

BY PAUL PURCELL, CHS-V



10 Ways


SCHOOLS Can Better Protect Your CHILDREN

Our thoughts and prayers go out to the victims and families of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, and to those affected by this event from miles away.

Though this tragedy has sparked intense debate about causes and reactions, the only true issue at hand is the safety of people in public places, be it schools, places of worship, shopping centers, or sporting events. Studies on this topic have been shared repeatedly by our firm (and by countless colleagues) but little has been done. Maybe now more focus will be given to public gatherings to improve overall safety.

What we offer here today is a focus on schools with a contribution to the voice of reason, and steps to add to the list of things we can actually *do* to genuinely make our communities safer and our schools havens of peace rather than oppressive fortresses, or the other extreme, soft targets.





Schools are soft targets because we don't want our kids spending every day in what appears to be a dreary, desolate prison. We want our children in an atmosphere where they can learn, grow, socialize, and develop to the best of their abilities. The downside of this is that we have put so many of our "eggs in one basket" that it makes for a "target-rich environment." Below are some of the many steps that schools can take (with possibly a great deal of urging from you) to keep your C.H.I.L.D. S.A.F.E.R.

Classroom Security

The classroom may be your best refuge. Can you secure the room?

Hiring and Training Staff

Have you trained your teachers and staff for emergencies?

Issues and Policies

Knowing your threats and planning your response puts you miles ahead.

Lockdown Alarms

Everyone has fire alarms to signal evacuation. What about lockdowns?

Drills and Game-Planning

Your teachers, staff, and local responders need to plan together.

Shared Monitoring

The more eyes on your security the better. Who can help you?

Anticipate the Criminal Mind

The deranged don't abide by laws. What will they do next?

Fear Has No Place

The goal of any readiness program is confidence. Know how to instill it?

Extra Security Personnel

How can you add layers of protection without breaking the bank?

Recruit the Parents

Some parents want to help, others may not. How do you include them?

Before we get into the details of the above, we will say this. Almost every school in the country has a detailed set of emergency plans. That's a good thing. But as we all know, the devil is in the details, so we're here to give but a few places to look when reviewing your school's plan, as we all will after the Sandy Hook tragedy.

1 Classroom Security

One of the heroic accounts coming out of the Sandy Hook tragedy was of a teacher who protected her students by keeping a door closed with her own body as she was shot through the door. We don't know if the shooter compromised the door lock or if the door even had a lock. The key point is that if there was more hardware in place, this teacher might not have been wounded. No matter how close law enforcement is, it takes a few minutes for them to get there so you need to be ready to be on your own for a little while. Here are some things to consider with basic classroom security:

Heavier Doors – Doors are part of the structure that protects students from a number of threats including tornadoes and fire. The heavier (thicker) the door, the better the protection. Also, all glass should be wire mesh reinforced. This makes intrusion more difficult and creates less shrapnel in destructive events such as a tornado.

Lockable Doors – All classrooms and regularly accessed areas (such as teacher's lounges, etc.) should be lockable with both knob lock and deadbolt, and possibly a sliding latch. Any storage area large enough for students to hide should also be lockable. If the budget can afford it, hallway doors should be closable and lockable by remote control (sort of like fire doors) from the main office and/or security office.

First Aid Kits – Every classroom should have an extensive one. Though some of the contents may be above the average teacher's skill level, the kit may act as a redundant supply for emergency responders.

Redundant Communication – Every school should have A – A two-way intercom system connected to each classroom, B – A reciprocal text system to both send and receive alerts as well as allow a teacher in hiding to silently request help, C – Monitoring access to any web cams on school-owned computers located in classrooms, D – A list of all teachers' cell phone, E – A non-electronic system of communication for bomb threat scenarios where electronics should not be used (signs, flags, whistles, etc.), F – Both Fire Alarms and "Lockdown Alarms" which are discussed below.

Designer Debris – Just as some areas using earthen dams have a system of stored "designer debris" that is released to plug a developing leak, classrooms should have furniture or other items designed for not only their main purpose, but also to be used as an expedient barrier to help deny an active shooter access to the classroom. An example is a teacher's desk designed to be flipped on end, fit snugly in the doorway, and held in place with hooks or other fasteners. Other notions include rolling book cases and stackable desks. (Note: Actual use depends on warning time which is discussed below under "Lockdown Alarms.")



Hiring & Training Staff

In any professional setting, your biggest asset is your people. And the more you can train, retain, and protect your people, the better for everyone involved. In this particular case, teachers, in addition to being educators and molders of minds, are the stewards of our children's safety.

Hire More Veterans – Thousands of veterans are coming back home as various overseas theaters minimize the numbers of troops involved. These brave men and women bring home with them discipline, courage, and intelligence; all qualities sorely needed in our classrooms. Also, these folks would be more capable than the average civilian of providing an extra layer of protection for students in any number of emergency scenarios. In a related note, we suggest the government should shift available funding within the VA Benefits/GI Bill arena to provide more incentive for returning vets to pursue a degree in education.

Self-Defense Training – Hand to hand combat against an armed assailant is never a good choice. However, as we saw at Sandy Hook and other places, heroes will try. So... your heroes need to be trained to at least give them an edge. If nothing else, some self-defense training can give that boost of confidence that makes the difference between freezing in fear or reacting quickly enough to send children to a protected area. Also, there are far more common scenarios which teachers face that don't involve active shooters. Ever hear of a school in which a teacher never had to break up two students who were fighting? We haven't either.

First Aid and CPR – No public facility (especially a school) should have a staff that is not trained in first aid and CPR. Check with your local Fire Department, Red Cross chapter, or the American Heart Association. For teachers, they may offer this training for free.

Family Preparedness – When a school is not the site of an emergency, it's many times part of emergency response. Schools are generally shelters or some other form of refuge for the community in area emergencies. Since your people are your biggest asset, they need to be trained in enhanced family disaster preparedness so that in times of crisis they know their family is safe and they can report to the school to help emergency responders and related groups care for community members seeking help.



Issues & Policies

There are far more numerous threats facing schools on a daily basis than active shooter scenarios, and contingency plans are only as good as the threats perceived and vulnerabilities uncovered. Once you become aware of a threat or potentially negative issue, what kind of policies should you have in place so that you are ready to react accordingly? Here are a few mainstream examples:

Visitor and Vendor Check-In – Do you have an open campus or secure facility? Do you have regular vendors that are allowed instant access to the grounds or do you have a policy that all visitors must check-in on arrival? If an incident occurs, what kind of plan do you have in place to track/locate your temporary guests? What will your reaction be if a visitor bypasses your check-in request?

Domestic Issues at Home – Many instances of workplace violence stem from domestic situations at home that find their way to the job site. The reason for this? Though a spouse may change their residence in times of domestic turmoil, work is the one place they can usually be found. Do you have a policy that requires staff to notify administration of pending divorce, restraining orders, stalking, or related situations that carry a potential for violent attacks?

Bomb Threat Response – In this day and age, you have to take folks seriously when they make a threat. Or do you? The percentage of actual bombs discovered after a threat is extremely low. However, a couple of school shootings were sniper scenarios where a bomb threat was called in as a ruse to get students outside of the building and in the open. Consider this later under game-planning.

Threat Response – Even though we're putting a finite list here for example purposes, don't limit yourself. You know your school and your area better than anyone, so look around at the other threats you may face. Remember, true preparedness is to be All-Hazards ready.

Student Cell Phones – What's your policy about students having cell phones? Do you find them disruptive? A means of cheating on tests? Or are students with phones part of your reaction plan since you would have more people that could call for help?

Self-Defense – What is your policy on self-defense in the case of a true attack? What do you do if a student is forced to protect themselves from a bully? What about a teacher protecting themselves from a violent student?

Secret Evacuation – When we train civilians we tell them to get information about the emergency reaction plans of their child's school to include the rendezvous point where everyone would go if the school was evacuated. When we train schools, we tell them to not divulge this information since you don't want to arrive at your destination only to find the location so overwhelmed with parents arriving ahead of you that you can't effectively control the scene and protect the children. Which do you prefer?

Scattered Lockdown – In almost any emergency, time is one of our biggest assets. So in a shelter-in-place scenario, where do you go for protection? Remember, different shelter scenarios will have different answers. For example, in a tornado, do you go to the hallways or other areas closer to the center of the building? In an active shooter situation do you barricade the classroom doors and stay hidden? Some corporate locations are opting for central safe-rooms on certain floors and their plan is to hustle personnel into those areas if a shooter is present. Our feeling is that—generally speaking—this creates a target-rich environment for a shooter when people are out of their offices and in hallways heading for other locations.



Lockdown Alarms

In disaster planning, there are two main types of reactions: Evacuation and Shelter-In-Place. In our work with corporate settings, faith-based organizations, and schools, we have been amazed at the lack of focus on the shelter-in-place scenarios. Almost everyone has a fire alarm, but very few have a shelter alarm. Lockdown alarms are necessary for everything from active shooter, through HazMat incident, to tornadoes and they are much faster than sending an intercom message or a text alert. Remember; in almost every emergency, time is one of our biggest assets. A few of many things to consider with lockdown alarms:

Unique Sound – Lockdown alarms should have a distinctly different sound than the fire alarm since fire is an evacuation reaction and lockdown is the exact opposite. You never want to confuse the two.

Classrooms and Commons – Lockdown alarms should be generally as accessible as the fire alarm. None of us know what is going to happen, when it's going to happen, or where it's going to happen so the lockdown alarms in the commons areas should be located near the fire alarms but clearly marked and just far enough away so that no one activates the wrong one. Also, these alarm switches should emit a dye on the fingers of the person activating it just like newer fire alarms. This will help reduce the number of pranks.

Location in Classrooms – In a classroom the fire alarm—if one is present—is usually located by the main exit door since fire carries an evacuation response. Since lockdown is a shelter response, the alarm switch in the classroom should be located in the area of the room where students would go for protection.

Tied to 911 Center – As with fire alarms, activation of the lockdown alarm should alert the local 911 center so law enforcement and other emergency responders can be dispatched.



Drills & Game-Planning

Above, we discussed training your staff. Here we take the training to the next level by involving the students as well as local emergency responders.

Fire & Lockdown – As we said earlier, there are two basic types of reaction: Evacuation and Shelter-In-Place. If either or both reactions are possible then drills become necessary, so conduct drills for both reactions on a regular basis.

Police, EMT, and SWAT – Involve your local emergency responders in some of your drills and allow the responders to hold some of their drills at your school. They need practice also to make sure their own skills are current. They might like to come in to a mock disaster scene to practice scene control, triage, transport, the whole nine yards. Also, let the local SWAT team come in one weekend a quarter to practice some of their drills. This keeps their skills sharp and also keeps them familiar with your school's layout.

Vary the Rendezvous – Since some scenarios see bomb threats perpetrated for the purpose of getting students out in the open, you must keep this in mind when conducting fire drills. For that reason, you might consider varying the campus location where students are taken during drills. Two quick tips here: One, be aware of locations such as dumpsters where explosive devices could be hidden. Two, try not to have students gather at any campus location where arriving emergency vehicles would need to park.

6 Shared Monitoring

The more eyes on security monitors, the better. Up to a point. How do you get better security monitoring of your location yet still protect privacy? And where do you draw the line to make sure your abundance of surveillance isn't its own security breach?

Extra Eyes – As security analysts, one thing we constantly see is state-of-the-art monitoring systems with no one watching the monitors. Many times, the only purpose the system would serve is to provide a video for police after the incident had occurred. In any emergency situation, an ounce of prevention is worth a ton of cure, so if you have a video surveillance system, the more eyes watching, the better.

Privacy Issues – Though you want extra eyes on your surveillance system, make sure you have the right people with access. Though many systems available are as simple to monitor as using your smart phone (yes, there's an App for that) you don't want would-be perpetrators, pedophiles, or the like, accessing your video feed.

Police & School Board – Two groups that you might want to share your video feed with are the police department or select personnel at the school board. The two key suggestions, though, are that the system is being monitored at all times by multiple people, and that these people are trustworthy.

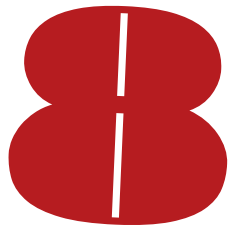
External Port – In working with emergency response personnel during drills, ask if there is a particular area of campus where they would gather in the event of an active shooter scenario (or other active internal threats). Place a hard-wired video feed port as near that location as possible so responders can tap into the video feed on arrival.

7 Anticipate the Criminal Mind

Laws are only for the law-abiding. Our main focus of this re-released article is to help protect schools in a post-Sandy Hook world. So though we should plan for All-Hazards type scenarios and responses, we need to zero in on intentional attacks for just a bit. Let's look at a few examples where planning for the actions of normal people will not help us where there is malicious intent.

More than Gun Violence – The largest school massacre in US history was in Bath, Michigan where a disgruntled Board of Education member used explosives to kill 38 students. Explosives were the main weapon again in Beslan, Russia where over 380 people were killed. When doing your game-planning and drills, don't limit yourself to one kind of threat and NEVER think "Oh, that would never happen! Who on earth would do something like that?" Good question.

Attackers vs. Laws – Laws are only for the law-abiding. The criminal or deranged individual intent on causing harm will ignore absolutely everything except their desire to finish what they started. They won't stop on command, they won't sign in at the office, they don't care if they're trespassing... nothing matters. Think of it this way: If you stand under a storm cloud with a sign that says "rain not allowed," the only thing you're going to get is wet. Keep this in mind during all your planning.



Fear Has No Place

The true goal of any protective plan is to make the secured site a haven of peace. This is done when teachers, staff, and students are confident that they are protected and the safety they enjoy does not come in the form of uniformed armed guards, search dogs, or barbed wire surrounding a walled compound. That type of environment is repressive and is not conducive to learning or anything positive. Though we mentioned the criminal and deranged mind above, that does not mean that the students have to know all the details behind the planning that keeps them safe.

Transparent Security – Always opt for transparent security. This means that you have a safe and secure facility, but to the students and visitors, the security measures you have in place are not necessarily “in your face.” For example, some of your security personnel may be plain-clothes security. Video cameras may be in hidden locations. Metal detectors might be built into door frames. Or, bullet-resistant doors might be made to look like any other door, and so on.

Teachers and Staff First – When planning your emergency reactions and creating your drills, do so with only your staff involved. These folks need to work out all the “kinks” in a plan and get everyone on the same page before involving students. If the students are part of a drill and it is obvious to them that the teachers are not familiar with the procedures, it will detract from the student’s confidence level.

Drill Calmly – The only demeanor any teacher or staff member should show during a drill is a calm one, and more importantly, in an actual emergency the more calm the teacher the more calm the students.

Hide & Seek – For the younger children, a simple game of hide & seek in the classroom is a shelter drill in and of itself and is fun rather than frightening. Think of other ways to make some of your drills enjoyable rather than negative.



Extra Security Personnel

Sadly, we live in a day and age when soft targets and targets with high shock value, such as schools, need extra security. In many cases this will mean more security personnel. How do you bring on extra personnel without your school looking like an armed camp and without ruining your budget?

Hire the Vet – As we mentioned before, look for crisis experience when hiring new teachers or staff. In a related thought consider this: some districts allow teachers to carry weapons. This concept certainly requires a lot of study, but, if any of your teachers have law enforcement or military experience then you have staff with built-in training should you decide to go that route.

Plain Clothes – Some of your security should be in plain clothes so as not to be a constant reminder of danger, but also to not be a target. In some attacks, uniformed security is targeted first to clear resistance.

Private Sector PR – Some private sector security companies may offer some of their personnel at no charge to you during special events as a way to give back to their community and for a little positive PR.

Special Events – Always have extra security at special events even if it does cost extra.

10 Recruit the Parents

Schools are not islands. Schools are not baby-sitters. Schools share the parents' goals of raising safe, intelligent, happy children. To share these goals and add the element of enhanced security, schools and parents must work more closely than ever before.

Parents and the PTA – The Parent/Teachers Association (or PTO for Organization in some areas) is the best tool for maintaining good parental involvement. With social media as it is today, there is more opportunity for communication than ever before. Every PTA/PTO should have a Facebook account, a Twitter account, and direct contact for member parents to include direct email, phone number, and text number for mass text broadcasting if the text number is different from the main phone number.

Security and Fundraising – Considering the above notion of requiring extra security at special events, you might want to ask your PTA to help with a little extra fundraising to cover the costs. Raising money to protect children should be a welcome project in any school district.

Teach Disaster Prep – As we discussed earlier with teaching enhanced family preparedness to teachers and staff so that they can report in times of crisis, you should also consider having a family emergency preparedness / home safety class or two for your students and their families. This is a positive way to keep safety in everyone's mind, and safety lessons practiced at home can carry over into the classroom.

So now that we've discussed a few points, gone over a few concepts that may or may not be included in school emergency plans, what do we do now? Do we push to make these ideas mandatory? Do we simply share them as best practices? What do we do? We want answers NOW, don't we?

Here's how you can help:

- ✓ Meet with your school's administrators, preferably at the next PTA meeting.
- ✓ Call your Board of Education.
- ✓ Call your Senators and Representatives of your State Legislature.
- ✓ Call and write your Senators and Representative in Washington, DC.
- ✓ And then share this list with others.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR
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