



# A Holistic Approach to School Safety

Is it possible and practical to balance metal detectors  
and mental detectors?

BY CHRISTINE A. EITH AND KENNETH S. TRUMP

**F**ollowing last year's tragic school shooting in Parkland, Fla., we saw school leaders come under immense pressure to strengthen safety measures. Anxious parents, understandably nervous and fearful of high ambiguity, demanded school safety changes.

In stressful times, the emotional climate reaches a feverish pitch as school system leaders and their governing boards rush to make a difference. Their reactions are to do something, do it fast and do it differently.

Not surprisingly, we saw questionable decisions in the past year where school leaders made choices — for instance, investing in bulletproof backpacks and whiteboards — that made people *feel* emotionally safe but did not make students safer.

Educators should pause to examine whether they are striving to make people feel safer or making schools safer. It's a balancing act to create a safe school and preserve the learning environment. School safety discussions require a proactive approach to thorny problems and rigorous conversations with stakeholders, data analysis, research, a review of best practices and pragmatic implementation considerations.

Our insights and advice about best practice are based on more than 30 years' experience. One of us (Trump, no relation to the president), has spent decades as a safety and security expert for districts during which time he has published three books and 450 articles. The other (Eith) spent nearly two decades researching school safety issues, including analysis of juvenile crime statistics for the U.S. Department of Justice.

### Outside Influences

Special-interest groups such as gun control and gun rights advocates have developed their definitions of a safe school, while the security industry

is actively lobbying to define safe schools based on stronger "target hardening" by increasing security hardware and equipment. While advocates, activists and others outside of K-12 education often are well-intentioned, many of their ideas are not always well-considered as to their potential for implementation in school contexts.

State legislators, state education agencies and homeland security officials also are creating school safety requirements to shape the definition of a safe school. Many of these definitions focus heavily on security hardware and products or tactics that do not always transfer easily to child-oriented settings. In fact, forensic analyses of

## Lockdowns at School: Differing Views Over What Works

**L**ockdowns became a staple in school emergency plans following the massacre at Columbine High School in 1999. Lockdowns move students and staff out of the way of potential harm as quickly as possible. This often means going into locked classrooms, offices or other locations considered more secure than open hallways or common areas.

Differing perspectives recently have gained attention as to whether lockdown drills are adequate or if other approaches should be incorporated into school planning. Many representatives from law enforcement or homeland security advocate for options-based training, which encourages school staff and students to run, hide or fight in an emergency.

Other experienced school safety experts oppose such tactics, arguing that running from a shooter versus locking down creates target-rich environments and risks greater losses of life, and teaching to attack gunmen presents greater safety and liability risks. School leaders considering options-based training may wish to consult with their school attorneys and insurance carriers for their opinions on potential risk and liability exposures.

### Lockdown Measures

The basic steps in a typical lockdown include:

► **Initiate a lockdown call.** During lockdown drills, notices often come from school public address systems typically located in main offices. Consider, how-

ever, in a real emergency, the main office could be compromised. Having multiple locations and/or methods for initiating lockdown notifications should be a part of planning.

► **Move quickly into a secure room or location.** Avoid common areas such as open cafeterias, hallways, stairwells, gyms and restrooms.

► **Turn off the lights.** The goal is to make the room appear as if no one is inside. Lights on could be one of the first indicators that someone may be hiding inside a room.

► **Move as far away from the doors and windows as possible.** Post-Parkland discussions in Florida have referred to "hard corners," a law enforcement tactical phrase to describe room locations where it would be harder for a shooter to hit a target when shooting into a classroom from outside of the doorway. While hard corners is not a phrase typically used in schools, the strategy of moving away from classroom doors and windows has been the lockdown guidance given with the same intent for years.

► **Minimize your physical exposure.** When possible, seek protective cover. Exactly where the most appropriate or available hard corners exist and how to minimize physical exposure will vary greatly within every school.

► **Remain calm and quiet.** Noise attracts the attention of persons with ill intentions who otherwise might not detect people in

a locked room. Teaching students and staff to be quiet while in lockdown is one of the most important but often underemphasized points in lockdown training.

► **Wait for an all-clear signal.** What an all-clear signal will be and how it will be delivered may vary school to school. This should be discussed with local first responders prior to an actual incident.

► **Debrief for lessons learned.** Small lessons learned can make a big difference in a real emergency. While school crisis teams may do more formal debriefings, all staff and students should be asked for input from all drills to learn what worked well and how drills can be improved.

### Diversified Drilling

School facilities vary greatly. The specifics of how lockdowns will unfold need to be discussed and practiced at each school.

Just as with fire drills, students and staff become proficient and efficient in locking down through practice. It is important for administrators to reasonably diversify lockdown drills. Having lockdown drills only when it is convenient for staff and students does not equate to reasonable and realistic practice.

Diversifying drills by conducting them during lunch periods, between class changes and at arrival or dismissal times can add challenges into the mix to get staff and students to better think on their feet in a real emergency.

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school security lawsuits show that allegations tend to focus on the alleged failures of people, policies, procedures and systems, not failures of security technology and gadgets.

Some states are enacting requirements that all schools establish a safe schools committee to develop strategic and continuous school improvement plans, create increasingly complex crisis and emergency preparedness documents and/or ramp up physical security hardware and police staffing.

Educators must speak up and speak out about safety issues, to ensure the needs of kids and schools are met. A holistic safety plan needs to consider how school leaders can influence and educate their communities and legislators on best practices in school security.

### Safe School Defined

As a first step, superintendents should develop a definition of school safety with community input because no universal definition exists to guide this work.

Frequently, school safety is defined by the absence of negative incidents (such as bullying or bomb threats) or focused on emergency preparedness. The latter is in line with the focus of Department of Homeland Security initiatives and moving toward the definition of schools as targets — where a school is one that is prepared for emergencies.

Changing the lens and focusing on safety as an environment that is free from fear, intimidation, violence and isolation can lead to an educational climate that fosters inclusion and acceptance for every child. Incorporating reasonable and balanced security and emergency preparedness measures can contribute to sustaining a secure climate in which to implement student behavioral and intervention supports.

Defining behavioral expectations that are clearly communicated, consistently enforced and fairly applied can help schools move in the direction of a definition of a safe school that is both measurable and prevention-focused rather than solely reactive. Having superintendents and principals motivate and engage faculty, staff, students, parents and the broader school community in implementing comprehensive school safety plans promotes ownership, engagement and sustained commitment.

Indicators of a safe school are many and may include:

- ▶ high academic standards,



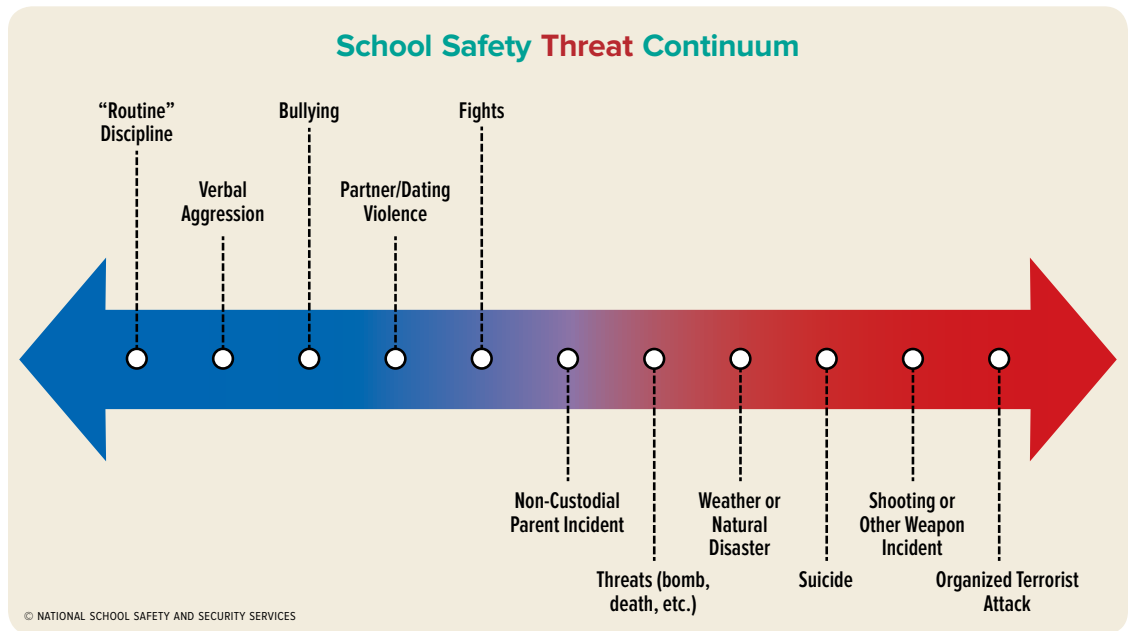
Christine Eith

- ▶ positive and respectful relationships,
- ▶ systematic conflict resolution strategies (e.g., peer mediation or meditation),
- ▶ a clean and orderly physical setting that enhances school pride,
- ▶ school personnel who listen to stakeholders,
- ▶ teachers and administrators who care about their students and have positive interactions and mutual respect for students,
- ▶ commitment to civility and positive classroom culture,
- ▶ behavioral and mental health intervention supports,
- ▶ opportunities and guidance for student before- and after-school programs and activities involving the whole community, and
- ▶ reasonable security and emergency preparedness measures.

This is not an exhaustive list. The key is for school leaders and their stakeholders to identify those indicators that define a safe school and then create a safety plan that is individualized, comprehensive and balanced.

### District Initiatives

Following the attack in Parkland, Fla., in February 2018, the St. Tammany Parish Public Schools in Louisiana initiated a new approach that balanced adding a school resource officer with a mental health professional for student supports in each of the district's 55 schools. In northeast-



ern Ohio, educators in the Copley-Fairlawn City Schools worked with their first responders and outside consultants to revisit their emergency preparedness while contracting with outside mental health agencies to provide intensive interventions with high-risk students.

Meanwhile, the 1,700-student Girard, Ohio, City Schools, bordering Youngstown, Ohio, engaged school safety consultants to evaluate the district's building security and emergency guidelines while providing professional learning opportunities on security and best practices in emergency preparedness to support staff, including food service, transportation and office personnel.

In Roanoke, Va., Superintendent Rita Bishop and her leadership team worked with school security and emergency preparedness experts to assess district-level safety programs and facilitate tabletop exercises for all secondary and elementary administrators, first responders and district support staff. Also, in Virginia's 82,000-student Loudoun County Public Schools, Superintendent Eric Williams and his district staff re-evaluated Loudoun's already-exemplary threat assessment program and strengthened its safety communications messaging with parents.

While each of these districts took somewhat different approaches, the common thread is that the leadership took a proactive stance to work

with internal and external stakeholders to examine school safety definitions and priorities. They reinforced safety communications with parents. They identified components of a comprehensive plan that needed strengthening. In short, they took the lead in defining what safe schools are for their school community.

### What's Enough?

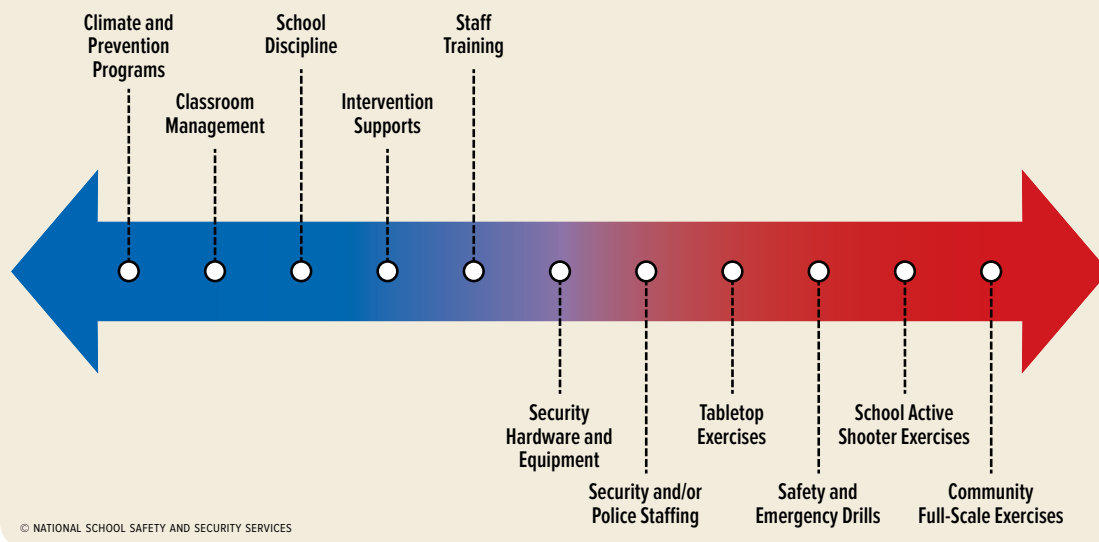
Grappling with the piles of research (or the paucity of it), the pitch of vendors and special-interest lobbyists and the sometimes-conflicting opinions of consultants on how to best keep students and staff safe is no simple task. A team of people with varied perspectives and areas of expertise to distill the facts and make rational decisions about school safety is recommended. How can you strike a balance between a safe school and a positive learning environment?



**Kenneth Trump**

Research published in 2013 in the *American Journal of Criminal Justice* shows that a heavy focus on school security equipment can have an unintended consequence of increasing student fear and anxiety. At the same time, the student who is assaulted in the back hallway on the way to his restorative justice circle group will not benefit from the "softer side" of school safety interventions if he cannot safely get to the session.

## School Safety Prevention to Preparedness Continuum



School safety discussions should be balanced between mental detectors and metal detectors. A team should consider options that include communications capabilities, visitor management systems and single-entry points — as well as school counseling needs and violence prevention programs.

Much focus now is on protection from active shooters. But threat assessment is only one dimension of school safety. Building trusting relationships between students and adults is key. School leaders typically find out about a weapon or a plot in school from a student who comes forward and tells a trusted adult. When schools emphasized personal communication and relationships with students, the reporting improved and incidents declined.

### Evaluating Threats

School shootings are low-probability but high-impact occurrences. While shootings are important threats to include in school safety planning, many other lower-impact but higher-probability threats to safety occur widely in schools.

A continuum of threats to school safety might begin with the disciplinary issues most school administrators deal with year-round and then progress in seriousness to bullying, fighting, noncustodial parent issues, bomb threats, weather and natural disasters, student or staff suicides or even an organized terror attack upon schools. School shootings must be viewed as an important threat, yet only one point on a broad

continuum of potential threats.

If we view threats to school safety on a continuum, then it is appropriate to plan school safety prevention and preparedness measures on a continuum, as well. Yes, schools must prepare for school shootings, but they also must address the many other potential threats by having school climate and prevention programs, behavioral and mental health interventions, reasonable physical security measures, staff training exercises and participation in broader community preparedness planning.

School leaders should therefore recognize the continuum of threats to the safety of their schools and respond with a continuum of prevention and preparedness measures. This type of comprehensive and balanced approach to school safety is supported by decades of research and experience.

Research consistently shows that schools should take a comprehensive and balanced approach in designing their school safety programs. But it also shows that schools struggle in implementing and sustaining such programs over time.

The first step toward creating a meaningful and evidence-based school safety program is to define what a safe school is for your school community. ■

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