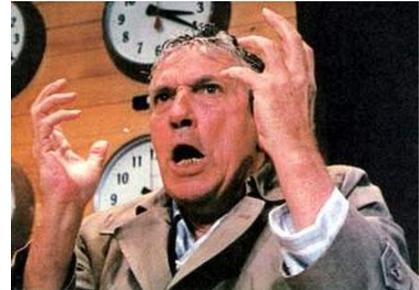


I Wish We'd All Been Ready

by

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Do you remember the movie, Network, in which the broadcaster yells, “I’m mad as hell and I’m not going to take it any more”? That is where I am as I consider kids dying in our schools. For too long now we have taken a defensive “wait and see” posture when it comes to enacted violence within our schools; the time for change is now. Innocence was lost to darkness of soul when just a short year ago kids died in a German school; the killer, an ex-student, walked into the building at 9:33 a.m. and changed destiny. I am certain that administrators, teachers, parents, and students never in their wildest imagination believed that such a horrific occurrence would visit them. That day turned bleak, and in the devastation, I remembered the 60’s song, “I Wish We’d All Been Ready.” (Larry Norman) One line particularly stirs me as I think of this event: “Children died, the days grew cold, a piece of bread could buy a bag of gold.” I am sick of kids dying in the safe haven that should be our schools; let’s resolve to do our part to stop this madness.



Time for a Change

I write today to spark change, to wake people up to the potential that is the collective will of us! As the security director for a large district, working with a group of dedicated security-minded professionals, we daily seek to protect some 33,000 students and 4,000 teachers and support staff. In studying the violent behavior of people who have

committed these horrific crimes within our schools, we understand certain aspects of prevention we want to share; we do so to empower you to enact protocols to help safeguard against violence. I write also in hopes that together we may discover the “fatal flaw” in our efforts that allows for this killing within our corridors. We seek to know the gap – between our best plans to protect and our inability to defend – in order to fill it by whatever means necessary to ensure no other child has to die while attending school. I write as a parent of four children, imploring the very best efforts of those duly appointed to educate them; those of you in positions of authority in our school districts do not have the opportunity for a bad day...you must daily move within the unforced rhythms of resolve and determination. You must ready yourselves for the matter of safety and security.

“The lonely man strikes with absolute rage.”

The statement was in a notebook owned and used by Dylan Klebold; it hits the heart of the battle we are engaged in today. Regardless the reason for such rage, we must find remedy. Gang violence is real. Lost souls become angry young men and women seeking identity, respect, and community. Fear, intimidation, anger...all are calling cards of the active gang member. The random actor, on the other hand, may be a complete stranger, who one day walks in off the street and changes our world. Such was the case when the vagrant walked in to Platte Canyon High School in Colorado. In his aggression, a young and innocent student was killed; he did not know her, she was simply a tool to fulfill his sadistic plan. None of us knows when the random actor will enter our door; we must always be alert to the threat and train our people to sound the alarm when they see the stranger. Then there is the student whom we all know; the person who grew up in our schools. On a given day and based in certain circumstances, the student enacts his

premeditative schemes...and classmates die. The threat from these three sources is ever before us. To avoid preparation is to invite disorder.

“America is stronger when all of us take care of all of us.” (Christopher Reeve)

Our ultimate aim is that no student is seriously injured or killed while involved in a school related event. In pursuit of the goal, we question the lengths to which we are willing to go. Our answer is dictated too often by funding. We would like to have a substantial police and security force, but cannot afford it. We would install sophisticated technology, but the costs are exorbitant and out of reach. We would like many things, but simply do not have the money. Of course, the greater question to pose to government officials is how we can afford not to provide suitable security to meet the growing threat. And though I am delighted that government officials consider the need of school safety and security (which resulted in the Texas School Safety Center, and, I might add, unfunded mandates on districts), I certainly am not relieved. We can ill afford to wait on the government for answers.

Systemic Improvements to Bolster Security

We all are sick of losing in this battle to protect all of our students while they are in our schools. I recognize there are elements to the violent mind that I cannot remedy in my capacity. We understand that violence and aggressive behavior are huge in scope and that our response options are narrow in effect. Yet, we fully believe we can incorporate several practices that afford us greater control of our environment. These ideas are simple to employ and have proven effective in our district. They do not require additional funding – though the funding would certainly bolster the effort. One of the steps, locking the

classroom door, will cause consternation, but it is worth it in the final analysis. Here, then, is our list of systemic changes designed to bolster campus security:

1. Positively engage all visitors. Keep all non-essential exterior doors locked, forcing all visitors to enter the building through the front door. There, have personnel who engage the visitor, verifying their identity and right to enter the campus. Give the visitor a large visitor's pass to be worn at all times while in the school. Train teachers and staff to stop any person who does not have a visitor's pass or district ID displayed. And remember, just because a person has checked in via your established procedures, does not mean that person is not capable of violence. At Deer Creek Middle School, just a few months back, a former student entered the school. People knew him...or at least they thought they did. At 3:05 p.m., just after school let out, the person left the school and approached two teenage students, asking them, "Do you guys go to this school?" When they responded they did, he summarily shot them. Positively engage everyone; once done, monitor them throughout their visit. Make no assumptions. Require everyone to wear some sort of ID; for the person without it, assume the worst and take action.



2. Sound the alarm. Regardless of the employee's position, empower people to sound the alarm when things do not feel, look, or seem normal. All employees – from the kitchen staff and custodian to the principal and superintendent – should be empowered to call for an emergency lockdown (and please remember that code words fail when a true emergency exists; always use the phrase "lockdown" when informing teachers and students of an emergency). They should be trained to look for the exceptional – a person walking on campus grounds, an older student

continuously driving by the school, the parent who has been issued court documents against coming to the school. In the German school, several students who perished were found with pencils still in their hands ~ it appears as if they received no warning of the ensuing violence.

3. Lock the classroom door. Keep the doors locked (and give substitute teachers classroom keys – we trust them to teach our children – we can trust them with a key). If a perpetrator enters the building and seeks to enter a classroom, it will be locked. This buys precious seconds, and when seconds count, that is what you and I need. Teachers may balk at the notion at first, but let the stranger enter the school and attempt to gain unlawful access and they will be appreciative of this practice. In the German school, the killer entered a classroom, shot and killed two students, then left to reload his weapon; when he did, the teacher locked the door. The killer attempted to reenter the room; when he could not open the door, he tried to shoot off the lock, but could not. A locked classroom door saved kids' lives. I wonder what might have happened had the killer found all the doors locked upon entering the building. Lock your doors.

A Fatal Flaw

Every plan has a single point of failure, which allows the aggressor to penetrate the security network. And more, each plan has the potential for a fatal flaw; as a result, we need contingency plans...What will you do if the principal is killed by the aggressor...who will be in charge? What will you do if the aggressor takes out your public address system, rendering you mute in attempts to inform staff of the situation? How will you respond if you evacuate to a fire alarm of unknown origin only to find that there is a shooter outside? You see the point, I trust.

Kids die in our schools because of a lack of planning on our part, a lack of resources, fear we feel, ignorance we suffer, and a lack of preparation to respond to a variety of situations. (And, I admit, because ultimately we simply cannot stop everyone who desires harm to kids, as was witnessed in China when 15 children were butchered at the hands of heinous and violent men; this, however, does not relieve us from our responsibility to safeguard these kids at all costs.) This preparation takes many forms, based on the threat. The fire department has earned our respect over the years, and today we prepare for emergencies through fire evacuation drills conducted on a monthly basis. As a result, no child has died in a school fire in over 50 years in the U.S. (the last one of record occurred in 1958, in which 92 students and 3 nuns died at Our Lady of the Angels in Chicago, Illinois). In relation, violence claimed the lives of more than 100 of our children in our schools over the past nine years (many more in other nations). Isn't it time to give the same sort of attention to preparing for the violent aggressor – be that person a member of a gang, a random actor, or an enraged student – as we give to the potential for school fires?

Can We Count on You?

Will it take metal detectors at every door to safeguard our children? Should we construct perimeter fences with gate guards to maintain positive control of who enters the educational domain? Should we employ the use of K-9 drug and weapon dogs at all times? I hope not, and I think not; yet, I am willing to



consider these steps if they will help our kids. Yes, our schools are public and we want to be warm and inviting to parents and guardians. But we have learned that enemies against humanity can look just like us; they can be our native sons and daughters. They can be violent in their search for identity, revenge, respect. I am sick of kids dying in our schools,

but thankful that people in our districts are resolved to meet the goal of safety and security. Please do not let another child die because of a lack of preparation or naiveté or arrogance.



As I finish this article, I remember September 11, Patriot's Day. Time has passed slowly since that day of horrible events, which claimed so many innocent lives. Terror struck home and none of us, I dare say, will ever forget the sights and sounds, and unyielding grief, of seeing innocence snuffed out by hatred. Our world has always known violence...may it be said of us – you and me – that we stood strong against tyranny when challenged; that we did not lose hope; that we did not fade into the backdrop of anonymity.

The threat we face is broad. Planning is paramount. Steps must be taken in every district to mitigate the potential for violence. And ultimately, in the final analysis, the matter comes down to each person. Stand firm. Remember, no one stands so tall as when she or he stoops to help a child.

Listen, people like us have long known that the best way to wake people up to the threat of this sort of violence is to actually suffer an act of violence at one of our schools. But what if such an act involved your child or grandchild...you would not for a moment sit idly by and watch that horror unfold. And so it is for all of us: we have a mission to accomplish in safeguarding our children. There is much work to be done yet.

Violence against kids...don't take it anymore! Too much is at stake. Surely we can count on you to do your part, can't we?

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