

Uvalde: Can Our Failures Help Us Succeed

By: Jon Quast

May 24th, 2022. We once again mourn as a nation as innocent lives are lost in one of our nation's schools. Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas will be etched into our collective history along with other benchmark events regarding targeted acts of school violence. Columbine, Sandy Hook, Parkland, and now Uvalde will all be marked as a failure in some form or fashion as to why we did not prevent, mitigate, and/or stop the loss of innocent lives.

Over the past decade we, as a collective All Hazards community, have worked diligently to prepare for, mitigate, and respond to acts of violence within our schools. Yet at times, we still fall short. What can we continue to do to improve our abilities, and either stop these acts of violence or quickly stop events as they unfold? Learning from past events, past failures, there are several areas to focus on to improve our ability to prevent and mitigate future events.

K-12 schools have worked with local law enforcement to conduct school safety drills in response to violent acts (AKA Lockdown Drills). Some feel that there is little value to conducting these drills; however, there are valid arguments that under stress and pressure of reacting to a violent act is NOT the time to try to practice your response options, much less discover your physical security within your environment is lacking. Progressive, age-appropriate drills will help enhance the ability to respond both quickly and effectively with your policy's response options (e.g., Run-Hide-Fight, ALICE, I Love U Guys-SRP). Be sure to include training for students, staff, volunteers, etc., including extracurricular events that occur outside of regular school hours and off site events, such as away games and field trips.

Schools, in association with local law enforcement or safety specialists, should conduct site safety assessments of the both the physical environment of their respective school building and the associated emergency response policies and procedures. Is the physical environment of the school safe and does the response policies and procedures effectively compliment that physical environment? In order to effectively determine the above questions, conducting progressive training and drills will help to identify gaps, barriers, and needed improvements. Once identified, it would behoove us to address those identified gaps in safety.

Having a culture of safety within our schools is paramount. Tools available to us are anonymous reporting systems, such as an Illinois sponsored program Safe2Help IL. All too often we look at an act of violence within a school retrospectively and are able to identify multiple warning signs that could have been reported and acted on to help prevent the event from occurring. Having a reporting system, not to get another student in trouble, but to help identify the need for help and possible interventions, can help prevent these acts from happening and becoming the next news headline.

A counterpart to receiving information about an individual in need of intervention is the Behavioral Threat Assessment Team (BTAT). The BTAT is comprised of a team within the school that have the ability to use the received information effectively to make decisions about the level of possible threat from a student to the school and others. Not everyone will be a physical threat,

but may need assistance and intervention to provide them a healthy pathway to continue having a successful experience within the school environment. If there is evidence that a threat is real and/or imminent, the BTAT can immediately engage with local law enforcement to take the next step in that intervention process. Identification of behaviors leading toward the path to violence and providing intervention is a key strategy to school safety for both K-12 and higher education.

An important component to both school safety and behavioral threat assessment is having the ability to monitor and investigate online activity and social media accounts. Social media is a large part of current K-12 students' lives, and is where we can often learn of issues, behaviors, and possible clues that a student is in need of some form of intervention. Having staff members who know how and where to look for information online is essential to doing a more complete threat assessment, especially when many of the recent school shootings had information leaked online prior to the attacks.

A recent debate has surfaced regarding the value of the School Resource Officer (SRO). Having a school resource officer within the school is not equivalent to a security guard. Most schools will tell you the SRO has become an integral part of their school community. The benefit is that the SRO can be part of the above listed processes regarding identifying safety issues that need addressed within the school's physical environment, provide advice as to improvements of response procedures, be someone students and come to with concerns, be part of the BTAT, and, if a violent intruder does enter the school with harmful intent, the SRO can help stop those acts of violence.

Columbine in 1999 was an important event for the law enforcement community in that law enforcement learned waiting outside the school for specialized tactical teams and other officers is not an option, especially when the violent actors are still actively engaging and harming others. The next decade was spent training law enforcement to enter using small team tactics, generally a "rapid response" and / or a small team of officers. The latest model of defined law enforcement active threat response training is that a solo officer who arrives and receives information that there is an on-going event, will enter and immediately seek out that threat and stop their violent acts. As additional resources arrive, they should augment the solo officer in seeking out and stopping the threat.

Progress towards immediately stopping the threat is important, as every shot being fired is the possibility of a person being shot, injured, and/or a loss of life. In short, law enforcement's first order of business is to "stop the killing." Once law enforcement is able to locate and stop that threat, the next step is to "stop the dying." Law enforcement has learned to now switch gears and part of their job is to locate those in need and provide medical intervention (such as Stop the Bleed [STB]) by using tools such as tourniquets and pressure bandages. Law enforcement teams up with other first responders, including fire and EMS personnel, to engage in both STB and Rescue Task Force (RTF) concepts. In short, law enforcement locates injured victims, provides an area in which EMS or Fire can provide pre-hospital medical triage care to victims, and prioritizes those that need to be immediately transported.

In 2018, the Illinois Tactical Officer's Association (ITOA), in conjunction with support from several other agencies within Illinois, initiated the Active Threat Master Instructor Program. The intent of this program is to provide Illinois Law Enforcement agencies the ability to train key law enforcement instructors throughout the state to effectively respond to various events that include a threat of violence, including active assailant events. With key Active Threat Master Instructors throughout Illinois training other officers within their respective areas, Illinois law enforcement officers should be trained and able to effectively respond to any type of active threat with increased competence, thus saving lives in the process.

We have the pieces of the puzzle for success within the State of Illinois, but we, as the All Hazards Community, need to ensure that we are utilizing those pieces to the fullest extent. Update, train on, and validate annually what we have done the previous year. Acknowledge that safety within schools is dynamic, not static. Since roles within the All Hazards Community (including schools and Law Enforcement) constantly change due to new personnel, job changes, promotions, retirements, etc., it is imperative that, as those roles change, everyone becomes well versed in the safety responses and protocols and is able to implement them effectively. We have learned from past events. We can take those lessons and the resources at our disposal to limit school shootings in the future.

About the author: Jon Quast retired after 27 years of service as a Lieutenant with the Peoria County Sheriff's Office. He served on the Illinois Governor's School Safety Working Group, which provided a number of school safety recommendations for K-12 schools in Illinois. Jon has presented several times on school safety topics at the IEMA and IASB Conferences. He also works for the Mobile Training Unit 7 teaching police firearms courses and is now a hospital emergency manager.

Important resources and related newsletter articles:

- [Illinois School and Campus Safety Program](#)
- [Safe2Help Illinois](#)
- [Recommendations of the Illinois Terrorism Task Force School Safety Working Group](#)
- [Illinois Tactical Officers Association – Tactical Patrol Officer Program](#)
- [School Safety and Lessons from Rick Rescorla](#)
- [School Safety Drills, Why We Should Continue to Practice Them](#)
- [School Entries, the First Layer of Safety and Security](#)
- [Visitor Management in Schools](#)
- [Emergency Communications within Schools](#)
- [K-12 Classroom Doors: What We Need to Know](#)
- [Paying Attention to Both the Left and the Right of Bang](#)
- [The Importance of SROs](#)