SCHOOL, COLLEGE, AND UNIVERSITY SAFETY:
A DIALOGUE WITH EXPERTS ABOUT
WHAT CAN BE DONE TO
SECURE EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS*
© 2018 Sam Houston State University

Authors:
Matthew Fuller, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Higher Education Leadership, Director, Higher Education Leadership Doctoral Program and Texas Academic Leadership Academy
Sinem Akay-Sullivan, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Counselor Education
Courtney Banks, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Psychology
Stacey L. Edmonson, Ed. D., Professor of Educational Leadership and Dean, College of Education
Bill King, Ph.D., Professor and Associate Dean of Criminal Justice
Phillip Lyons, Ph.D., Dean, College of Criminal Justice
Nadav Morag, Ph.D., Associate Professor and Chair, Dept. of Security Studies
Kevin Morris, Chief of Police, Sam Houston State University
Ryan Randa, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Dept. of Criminal Justice and Criminology
Jeffery Sullivan, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Counselor Education
John Yarabeck, Dean of Students
David Yebra, Director, Emergency Management Services

*The views published in this paper are solely those of the authors and do not represent the official position of Sam Houston State University or the authors of this work in an entirety.
At about 8:45 a.m. one cool, crisp May morning, the town of Bath, Michigan was rocked by two devastating explosions. One, at the small farmhouse of school board treasurer Andrew Kehoe, and the other at the school itself. Kehoe, despondent over increases in his taxes, a recent loss in the election of the Bath township treasurer, and the looming foreclosure on his house and farm, killed his wife and set off explosive and incendiary devices at his home. Local firefighters arrived on the scene moments later and found Kehoe and several sticks of undetonated dynamite. As Kehoe left his farm in his truck, he told the firefighters “Boys, you’re my friends. You better get out of here. You better head down to the school,” and drove off.

Almost simultaneously, a similar device tore through the north wing of the Bath Consolidated School. Classes had just begun at 8:30 a.m., and most of the school’s 236 students were in attendance. The explosion left a crater in the school’s place. The north-west wall of the building completely collapsed and the roof caved in on top of that. Bricks, mortar, and glass were thrown hundreds of yards from the site. But a bigger hole was torn through the small community’s heart; 38 elementary school children and six adults were killed and 58 others injured.

However, Kehoe’s plans were not complete. Parents—most of them mothers—came to the school demanding information only to find the lifeless body of their child. Some children were never found in the rubble. First responders also arrived. Kehoe had loaded his Ford truck full of scrap metal and dynamite. About half an hour after the explosion, he drove his truck up to the entrance of the school, where he saw Superintendent Emory Huyck. Kehoe then detonated the dynamite in his truck, killing himself, Huyck, a local farmer, and Cleo Clayton, a second-grade student who had survived the first explosion and had just wandered out of the rubble seconds before the explosion.

This is not a hypothetical scenario. You may wonder why you have not heard of this attack in the news recently. The reason: The attack was carried out on May 18, 1927, and although the names and faces may have faded from history, the Bath School Massacre remains the deadliest attack on any U.S. school. Such a coordinated attack took planning and preparation.

As is the case with so many attacks, hindsight is 20/20. In the summer of 1926, Kehoe had used his access as a school board member to pack the basement of the school with dynamite, pyrotol (an explosive defoliant used by farmers in this time), and scrap metal to act as shrapnel. He carefully maintained his truck so it would not break down on his way to the school, and he purchased over a ton of pyrotol. He also purchased, in small amounts, the dynamite necessary to conduct the attack. As dynamite was widely used on farms of the day and since he purchased the dynamite in small amounts, few people were concerned. However, there had been witnesses who wondered why Kehoe would make so many late night deliveries to the school basement or why he always seemed to blow up things on his farm. Kehoe had even earned the nickname, “the dynamite farmer.” Kehoe’s disdain for Superintendent Huyck was also well known throughout the community and many citizens worried that Kehoe was about to commit suicide in the months preceding the attack. As with so many disasters, warning signs were glaringly apparent.

An Integrated Model for Responding to School Safety

The Bath School Massacre illustrates a disturbing trend parents, students, educational and community leaders, and members of the general public know all too well from modern contexts. Throughout history, schools—places, which for so many of America’s youth hold memories of friendship, learning, growth, and develop—have been the target of some of the most sophisticated, planned, and tragic violence our society has ever known. Though not new, attacks on schools, universities, and other social institutions seem to have struck at the core of the American psyche of late. In particular, shootings, stabbings, and vehicular attacks have been prominent lately, and seem to occur at a hastening pace. Our communities and social institutions face an unsettling decision. Adapt to meet new challenges in safety or resign to a new, unpredictable, hopeless reality. School and university leaders are critical to institutional and community responses to emergency preparedness, safety, and prevention. In short, they must respond to violence with even greater sophistication, planfulness, and vigilance then the violence is originally conceived.

However, institutional leaders, law enforcement, psychologists, and community leaders are not prepared or trained to respond to these new realities. If viewed as a preparedness team, school and university leaders have been plagued by a lack of integration, competing
Our model takes an integrated approach to school and institutional safety. Integrated school safety requires a team approach to securing schools and universities. Responding to contemporary school safety issues requires a new and novel approach. See Fig. 1. A Novel Conceptual Framework for University and School Safety.

**Fig. 1. A Novel Conceptual Framework for University and School Safety**

**School leaders** (i.e. principals, central administration, and superintendents) are critical to convening teams of community leaders, sustaining important focus on school safety, and responding to lapses in preparation plans. From this framework, they focus on coordinating various resources, establishing lines of communication, and innovating new responses to unplanned security issues. School leaders set the tone for school communities, making it acceptable to report security concerns to appropriate authorities.

**Instructional Staff** (i.e. teachers, coaches, and aides) spend the greatest amount of time with students. They are keenly aware of students’ learning, histories, skills, and mental states. They can provide opportunities for students to be engaged in groups, learn interaction and coping skills, and model adulthood to young men. They are vital conduits of information that should be shared throughout the system as needed. Instructional staff should feel supported by leaders in their efforts to secure the learning environment. They are also often the critical leaders to whom students look to in critical incidents.

**Law Enforcement** (i.e. school police officers, local police and/or county sheriff’s departments) are critical partners in school safety. They must be present, visible, and ready to act. Their unique skills require constant training and innovation. They must balance their role as partners with students in safety concerns with their role in securing school communities in crises. Law enforcement must communicate with school leaders, instructional staff, parents, and students before, during, and after moments of crisis. Law enforcement helps set an important tone and visible presence in schools that are critical to their safety.

**Psychological Services and Counselors** (i.e. school counselors and psychologists, community counselors, hospitals, and agencies) can aid in identifying security concerns before crisis situations occur. They can also be critical to responses to crises. Counselors, psychologists, and mentors can be vital allies in helping young men realize and adopt a counter-message to violence (Garbarino, 2001). Unfortunately, many school counselors are asked to engage in testing management, robbing them of critical time to assess students’ psychological needs.

**Facilities Management** (i.e. building planners, architects, custodial staff, security personnel) may be able to develop or retrofit innovative physical environments that balance security and educational needs. Locks, impact-resistant glass, and other building plans could reduce the likelihood of a mass shooting or reduce an assailant’s mobility into and throughout a building. Facilities management teams are also often critical to securing buildings and must be diligent in their protection of schools. Planning for school security...
as new buildings are constructed must be informed by research and novel practices in school leadership.

**Community Leaders** (i.e. mayors, business leaders, advisers) also play a role in school safety. Communities offer after-school programs to guide young men in their development. Business leaders also offer opportunities for young men to gain skills, employment capacity, and hope, which may stabilize them in transitions through to adulthood (Garbarino, 2001). They offer mentors who can gain access to students in ways school staff cannot. Coordinating planning and response efforts often involve community leaders. Yet, many programs do not include community leaders in discussions about school safety. The proposed summit will include information for community leaders to serve as collaborators.

**Spiritual Leaders** have also often been excluded from discussions about school safety. As advisers, they serve as important sources of information and guides to help students cope with challenges, bullying, violence, and trauma, both before and after an active attack. In some instances, spiritual leaders may be best situated to counter the messages and patterns of violence many students consume today.

**Parents and students** are important partners with connections to all of the aforementioned groups. They are consumers of information, advocates for students, and sources of information. Planning with parents and students, hearing their concerns and ideas, and supporting student learning should be goals of all schools.

---

**What Can Schools and Universities Do to Improve Safety**

Integrated teams should adopt an “all-hands on deck” approach to school safety. To help safety teams better manage this all-hazards approach to school and university safety, our researchers conceptualize three areas in which schools and universities can prepare for and respond to safety issues: (a) prevention, (b) law enforcement, and (c) response. Below is a listing of 17 practices that institutions can implement to enhance learning through safe environments.

**Prevention**

Institutional efforts to prevent mass shootings and attacks are aimed at identifying threats, appropriately responding to them, and offering interventions to aid students in need prior to emergency situations. There is a concern that institutions cannot prevent mass attacks from happening. We believe institutions operating under this approach already have prevented mass attacks. Leaders should be hesitant in adopting the belief that attacks cannot be prevented. Doing so perpetuates a hopeless environment in which schools and universities are acted upon, not acting to preserve safety. This pattern of resignation is problematic in that it lulls community members into a sense of complacency about institutional and community safety. The following are a few steps schools can take to provide safe schools through prevention:

1. **Work to ensure that all institution and community members know the value of and are able to report potentially concerning behaviors.**

   Institutions must educate parents, students, community leaders, and community members about the early signs of potential threats. No threat, be it verbal, printed, or perceived, should be overlooked. However, there is also no single way of identifying individuals who are likely to be drawn into violent extremism or act upon violent thoughts. Some factors, though, may predispose someone to violent actions: peer pressure, influence from others, bullying, crime committed against them or their involvement in criminal elements, anti-social behavior, family stress, economic stress, hate crime, self-esteem issues, and personal or political grievances are just a few (U.K. Government, 2015, p, 10).

   During orientation sessions, law enforcement and school leaders should be present to describe to parents what some of the basic signs of
concern might be. They must also work with the community at large, through meetings, discussions, and media campaigns (i.e. flyers posted in schools, grocery stores, or local restaurants). Many local law enforcement, school resource officers, school officials, and the FBI (https://www.fbi.gov/tips) offer hotlines or established avenues of communication to report potential threats to institutions. However, school resource officers must be active members of the school community while also serving as intelligence gatherers. They must not simply share information, but must also actively collect information from a variety of sources and in new and novel ways. Also, school leaders and instructional staff can work to develop a culture wherein reporting potentially threatening behavior is not viewed as tattling, snitching, or turning on a friend. Indeed, this may be the only way to get this friend needed help. In a recent study of school teachers conducted by the Texas Classroom Teachers Association (2018), teachers expressed concerns that teachers and student voices and concerns were not being heard. Teachers have reported feelings of concern when reporting information on students of concern, because school leaders are perceived as caring more about efficient operations or “not rocking the boat” (p. 19) than school safety. School leaders should work to ensure that all concerns are addressed. School leaders must develop structures wherein information can be reported, shared, and verified quickly and in a low stakes way.

2. Routinely and thoroughly conduct school safety audits.

Currently, Texas’ Independent School Districts are required to conduct an audit of school safety practices once every three years. However, school officials struggled with how to conduct these audits and how to ensure these audits are viewed with integrity and importance. The 77th State Legislature authorized the creation of the Texas School Safety Center in 2001 to fill this need. (See https://txssc.txstate.edu/tools/k-12-toolkit/ for resources). School leaders must engage in periodic reviews of school safety practices that go beyond merely checking if locked doors remain locked. Instead, routine checks of safety should be everyone’s responsibility. While Independent School Districts have the resources of the Texas School Safety Center (TSSC), higher education institutions are not fully covered under the TSSC’s mission, though some community colleges are partnering with TSSC for development. Additional resources and a similar center for university safety are needed.

3. Engage in behavioral risk assessments regularly and act upon legitimate concerns. In many instances, school assailants have exhibited behaviors that, in hindsight, should have alerted counselors, psychologists, and school leaders to potentially dangerous behaviors. Behavioral risk assessments—such as those adopting the Virginia Model for Student Threat Assessment—are available and offer valid and reliable means of screening potentially harmful students. School psychologists and counselors must be given the resources, authority, and support needed to assess students’ behaviors. Their work must be consistent and vigilant and cannot be a one-off activity. Comprehensive, effective, immediate, and long-term intervention strategies must be implemented for students of concern. School psychologists must take a leading role in actively implementing proven intervention programs for students and working with school leaders and law enforcement. Often times, counselors and school psychologists hold a unique authority to engage in interventions, whereas law enforcement and school leaders cannot proceed with their efforts unless probable cause or a criminal act has been committed.

Moreover, actionable evidence suggesting a student’s behaviors are threatening should result in appropriate treatment and intervention supporting the student. Many teachers and administrators have expressed concerns that even with strong evidence suggesting violence is likely to occur, pressures to “mainstream” all students and fear of legal action have resulted in a chilling effect on staff members’ desire to refer students to behavior intervention services, or disciplinary action (TCTA, 2018). This may entail using wraparound services that involve collaboration with families, school psychological services, and community mental health agencies. Appropriate schools leaders should discuss what evidence is needed to make these recommendations prior to their implementation. Moreover, reimagining the role of school counselors and psychologists to focus more on behavioral risk assessment and less on bureaucratic elements may
be necessary. State and federal lawmakers can assist schools by reviewing and reducing the burden on institutional leaders for accountability reports, thereby freeing them to focus on evidence-based behavioral risk assessments.

4. Educate parents and local community members about services available to students with concern.

By developing a network of available therapeutic resources, school leaders are preventing potentially dangerous behaviors (Windham, Hooper, & Hudson, 2005). Connecting students who present at-risk behavioral concerns with resources for their specific needs prevent further escalation and teaches students coping skills. School leaders, counselors, and psychologists should identify new and novel sources of therapy to address specific students’ needs. Doing so requires them to remain abreast of new developments in the field of school psychology. It also requires them to develop relationships with school leaders, law enforcement, parents, and students, especially students of concern. This latter challenge, in particular, can be particularly challenging for school psychologists and counselors. Institutions should review and update their referral processes to ensure students are referred quickly to specific agencies or resources, and required to meet with therapists to continue involvement in the educational environment. School leaders must support counselors and school psychologists’ assessments of students of concern.

5. Develop and empower a Students of Concern or Critical Incident Response Team.

Many models of a critical incident response team are available. However, school crisis teams may meet in response to a crisis but not regularly to discuss prevention and assessment. Schools and communities must make prevention and assessment a proactive, ongoing element of their daily operations and culture. The Sam Houston State University Students of Concern Team is a cross-institutional team of experts in leadership, counseling, and law enforcement. Their charge is to establish and disseminate a mechanism for receiving reports of potentially threatening behavior. They are also the team authorized by senior leaders to implement responses to critical incidents. They undergo regular trainings and operate with a wide degree of authority to respond to or prevent critical attacks. Training for such teams is sparse and additional opportunities are needed. See http://www.shsu.edu/dept/dean-of-students/policies/Stu dow ofConcernCrisisManagementTeam.html

6. Reestablish the relational elements of education.

Preventing violence requires relationships between teachers, school leaders, law enforcement, students, and parents. Teachers, in particular, have expressed concerns over their capacity to form strong relationships with students given all of the administrative, bureaucratic, and legal constraints facing education today. For example, school counselors are often faced with the difficult challenge of counseling students—which, but necessity requires a relationship based upon trust, vulnerability, and support—and completing any number of testing, attendance reporting, scheduling, or other tasks. Reducing and limiting class sizes to allow for relationship building and improved education is one tactic offered by teachers in recent research (TCTA, 2018, p. 19). Similarly, there is a need to reduce the number of students served by principals, assistant principals, counselors, and school psychologists. In the academic year 2014-2015, Texas’ school counselors served, on average, 449 students (American School Counselor Association, 2016). While Texas’ schools have slowly decreased the number of students served by counselors, the state lags behind 30 other states in the ratio of school counselors to students. At the university level, the problem is more pronounced. The International Association of Counseling Services (2016) recommends a ratio of one counseling staff member for every 1,500 students. By this standard, counseling centers at 12 state universities are understaffed.

7. Provide parents and families with education and resources to support their families, especially early in life.

Teachers, parents, students, spiritual leaders, and school leaders have expressed concerns that discipline, morals, ethics, and empathy are traits they see less of in today’s students (Texas Classroom Teachers Association, 2018). As one teacher mentioned, “I do not believe any type of further gun restrictions will alter the likelihood that a mass shooting may happen. It is a lack of morals, lack
of accountability of people, and lack of enforced consequences that largely affects these unfortunate events” (p. 20) Social and community programs that support parents’ capacities to instill morals and virtues in their children should be supported through increased funding and community partnerships. Spiritual leaders should also be called upon as they are vital members of communities in shaping youth attitudes and morals.

8. Redesign learning spaces with safety in mind.
Many schools and higher education buildings were built to accommodate Baby Boomers as they progressed through the American school system. As such, institutions are being asked to educate in new contexts wherein their buildings are simply not designed to prevent mass attacks. Modern environmental design principles provide some guidance and must be integrated with code and other life safety requirements. For example, many institutions or schools have one entrance, which can be locked, or monitored via an atrium, but once the front doors are breached, access to the remainder of the school is often far too easy. Many renovations have included creating a security vestibule by adding a second set of doors after the entry doors that restrict access to the remainder of the building unless a person is “buzzed-in” by a staff member at the entrance. Adding bullet-resistant window assemblies at front entrances helps the staff member at the front entrance maintain visibility, so they can see who is approaching the building, while significantly reducing the ability for an assailant to shoot out the glass to gain access to the inside. Although limiting a school to one entrance may be desirable for restricting access to the school, it is not sufficient for emergency situations where there is a need to evacuate the building quickly, such as in a fire. Doors to the exterior must be located at multiple locations for the safe evacuation of the occupants in an emergency, however, those doors can be “exit only,” or can have access controls installed, so that only those with the proper credentials are able to enter at those locations.

Video surveillance that is actively monitored by staff who are trained to act decisively to implement a school safety plan may be considered. Redirecting flow of traffic and parking areas may assist in preventing vehicular attacks or allow school staff the time needed to lock the building down. Schools are equipping teachers with door lock mechanisms that can assist in locking a door in the event of an active shooter. As institutions look to redesign aging infrastructure, principles of prevention through environmental design should be considered yet must be balanced with the educational mission of the school or university.

Law Enforcement

9. Law enforcement officers must maintain a visible presence in the schools.
The first time that students meet a school resource officer should not be in emergency conditions. Maintaining a visible presence may also open lines of communication between police, students, and community members that can assist in preventing emergency situations. Visible presence pays dividends across the institution and community and makes a lasting impact on students and their families, even if emergency situations are not experienced.

10. Training in a variety of situations is necessary and should be the focus of every member of the team.
To be best prepared, institutions and communities must work to make the unpredictable predictable. Training for law enforcement is a necessity. Training should include tactical situations law enforcement officers are likely to face in school situations. The SHSU Police Department and the Texas State University Advanced Law Enforcement Rapid Response Training (ALERRT) offer top-notch training efforts in real life institutional settings. However, training should not stop with law enforcement. Schools can develop portions of professional development days to active shooter drills and other emergency response efforts. Incorporating instructional staff into training efforts is critical to institutionalizing a culture of integrated safety.

11. Law enforcement and school leadership must establish norms to apply in unpredictable scenarios.
Schools and institutions operate in hierarchical and bureaucratic realities. Budgets, authority, accountability, and other norms are commonplace and help govern institutional operations. In emergency situations, however, law enforcement
agents must be allowed to operate with full freedom and authority with minimal intervention and full compliance from school leaders, instructional staff, parents, and students. Institutional leaders must develop protocols with law enforcement agents to make it abundantly clear that emergency conditions dictate a temporary suspension of non-emergency norms. Proper planning and practice in this transition are critical to the success of any emergency plan.

12. Capacity to grow and respond must also be reflected in institutional goals and budgets. Law enforcement officers require an increasingly complex array of skills and tools. Affording opportunities for police force staffing increases, new technology purchases, and other support efforts should be planned for as a portion of every institutional budgeting process. Moreover, police chiefs and/or county sheriffs should be consulted on all major facilities decisions such as new school designs or renovations or policy decisions. Integrated safety means institutional leaders will reflect on non-traditional moments to include police leadership in institutional decisions.

Response

13. First responders must be trained to deal with institutional crises and must be trained as a part of the overall institutional response team
Emergency managers, firefighters, EMS, and various branches of local law enforcement may be some of the first responders that should also plan for and be prepared to respond to institutional crises. They have a critical role in responding to institutional crises, and communication between agencies can be strained. Therefore, communication systems must be the focus of training efforts. A school attack strikes at the very core of human senses of decency and can be difficult for first responders to process mentally. Support in the form of trauma counseling or post-traumatic stress disorder must be afforded to all members of the integrated safety team.

14. A robust, tested plan for school safety must be in place, trained, and known throughout the community.
Schools are required to have an emergency preparedness plan. Institutions of higher education often have such plans but are not necessarily required to have specific elements in their plans. Whenever possible, training should include real life, in-school situations that are likely to occur in the course of daily instruction. Students might also be enlisted to aid teachers in the event of an emergency. The training required of them to fulfill this role has both pragmatic and attitudinal effects. Pragmatically, such training enhances emergency response. However, the training also engages students as part of the response rather than merely the victims. Such attitudinal shifts can be tremendously important in emergency situations. Instructional leaders, coaches, principals, counselors, and staff who will further disseminate what they have learned to members of their team should receive enhanced training appropriate to their position.

15. Local businesses and community leaders must also be included in safety plans.
In crises, adjacent businesses and neighbors will be valuable assets in response. They may provide temporary shelter, space, or support for students. They will likely also want to know how they can support the response. Without preparations, neighboring businesses and homeowners could interfere with the response rather than support it. Prior to emergency situations, local business and community leaders can serve as valuable sources of information about students and aid in prevention by reporting information. At a minimum, neighbors should be aware of who to contact in the event of suspicious activities during and after hours of institutional operations. School leaders should make it a point to engage local business and community leaders in period discussions, making themselves available via cell phone at any time to report suspicious activities. Being available to local constituents is critical to receiving information that may be useful in preventing potential emergencies.

16. Counselors specializing in trauma should be part of the training experience for institutional teams.
Trauma counselors are critical to the response institutions will face. They specialize in helping individuals properly deal with the challenges they face as a result of what they have experienced or seen. They also provide a valuable infusion of counseling expertise to counseling teams that may be stretched beyond their capacity or skillset. The SHSU Center for Research and Training in
Trauma have faculty and staff skilled in training counselors, first responders, instructional staff, and school leaders in response to trauma.

17. School and university leaders should be prepared to respond to difficult questions following crisis situations.
In the hours, days, and weeks following a mass attack, school leaders and law enforcement will be asked to respond to a multitude of questions about the incident. School leadership must be prepared to field difficult questions in a professional, empathetic, and focused manner. They must call upon public speaking, emotional intelligence, legal expertise, empathy, and courage, to name a few. Responding to media and parent questions about emergency situations requires a unique skillset for which few school leaders are prepared. Training for school leaders must include elements of responding to the public after crises.

Overall Institutional Resilience
Though the primary focus of this document has been active attacks, many of these principles could also enhance institutional capacity in response to severe weather, natural disaster, accidents, or instructional risks. Developing a culture focused on being prepared for and responding to all hazards takes leadership and skill. The aim of emergency preparedness should be to make the unpredictable predictable, thereby improving the likelihood of a successful response. Plans may also operate on an attitudinal level by instilling in students a belief in their preparedness for an emergency, thereby forestalling a victim mentality or a sense of hopelessness. These principles can aid institutions in preparing for and responding to active attackers, hurricanes, tornadoes, spills in the chemistry lab, or other emergencies.

The Need for Training into Integrated School Safety
Current training efforts focus on the different components of a school safety team. Law enforcement often trains on tactical elements. School leaders may develop plans for emergency response. Counselors and school psychologists may not have the time or capacity to fully attend to the behavioral risk assessments needed to support all students given their other responsibilities. Rather than training in each team members’ respective areas, an integrated approach asks constituents from across the institution and community to consider their role in school safety but to also experience others’ roles and responsibilities as well. This understanding is critical in responding to emergency situations when they actually happen. Currently, no such comprehensive, integrated training effort is available to school or university staff, leaders, counselors, and community members. Efforts to enhance training for school and university leaders is necessary if Texas’ institutions are to respond to the new challenges of institutional safety.

Works Cited


