

Averting School Shootings

School shootings continue to occur with some frequency and impact families and whole communities. The California School Resource Officers' Association has been conducting a series of trainings related to proactive and reactive steps to avert school shootings or to mitigate the damage. One of those trainings is Safeguarding Schools: Emergency Readiness in the 21st Century. This article summarizes part of that training by providing 12 Critical Steps for schools and is separated by 8 proactive and 4 reactive steps. While some of the strategies overlap between proactive and reactive the message should be that schools must implement both types of strategies simultaneously.

Dr. Kris Mohandie and others have categorized those who attack schools into three typologies. CSROA has adapted this to the school setting to help in the understanding school shootings and other attacks. The *Type One* attacker is a member of our community including students, staff and volunteers. They are connected to us and know the layout of our sites, the patterns, the people and sometimes our security measures. They have knowledge of sites that many who are not directly connected will not know. The *Type Two* attacker has some relationship with the site whether as a parent, sibling, spouse, significant other or vendor. They may have some knowledge of the site, but, unless they are on-site everyday they might not have the in-depth knowledge of the site as the *Type One* attacker. This means they might do additional surveillance of the site prior to and attack. The *Type Three* attacker has no connection to the site. This type of attacker usually does not pop up on the radar screen until the attack has occurred. They generally have the least amount of knowledge of the site and may have to spend extra time surveilling the site prior to the attack.

The following information is based on the most effective strategies for the various categories of potential attackers, though the focus is on the *Type One* student attacker. The suggestions provided within each of the steps are only partial lists of what the school and district sites can do to safeguard against an attack. The intent of this paper is for schools to use this as a guide to evaluate what they are doing for each of the steps.

Proactive Steps

1. **Target Hardening** – The school district and individual sites must examine how physically vulnerable they are to the facility being breached and an attack being carried out. Target hardening refers to measures in place to discourage malicious intrusions from occurring. The site must balance an open and inviting environment conducive to building a positive school climate and culture with security. Target hardening measures can assist with discouraging the *Type One* attacker, however, this approach is more effective with the *Type Two* and *Three* attackers. These measures include fencing around the school site; limiting entry to the school through one gate; having staff at the entry point greeting and assessing students; high visibility of school staff before, during and after school; engage and assess all persons coming on campus; lobby management systems for all visitors and vendors after the school day has begun; utilize school

safety related technology as appropriate including lockdown notification systems and hot buttons or panic buttons which can be deployed to quickly notify law enforcement of the attack, as well as, notify staff and students of a lockdown; secured lobby entrance to main office and to the school campus; staff trained to alert front office quickly if they see or feel something might be out of place. Target hardening practices will discourage Type One attackers from trying to bring weapons and other contraband onto the school campus. Target hardening has also been shown to be a strong deterrent to the Type Two attacker and one of the best measures to prevent the Type Three attacker from gaining entrance into the school facility. Target hardening can significantly delay the attack, thereby, providing law enforcement with more time to get to the site to engage the intruder.

2. Effective Multi-tiered Interventions – Mental health staff and school social workers are increasingly needed in schools to assist with early and targeted interventions. Research on past Type One school shooters indicate rejection coupled with feelings of depression and anger are contributing factors along with bullying and isolation. It is critical for schools to include counseling, mental health therapists and school social workers on intervention teams for depression, isolation, addictions, suicide and homicide ideation. The first step is identifying students who may be at-risk of violence to themselves and others. Once a student has been identified, early interventions including group sessions and ongoing meetings with school administrator/dean of students, counselor and school social worker should be scheduled. A meeting with parents/guardians is critical in an effective intervention plan. The student and friends should be monitored on an ongoing basis. Every attempt to connect the student with positive activities

3. School Resource Officers – Having armed and highly trained school resource officers (SRO) is both a proactive and reactive strategy. On the proactive side, the school resource officer can help with planning and strategies for active shooter and many other emergency readiness issues. The SRO should be trained in the four elements of the job: Informal teacher, counselor and social worker with the last option as law enforcement. A highly trained SRO improves the safety and security of the school. Assists in building a positive school culture. Some reports indicating a significant reduction in bullying at schools with active school resource officers. The trained SRO will be to assist the school site threat assessment team in determining how serious a threat a student may pose and will be a part of the threat management plan. The SRO's are generally trained to go after the gunman to stop or engage the shooter. This single officer engagement puts the SRO in greater danger of being shot but is used to either stop the shooter or engage the shooter and save innocent lives. Data indicates an armed and trained SRO will be able to respond quickly to any threat.

4. Engaged and Alert Campus Security Staff – Campus security staff have been called the first line of defense for the school campus. Security staff much like school resource officers must be trained first in youth development, conflict resolution skills, communication skills, knowledge of education code relating to student discipline and build interpersonal skills to work with students, parents, visitors, school staff and administrators. With that foundation of knowledge campus

security should build knowledge on school safety, emergency readiness, school protocols during a crisis or emergency including the need to lockdown and secure students. In addition to a layer of safety and security, campus security staff also are a strong component of a peaceful school climate and assist in developing the positive culture of the school. Security personnel is best poised to identify students at-risk or in crisis and immediately talk to the student and refer to administrative and counseling staff. Security staff are also able to identify and immediately react to bullying, depression and signs of lethal violence. School systems should consider strategies for building an effective and highly trained campus security team.

5. Ongoing Staff Development – Schools continue to focus staff develop days and time to academics. This is understandable since the schools’ primary role has been to educate students. Schools should consider the primary role has evolved to include student safety and security along with academics. As it is, California schools are required to train grades 7 to 12 teachers in suicide awareness, prevention, intervention and postvention. Schools are also required to train all campus supervisor/security staff pursuant to education code 38001.5 on school safety and security topics. If the safety and security of the students, staff and visitors is important, then training of staff on safety and security should be considered as paramount to increasing knowledge and skill sets to prevent, intervene or quickly and appropriate actions to threats of violence and acts of violence. School staff need to be aware of warning behaviors which many of the school shooters exhibited prior to the attack. Many of the Type One assailants left plenty of clues to their motives prior to the attack. Unfortunately, these clues were either not discovered or investigated until after the attack had occurred. Trained staff can be aware of the warning behaviors and interventions can be developed to avert an attack.

6. Monitor Social Media – Many of today’s issues seem to be related to social media. The Type One school attacker will often times leak the intentions of lethal violence on social media sites. In addition, other mental health and safety concerns are also posted online. Some of the leakage is cryptic and some is straight forward. Schools must have a strategy in place to monitor social media. Obviously, the main issue becomes one of time, the number of social media sites and the security setting students should have on their accounts. Schools might implement a strategy to identify one person, usually at the district office to monitor various social media platforms. This approach will miss many of the concerning posts students and outsiders may leave as leakage or what has been termed “legacy tokens”. Schools might also utilize many of the commercially available social media monitoring services available. These companies will monitor the main social media sites youth utilize and will alert the school when key terms are used that indicate a possible attack. Schools can also alert students, parents and community to report any posts of concern to the district or site contact. This approach can be the highly effective is the school can break down the code of silence to facilitate reporting of social media posts that are cryptic or direct threats to attack the school or do harm to one’s self. It is recommended that schools explore a layered approach to monitoring social media and implement as many strategies as feasible.

7. Break the Code of Silence – School shootings are very rarely spur of the moment attacks. Usually these events are researched and planned over a period of time. The Type One attackers have also either “leaked” their plan to attack or have told others of plans in person or through social media. Since the majority of Type One attackers have informed others of plans to attack the school, educators must implement strategies to break the code of silence. Many students have indicated they did not tell school or law enforcement officials of the plan to attack because they believed the threat was a joke, would not be carried out or did not want to get their friend in trouble. Schools must utilize multiple approaches to educate students of the need to notify caring school staff, school resource officers or parents of any statement a classmate may have made regarding harming themselves or others. School staff must be trained to identify early warning signs of suicide or suicide/homicide ideation. In addition, schools must continue efforts to educate parents on a variety of issues including understanding when their child might be depressed, suicidal, have thoughts of violence against others or in need of mental health services. To break the code of silence, Schools can implement a few sound strategies include monitoring social media and the internet, implementing multiple reporting options for students and parents to be able to inform the school of potential violence and sound approaches to have students understand it is a responsibility to inform others of potential violence.

- A. Monitor social media – Since so many of today’s attackers have posted threats, plans or “legacy tokens” on social media school systems need to monitor social media and other internet sites. Unfortunately, after an attack has occurred it becomes apparent that the plan to harm others and attack the school was clearly posted online from direct statements of becoming a school shooter to vague references of impending violence. Schools need to begin to monitor social media and the internet. It is difficult for a few school staff to monitor the internet, however, strategies can be implemented including educating parents, community and students to do screen shots and report any posts that are suspicious or cause concern. Schools might also purchase one of the several programs that are on the market to monitor various popular social media sites. When the school is mentioned along with key words indicating a potential attack the service will notify school officials.

- B. Reporting options – Students might not be comfortable talking directly to school staff or school resource officers. Schools need to provide multiple options for reporting potential acts of violence. These options can include tip lines, applications that allow for students and community to quickly notify school staff of concerns they may have about one of students. Students are often more comfortable using a platform they are comfortable using such as a reporting application or a website with an electronic reporting form. If the school elects to use a digital reporting option, whichever program is selected must be marketed to students and families on a continual basis. Schools should consider having one point of contact at the district or main office to field calls and emails from individuals reporting a concern. If an application or reporting website is used, schools will identify multiple individuals to receive the

report including district staff, site administrator, counselor and school resource officer to ensure the tip is received and quickly addressed.

The school community must be continually reminded to report anything suspicious to school staff and school resource officers. Educational systems need to adopt the approach used by the Department of Homeland Security in using a slogan such as “See Something, Say Something” to the school community. Students need to be reminded that reporting concerns is a duty and they may be saving classmates including the perpetrator. Once a system is established the school must be ready to quickly address and investigate all tips. This can be stressing for the system.

Other options for reporting include open door policies which inform students that they can use passing periods and anytime to come in and meet with staff to discuss concerns. The use of Peer Listener, Peer Helper and Peer Counselors is an option to encourage students to report concerns to trained classmates. Some students feel more comfortable talking to peers instead of staff or the school resource officer. For these students including a Peer type of program adds an additional layer of reporting options. In addition, students who feel like harming themselves or others may choose to speak to a trained peer than an adult.

- C. Breaking the code of silence – Since the majority of students leaked information on their plan to attack the school, efforts must be taken to make sure students the school community know it is their responsibility to report anything suspicious. The Secret Service follow-up study on targeted violence in schools focused on why students and others do not report suspicions of an impending attack. The study indicated students usually do not report because they feel the suspect is just joking, no one will do anything about it or they do not want to get the other student in trouble. Using various reporting options will assist, but the school must make an effort to let students and community know that reporting can save lives and keep the suspect from being arrested and charged with a serious criminal offense. Much like the Department of Homeland Security slogan mentioned above each school system should consider using students to come up with slogans reminding classmates and the school community to report any information they might have regarding an attack or a fellow student stating a thought about harming themselves and/or others. Schools must continue to remind students and others of a responsibility to warn school officials of possible attacks. Reminders can be pushed on the school and district webpage, parent newsletters, parent organization meetings, assemblies, annual behavior assemblies, morning announcements and use of posters. Schools should also consider a contract to be signed by parent and student at the beginning of the year. The contract would be included in the student handbook. Another strategy might be the use of classroom meetings to discuss the importance and responsibility to report with secondary students. If using classroom meetings care must be given to not cause panic and should be done with parental permission.

8. Focus on Building a Positive School Culture and Community – Some school shooters have indicated they were bullied or ostracized by their peers. Efforts must be taken to build a positive school culture and community. This will reduced bullying, negative behaviors and create an inclusive community. A positive school community reduces negative behaviors, connects all students to the cultural fabric of the school. When there is a strong positive culture, it builds a sense of community. Student led efforts to build school culture and a sense of community is critical. If provided an opportunity, young leaders in the school can shape the climate by standing up for classmates being bullied, reduce the amount of name calling and hurtful comments. There are several programs available to assist schools with implementing peer engagement programs. Having extracurricular programs that meet the needs of the students is critical in getting students involved with clubs and other activities that build a sense of community. The school must find a way to connect those that do not want to be involved in the usual clubs and activities. Activities directors are critical to this effort of building culture, and must include activities for those who do not want to connect in traditional efforts. Athletic programs continue to be a good approach to building involvement and culture, but much like other activities, effort must be given to attract students on the fringes of school culture.

While programs, activities and rallies will continue to be a way to build culture for the majority of students, those who might not feel connected to the school or those who choose to isolate themselves will always be a concern. For these students, it is often one or two staff members and classmates who make a difference. In essence it comes down to what Ken Trump, a nationally known school safety expert, (Let Ken know we will be quoting him) has stated many times, “above hardware (for school safety), it comes down to heart-ware”. In other words, what really matters in school safety is people connecting with other people. The pro-social bonds that can be developed by a simple conversation and smile with a student feeling depressed or isolated from classmates.

Reactive Steps

1. Effective and Practiced Protocols – Most schools have implemented effective lock-down protocols. The intent of a lock-down is to secure students, visitors and staff into locked and securable rooms or spaces. The site staff must quickly recognize an attack is going on, quickly notify law enforcement and simultaneously notify the staff to begin following lockdown protocols. Staff must be trained in how to secure a room and account for students. The school should examine various programs to notify staff and students of a lockdown. It is recommended that the school use clear and simple commands to notify staff, students and visitors of a lockdown. The use of code words might confuse some staff, others might not remember what the code word is instructing them to do and students and visitors might not know they need to escape or find shelter. The school should utilize a one button deployment that simultaneously notifies law enforcement of the attack and instructs staff, students and visitors that the school is going into lockdown via the public-address system. The school must check to make sure that all parts of the campus can hear the call for lockdown.

To assist with rapid notification, schools should begin educating staff on *Natural Surveillance* and *Situational Awareness*. Natural Surveillance is a concept within Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED). This concept trains staff to be observant of students, visitors, perimeter areas and any area they can view. As soon as staff sees something suspicious or potentially criminal they alert either the front office or call law enforcement directly and simultaneously notifying the front office. Situational Awareness is training staff to take quick and decisive information based upon the information they have, comprehension of that information, the ability to project possible future events, making a decision and carry out an action based on their comprehension. An example of this would be a staff person exiting during the sounding of the fire alarm but hears gunfire and understands that someone is shooting. Based on the information and skill the staff person has, they might decide to go back into the classroom and secure it or to escape in a different direction.

Lockdown protocols must be continuously discussed with staff and practiced at various times including times when the school population is most vulnerable. These times include before school starts, during lunch or passing periods or immediately after school. During a lockdown drill, leadership staff should try to gain access to locked classrooms by knocking on the door or trying the door to see if it is locked. The school can also utilize students who may have been in the library or hallways while the lockdown drill was called and see if staff will open the doors to let the students back into their classrooms. After each drill a debriefing with key staff should be done to identify what went well and what could be strengthened. A report should be disseminated to the entire staff along with future expectations. During the next staff meeting a few minutes should be taken to discuss the findings of the drill with staff and to answer any questions they may have.

2. Partnership with Law Enforcement – A partnership with law enforcement agencies is critical in ensuring schools are safe. Law enforcement acts as a deterrent to attacks, serves to investigate threats and is usually the first to respond and engage the attacker. Law enforcement can assist with developing protocols for attacks and can observe drills and exercises to fine tune protocols. Prior to an attack, all law enforcement personnel should become familiar with the school sites including where buildings are located, what the inside of classrooms and other rooms look like, entrances and exits and other strategic information. Schools should encourage law enforcement, fire departments and other responding agencies to conduct active shooter exercises at various school sites. Schools should play an active role in the exercise and participate in the debriefing. When law enforcement and other responding agencies become familiar with school sites, they are better prepared to quickly to neutralize the attack and provide assistance to the injured.

3. Threat Assessment Team – A formal school threat assessment team should be developed and maintained. The team should be comprised of law enforcement, school administrator and counselor/psychologist. Other members might include campus security, school nurse or school social worker. Clear roles for each team member should be identified. The team will come together when a threat has been made to determine the type of threat made and how credible the

threat is. The team should be highly trained in threat assessment. The largest scare for threat assessment teams is the false negative. Being highly trained, identifying a threat assessment tool, practiced application and ongoing meetings as a team will reduce the probability of a false negative from occurring. The team should continually participate in table top exercises to keep skills sharp and to calibrate on consistent scores.

4. Effective Threat Management Plan – Once a threat has been documented and the Threat Assessment Team has completed its findings, then a threat management plan must be developed for the individual(s) involved. The management plan is used to ensure the safety of the school community and to provide intervention, counseling or mental health services as appropriate. In addition, every effort must be made to address the grievance if a grievance has been identified. The threat management plan relies heavily on the cooperation of the student making the threat and the parent. The student must comply with all discipline and interventions if an arrest is not made. If an arrest is made the school and law enforcement must maintain contact with the parent and student to make sure threat management steps are in place after the youth has been adjudicated. Parents must agree to assist and follow the instructions of the management plan including securing all weapons and conducting room and possession searches of the student in question.

A typical high-level threat management plan might include: parents confirming all weapons in the home are accounted for or law enforcement has secured the weapons. The day of return to the school and until further notice, parents will conduct a search of the student including backpack and the vehicle student will be transported in; take the student directly to the school resource officer's office or the site administrator's office each morning; informing the school officials of the mood of the student or anything they are not comfortable with; school officials conduct a search of the student including looking through notebooks for anything related to violence or dark content; school officials will talk to the student to see if the student has any concerns and if the original grievance is being addressed; school officials should continuously monitor student behavior and check in with the student's counselor or interventionist; check-ins with the student throughout the day, including at the end of each school day. This process continues until the school feels the student has been nudged off the "pathway to violence" and no longer poses threat. The student will continue to attend appropriate Tier Two or Tier Three interventions. If the student is also undergoing therapy through a private practice therapist, parents should provide the name of the therapist and allow for the exchange of information. The school psychologist, a counselor or school social worker should make contact with the personal therapist and share information if the parents have allowed the "treatment team" approach, if parents have denied this request, then the meeting will be about the Tarrasoff – Duty to Warn law. The school social worker will continue to work with the family and connect the family to community-based services. The school resource officer will periodically do a home visit with the school administrator or school social worker to meet with the student and family in an informal setting. The school threat assessment team will meet regarding the case periodically to ensure the student is off the "pathway to violence". At some point the case will be closed or information regarding the threat will be forwarded to another school system or agency.

Moderate and low level threat management plans can have any mix of the steps of the high level threat management plan. In addition, each situation and individual is unique and a plan should be flexible enough to fit those unique needs and the resources available.