

# No Safe Havens

*Are schools vulnerable to terrorism?  
A new national survey raises troubling questions*

By Kenneth S. Trump and Curtis Lavarello

**T**errorist attacks, anthrax scares, serial sniper shootings, and other incidents of extreme violence are changing the landscape of school safety and raising challenging questions. When national leaders issue warnings of terrorist threats, what steps should school officials take? Does allowing students to carry cell phones in school improve or detract from school safety? Should international field trips and student tours to national monuments be discontinued?

Lessons learned from high-profile violent incidents and a national survey of school-based police officials reinforce the importance of ongoing staff training, evaluating security measures, and testing school crisis plans to protect school students, staff, and facilities. Many schools have made meaningful safety improvements following a number of school shootings in recent years, but there is still no room for complacency. School officials, just like others in the broader community, must develop prevention strategies and emergency measures to plan, prepare, and practice for the worst possible incidents of violence.

## **Vulnerable to attacks**

The first professional industry survey of U.S. school-based police officers on terrorism and school safety was administered in July 2002 at the annual conference of the National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO). More than 1,100 professionals from 48 states and 416 law enforcement agencies of varying sizes attended the conference, and 658 school-based officers took part in the survey.

School-based police officers were nearly unanimous (95 percent) in saying they believe their schools are vulnerable to a terrorist attack. While 63 percent of the officers characterized



their school as “somewhat vulnerable,” 32 percent called their schools “very vulnerable.”

Unfortunately, schools provide “soft” targets to terrorists, and the idea of terrorist attacks on American schools is not far-fetched. When selecting their targets, terrorists attempt to achieve several goals. They want to send a strong message by attacking a symbolic target that represents their opponents or something significant to their opponents. They want to produce mass fear, alter the ways people live their lives, and corrode people’s confidence in the government.

Typical discussions of potential targets since Sept. 11 have focused on infrastructure areas such as utility plants, water reservoirs, transportation systems, banking and financial institutions, and similar entities. These are logical areas where antiterrorism resources should be allocated to protect our national infrastructure. But terrorists do not typically take the logical next steps anticipated by their victims—catching the opponent off-guard is a trademark of well-trained terrorist organizations.

We must accept the possibility that our schools could also be targets of future terrorist attacks. Threats to America’s children and schools have been attributed to terrorists in multiple news reports since Sept. 11. And recent history in the Middle East shows us that schools and school buses with children aboard have been victims of terrorist violence abroad on many occasions.

## **Gaps in preparedness**

If schools are to be safe, board members and administrators must take security programs and crisis preparedness planning very seriously. Yet a substantial percentage of officers (79 percent) in the NASRO survey said they do not feel that schools in

their districts are adequately prepared to respond to a terrorism attack. The majority also reported that significant gaps exist in their schools' security, that their school crisis plans are inadequate, and that those plans are either untested or inadequately tested and exercised.

For example, 96 percent of the officers reported that access to school grounds is either "very easy" or "somewhat easy," while 83 percent of the officers also described access to inside school buildings as "very easy" or "somewhat easy." The majority of officers (55 percent) further reported that their schools do not have mail-handling procedures designed to reduce risks from anthrax scares, suspicious packages, and related concerns. Almost 40 percent of school-based officers indicated that their schools have not conducted a formal security assessment in the past five years.

While 55 percent of the school officers said that their crisis plans are not adequate, 52 percent also noted that their plans have not been tested and exercised. Of those who reported that their plans had been tested, 62 percent indicated that the

## The school board's role

SCHOOL SAFETY is the responsibility of everyone, from school custodians to principals and superintendents. But the school board's strong leadership is critical to making safety and crisis preparedness a priority in creating safe learning environments. Board members should take measures to ensure that school administrators:

- Create comprehensive safe schools plans and update them at least annually. Retain copies of the plans and activities at the district level, and provide periodic status reports to the board.
- Provide ongoing staff training related to school safety.
- Evaluate the performance of the school security staff, the school police, and/or the school resource officer (SRO) programs. Take the necessary steps to maintain and/or upgrade these programs.
- Conduct periodic tests and drills of crisis response plans.
- Coordinate emergency management plans with other city, county, and state officials at the leadership, managerial, and front-line levels.
- Screen vendors who provide services to schools, such as food service and facility maintenance support. Have their employment records available to school administrators and safety officials as a condition of their contract with the district.
- Investigate the qualifications and experience of school safety consultants and security vendors. Award contracts based on qualifications and cost.
- Enact and implement safety and crisis preparedness policies based on established standards and "best practices" in the school safety field.—*K.T. and C.L.*

amount and type of testing was not adequate.

School-based officers also reported that they have received limited training and minimal support from outside agencies (local, state, and federal) in preparing for a terrorist attack on their schools. A 55 percent majority said they have not received terrorism-specific training related to their roles as school officers; 82 percent of school-based officers whose districts have in-house school security personnel said that they, too, have not had terrorism training. Meanwhile, 77 percent of the responding officers said their district's administrators, teachers, and support staff have received no terrorism-specific training.

The vast majority of school and public safety personnel did an excellent job after the Sept. 11 attacks by mobilizing mental health support for students, reducing access to schools, and communicating effectively with students and parents. However, the NASRO survey identifies a number of gaps in school security procedures. Areas for improvement include, but are not limited to:

- Better control of access to school grounds and buildings.
- Regularly scheduled school security evaluations.
- Training for school security and school police personnel, as well as school staff, on security and emergency preparedness for terrorism.
- Instituting and following policies and procedures related to unique issues associated with terrorism, such as anthrax scares and handling of mail and suspicious packages.

## Reducing risk—reasonably

While school officials do not need to panic or go overboard, prudent risk reduction and preparedness measures can be taken in a reasonable and balanced manner. For example, legitimate anthrax scares, as well as hoax incidents, have led some schools to evaluate their procedures for handling mail and suspicious packages. Here are some practical steps school officials can take:

- Do not allow students to open school mail.
- Limit the opening of mail to one staff member. Educate this person about how to recognize suspicious packages, and have the mail opened in a separate room.
- Locate faculty mailboxes so as to prevent unauthorized access by students and other unauthorized individuals.
- Review and practice lockdown and evacuation procedures and work with custodial and maintenance personnel to establish steps for quickly shutting down heating, ventilation, and air-conditioning systems.
- Confer with hazardous materials teams, emergency management agencies, and other public safety officials to establish specific response protocols related to biological and chemical crises.

Measures such as these, like many other security and emergency preparedness steps, have few financial costs, but they do require an investment of time.

While taking the new threats to school safety seriously, school officials must also avoid knee-jerk, feel-good reactions that on the surface may appear to help school safety, but in

practice could decrease overall safety and emergency preparedness.

One example is the increasing tendency of parents and students to ask school officials to allow students to have cell phones in school based on school safety reasons. Unfortunately, convenience is typically the real reason driving these requests. Yet there are a number of reasons suggesting that cell phones not only disrupt the educational environment, but also detract from school safety in a crisis situation. (See sidebar.)

Perhaps this is why 81 percent of the officers in the NASRO survey indicated that their schools do not allow students to use cell phones, and 78 percent of the officers did not feel that student use of cell phones improved school safety.

Field trips are another concern. School officials should continue local field trips unless specific threat assessments suggest otherwise. National travel decisions should be based on ongoing, specific threat assessments at the time of travel. International travel is discouraged during war and terrorist acts, and serious consideration and assessment should be undertaken on any such proposed travel. All field trips should involve safety plans that cover supervision, communication, and emergencies.

### Heightened security measures

When national leaders call for “heightened security” alerts due to terrorist threats, many parents want to know what measures schools are taking to heighten their security, too. Some practical, cost-effective measures might include the following:

- Provide special attention to perimeter security and access control issues.
- Stress the importance of staff greeting and challenging strangers and reporting suspicious individuals.
- Train custodial and maintenance personnel to identify and manage suspicious items found on campus.
- Stress the importance of adult supervision before, during, and after school, in common areas as well as outside during recess, physical education classes, drop off, and dismissal.
- Verify the identity of service personnel and vendors visiting the school. Maintain detailed records of service and delivery personnel including the full names, organizations, vehicles, and other identification information.
- Secure access to maintenance and facilities operations locations and outside utility controls.
- Evaluate food and beverage service stock, storage, and protection procedures. Determine whether schools have adequate water, food, and other supplies in the event students and staff need to be kept at the school for an extended period of time beyond normal hours.
- Assess school health and medical preparedness, including nurse staffing. Maintain adequate emergency kits and medical supplies.
- Identify higher-risk facilities, organizations, and potential terrorist targets in the community surrounding schools and plan accordingly.
- Provide crime prevention and crisis preparedness training to staff. Refine and test crisis preparedness guidelines.

## What about cell phones?

UNDER THE GUISE of improved school safety, some parents are urging school boards and administrators to let their children carry cell phones, even if the phones can be distracting in class. But rather than help, cell phones can actually detract from school safety in a number of ways:

- Cell phones can be used to call in bomb threats or even to detonate a bomb.
- Cell phone use by students can hamper rumor control and disrupt and delay effective response by public safety personnel.
- Students using cell phones can impede public safety measures by summoning parents to the scene of an emergency when officials might be trying to evacuate students to another site to meet their parents.
- Cell phone systems typically overload during a major crisis, as they did during the Columbine and World Trade Center attacks. Use by a large number of students at once could knock out cell phone systems and hamper communication among school administrators and crisis team members.

For more information: National School Safety and Security Services ([www.schoolsecurity.org](http://www.schoolsecurity.org))—K.T. and C.L.

Again, many of these measures cost more in time for planning and preparation than they do in dollars.

Many schools created crisis guidelines following the school shootings of recent years. Yet the NASRO survey results—along with the experiences of many national school safety professionals—show that many schools simply borrow crisis plans from other sources without adapting guidelines to their own circumstances. Perhaps even more alarming is that plans are not being tested and exercised in most districts.

Full-scale drills are educational, but many schools cannot—or will not—invest the time and resources for these programs. Schools that cannot do full-scale drills should at least do tabletop exercises of crisis guidelines. These exercises typically require less time, manpower, and resources. A dusty crisis plan sitting on a shelf is hardly worth the paper it is written on.

School board members and administrators have a moral, ethical, and legal responsibility to protect students, staff, and facilities as reasonably as possible. Ongoing staff training, evaluating security measures, and testing school crisis plans will help school leaders meet that obligation. Whether the crisis involves violence, terrorism, or a natural disaster, the lesson remains the same: Plan, prepare, and practice.

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