

Part I

Understanding and Managing School Safety

School leaders face a tense struggle between maintaining welcoming and supportive schools with a positive climate for students while also keeping schools safe, secure, and prepared for managing crises that cannot be prevented.

Effectively managing school safety requires the combined skills of a juggler and tightrope walker. School administrators must juggle school safety and the many other aspects of leading schools: academics, facilities, finances, district politics, school-community relations. They must also walk a tightrope by beefing up security and preparedness for an emergency while maintaining a supportive environment where students feel they are a part of the school, teachers can focus on academics, parents feel welcome as visitors and volunteers, and the school is part of the broader community.

This is not an easy job. School leaders must understand the evolving threats to school security, know how to navigate the “politricks” of school safety, and develop a comprehensive and balanced approach to school safety planning. Chapters 1–3 provide guidance for addressing these complex, and sometimes competing, interests.

1

The Evolving Threats to School Security

A series of school shootings and violent acts rattled the American education community between 1997 and 1999. The 1999 attack at Columbine High School was a watershed event in the field of school security and emergency preparedness planning. But more than a decade later, schools still struggle in managing safety, security, and emergency preparedness issues. Schools have made many safety improvements in the post-Columbine era, but glaring gaps remain.

THE SCHOOL SECURITY THREAT CONTINUUM

In my first book, *Practical School Security: Basic Guidelines for Safe and Secure Schools* (Trump, 1998), I wrote about aggressive and violent behavior, drugs, weapons, gangs, and stranger danger. In *Classroom Killers? Hallway Hostages? How Schools Can Prevent and Manage School Crises* (Trump, 2000), I talked about homemade bombs and bomb threats, computer-related offenses, adult-originated violence, teen suicide and self-harm, bullying and aggressive behavior, and schools as terrorist targets.

More than a decade later, I realize that all of these issues plus new threats can, and do, challenge school leaders at various times and in various communities still today. We cannot frame school security threats in the form of a top-10 list of specific threats at any given time. Instead, school leaders must prepare for a continuum of threats that could potentially affect the safety of their school at any given point in time.

On one end of the continuum, on a day-to-day basis the worst threat to maintaining a safe school may be verbal disrespect, physically aggressive

behavior, and bullying (all important issues not to be minimized). On the other end of the continuum, threats may include a school shooting or a terrorist attack upon our nation's schools. Somewhere in between these extremes rests a host of other threats, such as a student or staff suicide, weather or natural disaster, large-scale student fights or riots, or a gun discharged in a restroom.

Any of these situations could potentially occur at any school at any point in time in the school year. Gangs may be a priority threat in a given school this year, but 2 years later gangs may be a nonissue. Today's focus on bullying and teen suicide by the media and school-community could shift overnight if terrorists strike our schools.

School leaders must therefore view potential threats to school safety as being on a continuum. The threats evolve from school to school and from one point in time to another. Planning and preparedness must evolve accordingly.

INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL THREATS TO SCHOOL SAFETY

Today's school leader must prepare for both internal *and* external threats. Too often we see school administrators overemphasizing the source of potential threats to their school's safety. Some say they are less worried about violence by a student inside a school but are more worried about outsiders who may come into the school to cause harm. Others will overemphasize potential student violence while failing to recognize factors beyond the school property line that pose a risk to their schools.

For example, I'm often surprised at how many schools that sit adjacent to, or within a very short distance of, a railroad track have never addressed the risk of a hazardous material spill incident. Administrators and crisis teams at these schools have often given detailed thought to reducing access to their buildings, training staff on assessing student threats, and planning for a school shooter. But so often we find these schools have had little if any discussion and planning on one of the biggest threats facing them: a train derailment, hazardous material spill, or other emergency related to the railroad track in their vicinity.

As another example, one of the top reasons we see elementary schools go into lockdown to secure their buildings is the result of the police or other activity outside of their school in the broader community. It is not uncommon for schools to lockdown after being alerted of police in pursuit of a bank robber or fleeing suspect from a traffic stop nearby. Yet over the

years I have frequently had elementary school administrators and teachers say they do not want to practice lockdown drills out of fear they will traumatize young children and that there is no need to do so since there is little likelihood of violence impacting a school with elementary children.

School officials must recognize that threats to their school's safety can originate from both within and outside of their school. It is unrealistic to believe that student-originated violence or a disruption from an irate parent could not potentially occur inside a school. Likewise, ignoring potential risks from our broader community, such as a felon fleeing police or a hazardous materials spill from the highway next to your school, is also a risky move.

ASSESSING THREATS AND PRIORITIZING RISK REDUCTION

Each school district, and every school and support facility within that district, should assess the potential threats and prioritize their risk reduction measures. This means the priorities at one school may differ from those of another school within the same district.

For example, in one county school system where I conducted a school security assessment, one school was located within a few feet of a railroad track. Priority for planning at that school should have been for a hazardous material or other railroad incident. But in the same district, on the other side of the county, another school was in the flightpath of a small regional airport, and an airplane accident was of significant concern.

It is this uniqueness of each school, district, and school-community that requires educators, public safety officials, and community partners to conduct ongoing assessments and reevaluations of their school's security and planning for a crisis. Too often, schools put a one-time emphasis on assessing security and creating a crisis plan, relying on checklists or templates used districtwide rather than requiring a site-by-site assessment and emergency plan. Reassessments and updating of emergency plans must be conducted at least annually. School safety planning must be an ongoing process, not a one-time event.

Higher Risk Threats

Some types of individuals, situations, times, and places encountered by school officials are, by their nature, higher risk than others in terms of safety threats. These include the following:

- Athletic events, especially when there are a large number of observers or when the games are between rivals.
- Dances and similar social events where there are a large number of individuals gathered together and engaging in increased social activities.
- Locations within and around the school where there is a high level of student movement but little responsible adult supervision, such as restrooms, isolated hallways, stairwells, cafeterias, and bus drop-off and pick-up points.
- School opening, class change times, and dismissal.
- irate parents or guardians, especially when they have ongoing encounters with school officials that they perceive to be negative or adversarial.
- Disgruntled employees who cannot resolve their conflicts through formal and legitimate mechanisms.

It is logical to believe that, because we know what types of situations pose a higher risk, we should be able to take more risk reduction measures to counter them. Unfortunately, this is not always the case.

ROLLER-COASTER AWARENESS, POLICY, AND FUNDING: THE BIGGEST ONGOING THREAT TO SCHOOL SAFETY

Although specific threats such as gangs or bullying change over time, the most serious threats to school safety have remained constant since I wrote my first two books more than a decade ago. These threats are adult-generated threats, not threats from students or outsiders who come onto school property. These threats are not violent, per se, but instead involve how school and other public officials manage policy and funding for school safety.

These threats include the following:

1. Inconsistent or AWOL leadership on school safety. We have worked in school districts where school safety is a top priority, from the school board to frontline staff such as school secretaries and custodians. Likewise, we have been in school districts where school safety is a priority by the leadership in one school, yet in another school in the same district the attention to safety is almost nonexistent. Inconsistent or nonexistent leadership on school safety issues, from the school board and superintendent to each school building principal, is one of the biggest threats to school safety. Specific issues such as drugs or fighting will likely evolve

over time, but if school safety is not held forward as a consistent priority of the board, superintendent, and principal, schools will be less prepared than they possibly could be.

2. Complacency by school staff, students, and parents. The first and best line of defense for school safety is a well-trained, highly alert school staff and student body. When students open doors for strangers or fail to report another student who has a gun in school, and when staff members prop open doors and fail to challenge or report strangers in the hallways, school safety is at risk. Parents who fail to follow building entry and visitor procedures put safety at risk. An “it can’t happen here” mentality puts school safety at risk. All of the security technology in the world cannot overcome the threat of human complacency, which is truly the biggest enemy of school safety.

3. Inadequate funding for prevention, security, and preparedness. Our state and federal legislatures, as well as local school boards, legislate and fund by anecdote. When there is a high-profile school safety incident in the headlines, legislators look for legislation and funding for that particular issue. When parent and media pressure is on at the local level, school boards *find* money to fund prevention and security programs that otherwise have had funding cut to the bare bone. Long-term stability is needed in both policy and funding for school safety, and legislating and funding by anecdote creates knee-jerk reactions, not the consistency needed for long-term success in addressing school safety.

Roller-coaster public awareness, policy, and funding present a danger to long-term school safety as great as the danger of specific threats such as gangs and bullying. When programs are created and then cut 2 years later, when school resource officers or security staff are in place for years and then suddenly eliminated, and when school safety falls to the back burner because there is not a crisis in the local news, long-term, sustained school safety planning loses.