

SCHOOL SAFETY WITH 2020 VISION

By: Paul Novak and Lyn Butcher

You already know all too well the statistics surrounding school shootings in America; so, this article is not intended to dwell on that. What's important is that K-12 public schools continue to come under serious scrutiny concerning their efforts to ensure the highest degree of safety for their students and staff. And there are as many opinions about how to achieve safe schools, as there are district leaders, politicians, parents, law enforcement agencies and school safety experts. If any one of us truly had the absolute failsafe solution, then there would be no debate.

This article is offered to you by two subject matter experts; a newly retired police sergeant who supervised 19 School Resource Officer's at a dozen large campuses, in the fifth largest city in America for the past 15 years and a school safety expert with more than 25 years keeping schools and students safe.

Each time there's a school shooting in one of our nation's 13,000 public school districts, each of the groups previously mentioned, scramble to identify and offer different solutions, implement different strategies, and vote to provide more funding at the national and state levels. However, the truth of the matter is that our schools continue to be vulnerable.

Perimeter fencing, locked doors, cameras and School Resource Officers (SRO) are clearly the most common defensive measures that we see, as we visit campuses across the nation. Most schools cover vast geographic areas. Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida for instance, sits on 44 acres and has over one mile of perimeter fencing and many multi-storied buildings. This physical description is offered so that we can address two commonly practiced school safety measures: 1) Deployment of one or more School Resource Officers; and 2) Single points of entry.

We will argue that both are highly practical and effective in advancing your campus' security posture. We will also argue that every school that has both, is still vulnerable and exposed to the possibility of an active shooter.

SRO: In every school shooting, one of these is true: There was no armed officer assigned to the campus; or there was at least one officer on duty. And in one recent school shooting that left 10 dead, there were two-armed officers patrolling the hallways. So, we can conclude that the presence of SRO does not always deter, prevent or even rapidly end such an attack.

As stated, most campuses have multiple buildings, each with multiple floors, and locked exterior doors. So the time it might take an SRO to determine that shots were in fact fired, to triangulate the point of origin of the shooting, to move to the correct building, make entry through the locked doors and determine which floor the shots originated from, then engage the shooter, is possibly five or more minutes.

School shootings typically only last minutes but take countless lives. The shooter at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut took 26 lives in 4 minutes and 24 seconds. The attack at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School lasted 6 minutes and resulted in 17 deaths and 17 injuries. It's common for SRO to leave campus from time to time for training, court appearances, meetings, or due to illness, and they are normally not replaced for the day. Some school administrators opt to have their SRO work a 4/10 schedule so the officer can be present before and after school: leaving the campus extra vulnerable one day each week.

Because of scarce funding for SRO, decisions are often made to place them in poorer communities as well as in high schools and junior high schools, however we see that many school shootings occur in affluent neighborhoods (Santa Fe, Texas – median household income of \$70K); (Parkland, Florida – median household income \$128K) (Newtown, Connecticut – median household income \$129K) and shooting do not always occur just in high schools (Sandy Hook Elementary School).

SINGLE POINTS OF ENTRY: Controlling and monitoring the entry of every person onto campus is a responsible and essential part of ensuring our schools are keeping with the highest standards of what parents and students expect. Leaders at the schools are an integral part of ensuring this standard is met. However, it is quite easy for one to conceal weapons under clothing or in backpacks.

Many argue that metal detectors installed at the entrance(s) would decrease this likelihood. However, there are significant arguments why this is not only impractical but also not truly an effective tool to prevent weapons from coming onto campus. Weapons can bypass the single point of entry simply by tossing them in a bag over the six-foot chain-link fences far from sight or by passing them over the fence to an accomplice prior to entering through the monitored entry point.

Metal detectors should be manned by armed personnel. Metal detectors can cause ridiculous bottlenecks at school entrances as thousands of students arrive within a short period of time. These detectors must be operational from the earliest staff or student arrival, often hours before first bell, until evening. They must be in place and manned throughout the day for visitors, deliveries, tardy arrivals, etc. School shooters are not always current students (see Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School and Sandy Hook Elementary School); but sometimes are – (see Santa Fe High School, Santa Fe, Texas).

At the end of this article is an exhausting and voluminous list of choices that leaders have available when planning upgrades to physical security on their campuses. When visiting one of the nation's K-12 public schools, we score each of these options from 1 to 10 for their effectiveness and their combining (pairing) compatibility with each of the other options. Next is a score that calculates the risk/benefit (great example is arming teachers) for each option. Then we assign an affordability score from 1 to 10. This matrix provides administrators the best information from which to act.

ARMED TEACHERS: One choice that fortunately only very few schools and districts have settled on, is the arming of teachers with loaded handguns. Arming teachers is extremely high-risk and leave students and staff greatly exposed. This article will not address those risks, but there are far too many to make this an option we ever recommend.

CAMERAS: Surveillance cameras are not a great deterrent. Shooters do not care that they will be identified, and most often expect that they will not themselves survive the attack anyway. Cameras are great for capturing crimes, but not for stopping them.

Another area that we caution against is the use of guns, percussion grenades, and other terrifying training techniques with students present. Even for staff, it's not beneficial to take them through these exercises, just on the slim chance that they will experience a school shooting. It can lead to unnecessary trauma and stress, when simply doing lockdown and evacuation drills and tabletop exercises will prepare them sufficiently. In the 1960s we practiced getting under our desks. No one had to drop incendiary devices or run through the hallways screaming to get us to take it seriously. We knew how to follow instructions and that was good enough. Traumatizing students and staff unnecessarily with tactical teams clearing buildings today, will likely not save a life tomorrow. We do support law enforcement using school buildings within their jurisdictions to train when schools are not in session. Schools are unique environments and police would benefit from training in them.

Here is but a small menu of measures and products that schools may choose from, to make their schools safer:

Clear only backpacks, bulletproof backpacks or no backpacks allowed rules

Interior/exterior cameras

Panic buttons

Single points of entry

Vestibule entry design

Lobby containment designs that prohibit entry beyond the lobby without active measures

School Resource Officers

Loaded handguns carried by teachers

Ballistic, bullet-proof or glazed glass

Self-closing and locking classroom doors

School-wide audible messaging

Smoke cannons (Southwestern High School, Shelbyville, Indiana)

Miniature baseball bats or buckets of rocks in each classroom to defend with

Pepper spray canisters in each room

TASER conducted electrical weapons for self-defense, vaulted in each classroom

Some of these sound silly (buckets of rocks) and some sound dangerous (teachers with loaded handguns) but each district and each of the 130,000 public schools and 12,000 private and parochial schools must do everything within their power and budgets to ensure that they give teachers and students the best chance to survive a tragedy of the sort that we see happening all too often across America. We are always happy to help districts with this daunting task.

Lyn Butcher is a retired Phoenix Police Sergeant with over 25 years of law enforcement experience. She spent the past 15+ years as a School Resource Officer Sergeant supervising School Resource Officers and working closely with school and district administrators. Lyn earned her bachelor's degree in justice studies and her master's degree in Public Administration from Arizona State University.

Paul Novak served on active duty in the U.S. Army for 20 years, retiring in 1995. He then served for 21 years as the district director of school safety and student transportation for a K-12 district in Tempe, Arizona. Since retiring from Tempe in 2016, he has served as the CEO of Gauge Precision Consulting which specializes in School Safety and Student Transportation Consulting. www.gaugepc.com paulnovak@gaugepc.com