Kenneth S. Trump, M.P.A., is the president of National School Safety and Security Services ([www.schoolsecurity.org](http://www.schoolsecurity.org)), a Cleveland-based national school security and emergency preparedness consulting firm.*



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## Buyer Beware

### School Shootings Trigger Targeting of School Budgets

KENNETH S. TRUMP

**T**here are many credible, well-meaning vendors offering products to help make our nation's schools safer. Unfortunately, every time there is a high-profile school shooting, there also seems to be a growing number of opportunists who see potential for increasing dollars in their corporate profit margin.

Educators must exercise extreme caution and closely scrutinize the experience, credibility, independence, and expertise of safety and emergency preparedness product vendors,

school security consultants, and related service providers. Failure to do so could result in their district seeing increased potential liability, adverse publicity, and recommendations and products that are not needed or appropriate for their school buildings or for their school budgets.

#### **"Penetrating the School Safety Market"**

In an effort to sell their products, we have seen a growing number of vendor tactics which can confuse and mislead

school boards and administrators.

A few examples include the following.

1. Product vendors who offer “free” school security assessments to schools. But are they really free or do they return recommendations to educators for thousands and thousands of dollars in products that these companies and their “strategic alliance partners” coincidentally sell?
2. “Free” school safety conference and workshops sponsored by product vendors and insurance companies, often in partnership with education or safety associations that are getting their own benefits from these sponsors. The program agendas are often stacked with speakers from the vendor or their partners, that offer safety related products and/or services. Will educators really be getting independent, unbiased, and best practice driven information, or skewed back-door sales pitches?
3. “Free” grant writers provided to districts to help schools pursue federal and state grants for school safety and emergency planning. The vendor-provided “free” grant writer provides a templated proposal in which school district information can be plugged in and the proposal quickly mailed. The process requires little work for the school district.

The catch — the bulk of the grant proposal submitted ends up being for products provided by the product vendor who supplied the “free” grant writer. The district spends most of the grant on the vendor’s product, and once the grant funds are gone, the district could unknowingly get stuck with ongoing maintenance and replacement costs that must then come out of the district’s general operating fund. If school districts craft bids based on vendor-provided specifications that require qualifications and specs only that vendor can meet, that could also be considered a

crime in some jurisdictions.

School administrators with the best of intentions could easily find themselves backed into a corner with few answers as to how they got there and few ideas on how to get out.

## School Security Equipment and Technology

The first and best line of defense in school safety is always a well-trained, highly-alert school staff and student body. Any type of security equipment is only as effective as the weakest human

## The qualifications and process for selecting a school security consultant are typically new to even the most experienced school business manager or purchasing agent.

link standing behind the equipment. School security technology must be looked upon as a supplement to, but not a substitute for, a more comprehensive school safety program.

Unfortunately, a number of school districts have created a false sense of security in response to high-profile school violence tragedies by moving quickly to install equipment and other physical and tangible measures in response to parental demands for a “guarantee” that such incidents will not happen again.

In our school security assessments across the nation, we find common and consistent themes regarding the use of security equipment in schools. These include:

1. the inappropriate use of the security equipment itself;
2. poor purchasing practices related to school security equipment;

3. a lack of input from building principals, assistant principals, site security and police staff, and other end-users on where equipment is needed and would be most effective in their day-to-day school operations; and
4. a failure to integrate the use of equipment with human, procedural, and other school safety strategies.

When effectively used, however, security technology can contribute toward reducing specifically-identified school safety risks under the appropriate circumstances. School officials should be able to answer a number of questions before employing security equipment. These include the following.

1. What specific security threats and concerns are educators attempting to address by using a particular type of security equipment?
2. How will this equipment help address these threats and how will it actually be used on a day-to-day basis?
3. If the district is able to purchase the equipment today, how will it be maintained, repaired, and upgraded, as necessary, in the years to follow?

School leaders should work with their school security, school police, and/or independent school security specialists to identify the answers to these questions and to determine the unique security equipment needs of each individual school. Educators should never allow product vendors to be solely responsible for conducting security assessments of their schools.

## Types of School Security Consultants

School districts are increasingly turning to school security consultants to conduct school security assessments, evaluate school emergency preparedness plans, conduct professional development training on school safety, and provide related services.

While top school leaders are still typically involved in some aspect of the selection process, today it is more com-



mon for the selection of school security consultants to be delegated to school business managers, purchasing agents, and/or committees of multi-disciplinary district personnel and community agency partners. The qualifications and process for selecting a school security consultant are typically new to even the most experienced school business manager or purchasing agent.

Oftentimes, the result is the posting of flawed qualification criteria, poorly structured requests for proposals, and the use of evaluation processes typically designed for other types of service providers.

To help better understand the school security and emergency preparedness consultant pool, school leaders can expect a large number of interested providers to fall into one of the following categories:

- 1. The “Big Box” Mega-Firms:** These companies are generally big name organizations, often Fortune 500 type-firms, that are not primarily skilled, experienced, or long-term experts in K-12 school security. In an effort to pursue what they believe is a potentially profitable market, they create new divisions or programs which often put a school safety spin around their existing core products and services. The mega-firms tend to have an exceptionally high mark-up. A number of these firms, though, will actually offer “free” assessments in an effort to get their feet inside the school doorway, only to provide assessments with recommendations focused primarily around the products and services they wish to sell.
- 2. Established “Boutique” School Safety Consultancies:** Typically, smaller firms consisting of one person to a handful of associates, these consultants often have greater experience and expertise in K-12 school security and emergency planning. They probably lack the “marketing machine” and

slick sales propaganda, as well as the larger corporate support structure, of bigger firms. While some work nationally, a number may be more established regionally. Fees tend to vary based upon experience, expertise, and national standing in the field. They often have a very good feel for school operations and climate issues of concern to school administrators that is often lacking in other types of consultants.


- 3. Crossover Security Consultants:** Security generalists and/or security specialists from other industries who are trying to expand into the K-12 school market. These individuals may have excellent credentials in corporate security, military security, or federal, state, or local law enforcement, but relatively minimal experience with K-12 schools. They tend to lack in-depth knowledge of school climate, culture, and school-community relations issues typically held by boutique school safety consultants. Their emphasis is often heavily skewed toward physical security measures and equipment.
- 4. Part-Timers and Low-Bidders:** This growing category of school security consultants often consists of individuals who work full-time in school districts as school security or police officials, or in other peripheral positions (such as local police, fire, or emergency management departments) who have turned to consulting for part-time income. They frequently base their fee rates at a significantly lower level than full-time consultants. Their qualifications and skills, such as report writing and skill in managing school politics and school community relations can vary widely. Their availability may be scattered and limited once the work at hand has been completed and they are back at their full-time job.
- 5. Overnight Experts and Charlatans:** These individuals often appear in the market following a spate of

high-profile school safety incidents. They typically have little-to-no established background working in schools and, in particular, in working with school safety issues. A closer look by school officials will often find exaggerated claims of experience and expertise, and little K-12 school safety experience.

Each group of consultant types has its pros and cons. School administrators should look closely for evidence of long-term experience, established credibility in the K-12 school safety market, and a reputation for cutting-edge knowledge in prospective consultants.

## Selecting Qualified Providers

While the needs of each school district will vary, school officials designing RFPs for school security consulting services should provide weighted points to individuals bringing K-12 specific school safety experience. Extensive references should be sought from past school district clients. Individuals with only a few scattered K-12 references should be scrutinized closely, as should those consultants who have extensive experience in other security industries but lack work specifically in school settings.

Security equipment providers and school security consultants can help school leaders improve school safety, reduce risks, and improve school community relations. Selecting qualified, competent, and experienced providers will make the difference between a good experience and one of potentially greater liability. 

**Kenneth S. Trump** is president of National School Safety and Security Services, a Cleveland-based national consulting firm that has worked with school officials from 50 states and Canada on school security and emergency planning issues. He can be reached through his Website, [www.schoolsecurity.org](http://www.schoolsecurity.org).

# SCHOOL SECURITY AND EMERGENCY PLANNING

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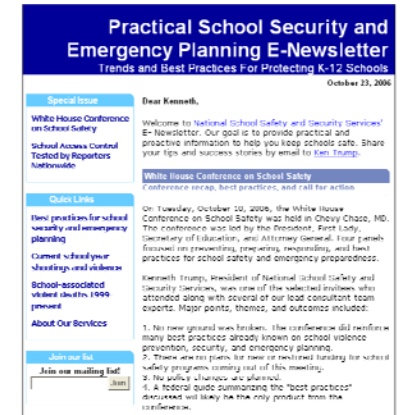
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