

# Inside School Law

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Sensible strategies and preventive practices for NSBA National Affiliates

## School Safety: Working Together to Keep Schools Safe

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and Dean Pickett

**F**lint, Mich., 2000, one death. Littleton, Colo., 1999, 15 deaths. Springfield, Ore., 1998, two deaths. Fayetteville, Tenn., 1998, one death. Edinboro, Pa., 1998, one death. Jonesboro, Ark., 1998, five deaths. West Paducah, Ky., 1997, three deaths. Pearl, Miss., 1997, two deaths. The sad litany of school shootings goes on and on.

This past summer, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) pulled together an amazing group of people—including more than 100 educators, law enforcement officials, victim assistance advocates, and mental health professionals—for an in-depth discussion of school violence. The discussion was based on some 16 incidents of school violence that have occurred over the past decade. The communities where these incidents occurred—communities like Littleton and Springfield and Jonesboro—have become known to the American public through their tragedies.

The purpose of this gathering was to learn from those tragedies. The participants sought to identify common behaviors and to try to gain insight into the motivation of the children involved. In addition, participants worked to determine what steps can be

taken in the future to reduce the likelihood of such tragedies in our nation's schools.

These comments are not the official transcripts and notes from that group; nor do they constitute legal advice. Instead, they represent a summary of information and insights gathered from these events. The focus is on prevention, which participants at the FBI meeting agreed is the most responsible place to put schools' resources.

### How can we address school violence?

Participants suggested four strategies:

1. Work together as a community to keep children safe.

"First and foremost," said Stephen Band and Joseph Harpold, organizers of the FBI event, "all aspects of a community need to work together. School violence is not the sole responsibility of the school system. Law enforcement, local government, civic groups, corporate entities, schools, and parents must form a partnership to combat these violent acts. Schools must prepare for these attacks. Law enforcement must develop response plans for handling such incidents. And, communities must work with both to prevent such tragedies from occurring." (FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin, September 1999)

A wall exists between many schools and their local law enforcement agencies, which, knowingly or unknowingly, do not communicate with one another. Most crimes committed at school are not reported to local law enforcement. But if law enforcement agencies and schools share information about students, it is easier to see problems and patterns emerge and to prevent future violence.

Schools and community law enforcement agencies must share information through formal means, such as memoranda of understanding, or through informal means. Schools must provide information to law enforcement officials about troubled children, activities in the schools, and simple matters, such as floor plans and schedules. Law enforcement officials must reciprocate by sharing information about students with school officials, informing them of charges against young people, for example. It is easier to deal with the problem of violence together, when information and responsibilities are not seen as the sole province of one agency or another.

2. Create a visible law enforcement presence in the schools.

There is no one perfect plan or program that can be implemented in every community to prevent violence. Prevention measures must

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## About NSBA

The National School Boards Association is the nationwide advocacy organization for public school governance. NSBA's mission is to foster excellence and equity in public elementary and secondary education in the United States through local school board leadership. Founded in 1940, NSBA is a not-for-profit federation of state associations of school boards across the United States and the school boards of the District of Columbia, Guam, Hawaii, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

## About the National Affiliate Program

The National Affiliate Program extends NSBA's services directly to local school districts. School districts are eligible to join provided they are members in good standing of their state school boards association.

## About the Council of School Attorneys

The Council of School Attorneys provides information and practical assistance to attorneys who represent public school districts. It offers legal education, specialized publications, and a forum for exchange of information, and it supports the legal advocacy efforts of the National School Boards Association.

vary according to community culture, needs, and resources. However, most communities could benefit from some general prevention procedures, policies, and programs.

One recurrent theme of prevention that received unanimous endorsement and praise at the FBI event was the use of local law enforcement personnel, in uniform, as full-time school resource officers. Their presence will not guarantee safety, but resource officers can help prevent tragedy and help school officials react immediately if a crisis occurs. In addition, the visible presence of law enforcement officers on a school campus signals that the school is taking a proactive stance on violence prevention and can have a positive impact on the school's security and safety. (See *Starting a School Outreach Program in Your Community: An Effective Practices Outline for the School Resource Officer Approach*, by the Center for the Prevention of School Violence, 1999.)

With a school resource officer on campus, students have an opportunity to develop trust in law enforcement in a neutral, nonthreatening atmosphere. Moreover, the school resource officer can serve as a conduit between the school and the community. In many of the schools where shootings took place in the past decade, students had been talking to others about the pending violence not only in their schools, but also in the community. Selection of the right officer is crucial to the success of the program, and proper training of the school resource officer is equally important.

3. Create a communications link to receive information from students.

A school's goal must be to create a culture in which it is mandatory for all members of the school community—including students and parents—to report real and threatened violence. This is not a new assignment for already overworked educators: Violence, and threats of violence, have always been confronted in the classroom and reported to the principal's office. The culture of reporting warning signs that constitute a threat of violence in school is no different than the expectations we all have for addressing threats or acts of any other form of violence. However, everyone must feel free to share information among students, school officials, and law enforcement officials.

A number of anonymous reporting programs are currently in use, including Crime Stoppers (<http://www.c-s-i.org>), the most widely imple-

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mented tip program in the United States. In all but one of the school shootings to date, the shooters had told other students about their intentions. But students seldom feel comfortable or safe conveying such information to school officials or law enforcement officials. It is generally contrary to the school community norms to "snitch" or "rat" on another student, or if students do report information, adults do not always take them seriously. Nonetheless, an anonymous tip line or similar program would facilitate the flow of information from students to law enforcement and school officials. Adding a peer mentor or counselor program might be also helpful because students might feel more comfortable confiding in a peer instead of an adult. Whatever strategy is used, there must be a good working relationship between school authorities and law enforcement to ensure that the information is reviewed and conveyed in a timely fashion.

4. Adopt a zero-tolerance policy and mentality.

Schools should establish reasonable zero-tolerance policies for students who make threats of violence or bring weapons to school. Such a policy might include expulsion or suspension of students who threaten to kill or assault others and, when appropriate, quickly provide psychological evaluation or intervention for these students. When adults take threats seriously, students will realize that violence is not acceptable at school.

Students must be made to understand that threats are a crime and must be dealt with accordingly. Students who pose a threat must be dealt with under school policies, and an account of the situation should be passed on to local law enforcement authorities to assist in preventing violence in the community. School policies should be clearly worded and distributed to all personnel, students, and their parents or guardians. Inviting input from the com-

munity and from parents regarding acceptable behavior might help reduce resistance to such policies. If the community has ownership in the policy, it is more likely to believe in the policy.

### How can we predict violent acts?

While society can minimize the risk of violence, we can rarely, if ever, predict it because of the numerous human variables involved. We can only analyze the risk. This is often referred to as threat assessment. In assessing the level of threat, we move from the general to the more specific, examining the social context, the school dynamics and the individual. The appropriate focus for threat assessment is to identify and understand risk factors, often seen in the form of recurring behaviors. It is not appropriate, however, to try to match a student to a predetermined “profile.”

#### Warning signs

Children who commit violence in schools are a small subset of vulnerable children. We should watch for these children and put into place mechanisms to refer them for screening, support, or external mental health assistance. General warning signs or personal background indicators include:

- A history of violence
- A close family member who has committed a violent act
- A history of alcohol or drug abuse
- A precipitating event, such as a failed romance or the perception of a failure
- The availability of a weapon or the means to commit violence
- A recent attempt to commit suicide or an act of violence
- A lack of coping skills or strategies to handle personal life crises with no controls to prevent anger or positive ways to release it
- The absence of any apparent emotional support system
- A lack of involvement in extracurricular activities

#### Characteristics of previous shooters

Several factors might indicate that individuals have the potential to commit violence. While these indicators are by no means certain or present in every case of violence, they are cries for help that may necessitate intervention. Many children may possess one or more of these traits. Those who exhibit these symptoms should receive additional oversight and assess-

ment or counseling services in an effort to prevent possible violence.

Most of the school shooters have shared the following characteristics:

- They demonstrate low self-esteem and feel disrespected by their peers and family.
- They have committed previous acts of cruelty to animals.
- They have a fascination with firearms and weapons.
- They are “injustice collectors”; that is, they attract and accumulate injustices—instances of ridicule, teasing, or bullying—until they reach their breaking point.
- They see violence as the only alternative left to them

### How should we respond?

Participants at the FBI meeting suggested three avenues of response:

#### 1. Work together.

Communities should deal with potentially violent students as a subset of troubled youth. Many of our children need more support and guidance than they are currently receiving. Neither the family nor the school can provide that support and guidance alone. They must work together and in concert with the total community to assist children as they develop, mature, grow. The most troubling aspect of the conversations at the meeting, participants agreed, was realizing the barriers that we have placed between our institutions. These barriers increase costs, lessen efficiency, and in the end harm our children. We must all—parents, educators, and law enforcement officials alike—work together.

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#### 2. Share information.

When law enforcement and school personnel encounter a child who appears to be abused or neglected, they have a state statutory duty to act. That statutory duty includes the responsibility to share information with others—child welfare and juvenile justice authorities, school officials, and law enforcement officers. Unfortunately, because of our emphasis on student confidentiality, we do not respond similarly when we perceive a child who is at risk in other ways. This harboring of information inhibits us from seeing the whole picture, picking up on early warning signs, and collaborating with others to provide assistance. School officials and law enforcement officers must overcome this barrier. Unfortunately, in many jurisdictions that will require amending confidentiality statutes to allow for such sharing of information.

#### 3. Develop intervention strategies.

School personnel should identify a continuum of appropriate responses to warning signs of violence. At the same time, however, they must use sound judgment and rely on their instincts when serious conditions demand immediate intervention—including police assistance to save lives.

When the situation is not an emergency, it might be useful to adopt a procedure such as the following:

- Recognize the warning signs.
- Report to other school officials. Determining who should receive such information will depend on the particulars of the school.
- Gather information from teachers, students, parents, other school staff, law enforcement officials, juvenile justice authorities, and the student who is perceived as a risk.
- Use a team approach to assess the level of threat. The makeup of the team will vary but should generally include the student’s parents, teachers, counselors and /or mental health professionals, the principal, and law enforcement professionals.
- Use a team approach to plan an intervention. An intervention might include community-wide supervision and skill training, appropriate social services, or behavior screening/assessment. The form of intervention will vary depending on many factors, including the characteristics of the student, the perceived risk of violence, and the level of perceived violence.

- Perform the intervention.

In some circumstances, these steps must be taken in rapid succession as an immediate priority for school and law enforcement personnel.

### Learning from experience

There is no universal, "one size fits all" solution to school violence. A successful plan for assessment and intervention must be flexible and able to be adapted quickly to each situation. The ideas and suggestions provided here are based on tragic experience. None of these strategies alone will insulate a school from lethal acts, but taken together, they may deter future violence. Thoughtful consideration of these strategies will also bring together communities—including educators, parents, students, and law enforcement personnel—and sensitize them to the need for threat assessment and violence prevention programs for

our schools and the children who learn in them.

It is a sad fact that horrific incidents will happen in our society—and even in our local public schools. Youth violence is a complicated phenomenon, and it requires our collective wisdom and actions to deal with it.

Meanwhile, we must develop comprehensive plans to prevent it and to address the worst when it occurs.

Perhaps Misty Bernall, the mother of Cassie Bernall—one of the students slain in the Columbine shooting—captured it best when she reported a conversation with friends who had just been traveling in Israel a few days after her daughter's death. At a service to remember fallen soldiers, the choir chanted the following tribute in Hebrew: "My death is not my own, but yours, and its significance depends on what you do with it." What we as a society do now will give meaning to the

short lives of the students who have died in school shootings in our nation.

### For more information

This publication is a summary of "School Safety: Working Together to Keep Schools Safe." The full text of the report, including several helpful appendices, is online at <http://www.keepschoolssafe.org/school.html>

Additional online resources:

"Early Warning, Timely Response: A Guide to Safe Schools," U.S. Department of Education (<http://www.ed.gov/offices/OSERS/OSEP/earlywrn.html>)

"Keep Schools Safe," a joint project of the National Association of Attorneys General and NSBA (<http://www.keepschoolssafe.org>)

"Safe from Harm," an online anthology of articles on school security from American School Board Journal and other NSBA publications (<http://www.asbj.com/security/index.html>)

"Violence and School Safety," a topical archive of articles from School Board News (<http://www.nsba.org/sbn/topic/violence.htm>)

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