



After a man is gunned down at the Ford Elementary School parking lot in St. Louis last April, a woman took her niece and daughter out of school. She and the girls walk past police evidence markers on their way back home.



A memorial with an apple, stuffed animals and flowers is erected for slain teacher Jennifer Paulson across the street from Birney Elementary School in Tacoma, Wash. Paulson was fatally shot last February as she arrived at school for work. Authorities say the suspect was later killed in a shootout with a sheriff's deputy.



In February, teacher David Benke became a national hero. He describes his altercation with a gunman who shot two students at Deer Creek Middle School in the Jeffco Public Schools in Golden, Colorado. Deer Creek Middle School Assistant Principal Becky Brown stands by his side.

# Keeping Schools Safe During Tight Budget Times

BY KENNETH S. TRUMP

School leaders cannot justify doing school safety on the cheap.

**T**IGHT BUDGETS ARE NO EXCUSE FOR FAILING TO BE proactive with school safety. In fact, school leaders must be especially committed to prevention and security programs during times when economic woes are increasing stress on kids, their families and school staff.

Parents will forgive educators if their school's test scores drop. But they are much less forgiving if their children are hurt in an incident that could have been prevented or better managed. Attorneys and the media will be equally relentless. Educators must be proactive, responsible school safety leaders even when forced to make cuts.

## A Perfect Storm

Unfortunately, school safety is moving into the eye of a perfect storm with a momentum that seems unstoppable. A number of converging events threaten the progress made on school drug and violence prevention, security and emergency preparedness in this post-Columbine era:

1. **Elimination of the Title IV state grant component of the federal Safe and Drug-Free Schools Program.** These formula grants, a cornerstone of drug and violence prevention strategies in schools for over a decade, were eliminated effective July 1, 2010. While a new school safety program has been proposed by the U.S. Department of Education for FY 2011, it is skewed

toward a focus on school climate and does not appear to authorize the diverse program activities previously allowed under the Safe and Drug-Free Schools program. Funds from this new program will also be distributed by a highly competitive national grant process, limiting its application to far fewer districts.

**2. An intense economic recession resulting in cutbacks to local school district budgets.** The loss of federal dollars is occurring while local education agencies are being forced to make dramatic budget cuts due to declining local and state revenues. School safety and prevention administrators cannot look to their superintendents and boards to replace lost federal school safety dollars with money from other budget line items. Educators cannot rob Peter to pay Paul, because Peter's budget has also been eliminated!

**3. School budget cuts often made quickly, under intense pressure, in a** ▶

## Low-Cost and No-Cost Safety Strategies

School budgets are tight, but there are still many things school leaders can do to keep schools safe.

- **The five-minute safety rule.** Take five minutes at every faculty meeting to discuss one topic from your school's safety or crisis plan.
- **Diversify drills.** Conduct lockdown drills during nontraditional times such as lunch periods, during student arrival, and just prior to dismissal. Block exits (unannounced) during fire drills to teach students and staff to think on their feet. Lock down one section of your school while evacuating another area during the same drill.
- **Engage students.** Draw students into school safety plans through student-leader group discussions, poster contests and increasing awareness of drills. Train students not to open exterior doors for strangers during the school day.
- **Reach out to nontraditional partners.** Work with your county emergency management agency (EMA) to update crisis plans, participate in drills with first-responders, and collaborate on joint applications for security grants.
- **Hold mini-tabletop exercises.** Build abbreviated tabletop scenarios into faculty meetings and districtwide principal meetings several times during each school year.
- **Conduct safety roundtables.** Add an agenda item to district principal meetings for sharing successful safety and crisis-preparedness practices in district schools.

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# Keeping Schools Safe During Tight Budget Times

climate of uncertainty about the future, and with limited to no input or engagement from the affected parties. Cuts to prevention and security programs are often made from a “bean counting” perspective without consideration being given to the long-term impact of the cuts. Dollars are saved in the short-term, but the decisions fail to factor in the long-term adverse impact and likely greater costs that may arise as a result of the cuts.

For example, eliminating a drug or violence prevention program, or perhaps security or school police officers, will save dollars today. But an increase in violent incidents because of reduced safety forces could result in increased costs for insurance and legal settlements down the road. Replacing in-house school security staff and school resource officers (SROs) with private security guards may save dollars today, but this decision could create lower standards and a diminished quality of safety services in the future.

The old adage about being “penny wise and pound foolish” fits a number of recent school safety cuts we have seen across the nation. School leaders are risking not only increased legal liability but also a potential loss of credibility with parents and the school community.

**4. False assumptions that cuts to prevention, security, police and other safety programs can be shifted to outside agencies with no adverse impact to the schools.** When eliminating security staff and school-based police officers, boards and administrators are often quick to claim there will be no harm done, as principals will simply call the local police and get the same service. Cuts to prevention programs are often justified with the expectation that community-based and social service agencies will pick up the load.

Such assumptions fail to recognize that the elimination of these programs shift safety from a proactive to reactive posture within the district. These decisions also fail to recognize that police, social service and community-based agencies are facing staff and programmatic budget cuts just like

## Strengthening School Safety Communications

MOST SCHOOLS HAVE POSITIVE MEASURES IN PLACE TO ENHANCE SCHOOL SAFETY, but many do not communicate what they are doing to the school community. Beef up school safety communications through the following strategies:

- **Maintain a school safety Web page.** Create and update a dedicated page on your district’s Web site focusing exclusively on school safety issues. Post tips for parents (drop-off and pick-up driving spots around school, visitor sign-in, cybersafety parent resources), on where and how to get emergency notices from the district, prevention and intervention programs for students, features on school resource officers (SROs) and security staff and related information. Add a link on individual school Web pages that connect to the district’s safety or security Web page.
- **Engage parents in school safety planning.** Add parent representatives to building- and district-level crisis teams. Encourage the district’s parent organization to form a school safety committee. Provide speakers on safety issues for parent meetings. Communicate safety and crisis issues regularly in parent newsletters and online networks.
- **Promote school safety in local media.** Promote school safety topics to local radio and TV public affairs programs. Use district and/or community cable TV shows to highlight safety and crisis-preparedness programs. Work with student newspapers on student-focused stories on school safety topics (bullying, cybersafety, crisis drills, etc.).
- **Dedicate board meeting time for school safety.** Highlight positive prevention, security and preparedness measures at board meetings throughout the school year. Keep your board informed on school safety, and engage board members as active partners in school safety initiatives.
- **Maintain a crisis communications plan.** Create and update a formal crisis communications plan separate from, but coordinated with, school emergency guidelines. Stay out in front on communications regarding security threats and text-messaged rumors, and have a plan ready for communicating during crises. Train district and building administrators on managing parent and media communications on safety and crisis issues.

education agencies, so their capacity to take on the school district’s burden will be minimal or nonexistent.

**5. A tunnel-vision focus on education reform and accountability, which has shifted education leaders’ focus away from school safety.** The political and administrative pressures associated with improving test scores, debating and implementing education reform strategies, and meeting other state and federal expectations has forced many educators and legislators to take their eyes off the ball of school safety. Absent a series of high-profile incidents resulting in heightened parent and/or media attention, the bulk of conversation and lobbying within and outside of the education community has

focused on policy and funding needs for academics, not school safety.

Each of these dynamics, taken individually, is challenging in itself. Collectively, they form a perfect storm that is putting school safety in serious jeopardy.

### Assessing the Damage

The unanticipated costs of this reduction and/or elimination of prevention, security, and preparedness staff and programs will most likely include:

**Elimination of programs and staff that create a framework for school safety and prevention efforts.** A recent report, “School Security Budget Cuts,” by the U.S. Department of Education found, “Programs being cut include Student

Assistance Programs, Youth Development Programs and Professional Development Programs. Staff members are being laid off, including SROs, nurses, counselors/psychologists, teachers and custodians." All of these programs and professionals

have been more active due to an increase in student behavioral problems attributed to reductions in staff and programs."

**A shift from proactive prevention and security efforts to reactive, crisis-driven interventions triaged by an overworked,**

## A growing number of schools, already used to doing "more with less," fear they will now be doing "nothing with nothing" for school safety.

contribute to a safe and healthy environment, with mitigated potential hazards and threats.

**Increase in behavior problems and security incidents.** The Department of Education report confirmed what school safety specialists have been seeing anecdotally in recent years: "Some respondents indicated their school security departments

**smaller staff.** This translates to a decreased quantity and quality of services. A reduction in professional development programs also puts schools at risk for decreased awareness and preparedness for crisis prevention and emergency response.

The bottom line: A growing number of schools and administrators, already used to doing "more with less," fear they will

now be doing "nothing with nothing" for school safety.


### **Preventing and Repairing Damage**

Eventually, we will recover from this current economic crisis. It will take time, hard work, and focused energies.

There are still many things school leaders can do to keep schools safe during tight budget times:

**1. Focus on what you can do, not what you can't do.** The anxiety and depression associated with school budget cuts can easily become contagious. Uncertainty leads to fear, panic and depression. Reframing the focus and conversation on what can be done to keep schools safe, even during tough times, must be a top priority.

**2. Engage affected parties in cost-cutting decisions.** Avoid making arbitrary cuts to prevention and security staff and programs. Get input from affected ►



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staff and stakeholders. Often those staff running the programs can provide valuable input into potential areas for savings that would have a less severe impact on their program, but they are never consulted. Decisions made by “bean counters” may look good for the budget, but they may not be in the long-term best interest either of school safety or that of students.

**3. Expect community agencies to be partners but not to take on the whole load.** Setting unrealistic expectations of community partners will reduce parent and community confidence.

**4. Conduct an internal assessment of school safety strengths and needs.**

- Tap into building- and district-level safety committees for ideas.
- Conduct safety surveys of students, parents and staff.
- Get input from community partners such as first-responders, mental health workers and other stakeholders.
- Create prioritized lists of what is working well and what is needed to help guide funding decisions.

**5. Follow a strategic plan developed by school safety professionals.**

- Consider using school or district safety funds to have a comprehensive, independent, external, professional school safety assessment to build upon your internal needs assessment.
- An external assessment by independent, non-product-affiliated school safety professionals can produce findings to be used over a three-to-five-year period as a strategic plan to prioritize school safety activities.
- Any costs paid up front to commission a professional assessment by quality experts could save your schools a lot of wasted time and money later.

**6. Avoid knee-jerk reactions to specific security incidents.**

- School boards and superintendents should not cave into pressure to install unnecessary metal detectors, more cameras and other big-cost items in response to parent and media pressure after a high-profile incident.
- Use your strategic plan for school safety after a high-profile incident, rumored threat, or other school safety issue to avoid costly knee-jerk reactions.

**7. Proactively communicate with your school community.**

- Communicate about existing school safety programs with parents, students, staff and the community.
- Highlight plans for strengthening school safety over a period of three to five years.
- Update the community periodically on recommendations and strategies as you implement them.

**8. Communicate school safety funding needs to state and federal legislators.**

Boards and superintendents should let their state and national education association staffs know of the need for greater advocacy specifically for school safety funding. Make sure advocacy messages for school safety stand separate from, not as a footnote to, other lobbying efforts for other education programs and resources.

## Moving Forward

School leaders cannot justify doing school safety on the cheap simply because they are dramatically cutting other areas of their education budget. Parents won't buy that as a reason for failing to be proactive with the safety of their kids. And a judge or jury will almost certainly not be sympathetic when a superintendent and school

## Free Online School Safety Resources

### School Security Blog

[www.schoolsecurityblog.com](http://www.schoolsecurityblog.com)

A blog on school safety, security and emergency preparedness trends and topics, with free tips, funding information, school safety news and opinions.

### Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (REMS)

[rems.ed.gov](http://rems.ed.gov)

Resources from the U.S. Department of Education's technical assistance center for emergency planning grantees.

### FEMA School Emergency Planning

[training.fema.gov/emiweb/emischool](http://training.fema.gov/emiweb/emischool)

Online National Incident Management System (NIMS) training and all-hazards emergency planning information.

### Stop Bullying Now

[www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov](http://www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov)

Bullying and cyberbullying resources for kids and adults from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

board president testifies why a student was injured or killed by pointing to tightened school district budgets.

Educators will earn the trust of their school community if they have a legitimate, district-specific and strategic school safety plan they are genuinely working to implement. School leaders will be viewed as genuine in their commitment to school safety if they have a legitimate safety planning process, are transparent with that process and communicate regularly with their school community on best practices implemented in their schools. **DA**

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## Product Shootout

## Dueling whiteboards.

See page 51.

