

A Focus on School Safety

By the Kentucky Department of Education's Commissioner's Student Advisory Council

School shootings have made us painfully aware that our schools have been and may continue to be sites of violence. Although the actual number of primary victims (those killed and injured directly by school violence) has been small, the events have produced many witnesses and survivors who are known as secondary victims.

Our youth are increasingly exposed to the long-lasting and damaging effects caused by school violence. In 2022, there were at least 170 incidents of gunfire on school grounds, resulting in 55 deaths and 145 injuries nationally (Everytown Research and Policy, 2022a). Witnessing shootings, whether in their schools, their communities or their homes, can have a devastating impact. Children exposed to violence, crime, and abuse are more likely to abuse drugs and alcohol, suffer from depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorder, fail or have difficulties in school, and engage in criminal activity (Everytown Research and Policy, 2021). Members of the Commissioner's Student Advisory Council began to develop policy suggestions for school safety at their May 31, 2022 council meeting following the school shooting in Uvalde, Texas. Council members researched independently over the summer and started to work in small breakout groups in August to develop a list of recommendations to legislators and education stakeholders along three categories: before, during and after an incident.

Before an incident: What can we do now to prevent or minimize the chance of an event?

Recommendations for Before an Incident

1. Promote the STOP tipline. Ensure awareness of the STOP tipline.
2. Improve intervention rates. Improve the rate of intervention in concerning behaviors.
3. Support gun control. Promote and support gun legislation that would make it harder for an active shooter assailant incident to occur in the first place.

Ensure awareness of the stop tipline.

Kentucky Revised Statute 158.4451 details the STOP tipline, an anonymous reporting tool used in Kentucky schools, and how it operates. While the law states that the tipline must be available to schools, it does not specifically address students' awareness of the tipline. The Safe School Initiative, conducted by the Secret Service and U.S.

Department of Education, found that “most attackers engaged in some behavior prior to the incident that caused others concern or indicated a need for help” (2002). In 66% of cases studied, these behaviors were observed by students and/or staff, yet not reported. This shows that these behaviors were being recognized by peers, but other students chose to not report them. This could be attributed to fear, disbelief, or misjudgment of the attackers' communicated intent.

In 2021, the Secret Service published an analysis outlining plots against schools and suggested students are the best resource for identifying concerning behaviors in students. The report recommended schools ensure that student reporting is facilitated and encouraged. Solutions to promote awareness and use of the STOP tipline may include:

1. Reassuring students that no one will be punished for “overreacting” to a possibly threatening statement.
2. Sending out a letter or pamphlet to every student detailing the tipline at the beginning of the year.
3. Providing a short training to each student on recognition and reporting of concerning behaviors at the beginning of the year.

Improve the rate of intervention in concerning behaviors.

KRS 158.4451 does not detail the response to concerning behaviors reported to the STOP tipline. According to a 2019 report from the Secret Service, 80% of the attackers studied had experienced some form of bullying consistently. Of the bullied attackers, 34% had school officials that were aware of the bullying. In a few of these cases, there was no evidence that the school addressed the situation. Additionally, 71% of attackers received disciplinary action for a concerning behavior prior to their attack, but only 23% of those disciplined were referred to a team or mental health professional for an evaluation, an assessment, or support services (National Threat Assessment Center, 2019). Solutions to improve the rate of intervention in these situations include:

- 1) Requiring a response to every tipline report (even those deemed as a joke should be responded to so as to prevent frequent irresponsible usage);
- 2) Conducting a threat assessment on each student reported; and
- 3) Providing in-depth training for teachers on recognizing at-risk students.

Promote and/support gun control legislation that would make it harder for an active shooter/assailant incident to occur in the first place.

Currently, background checks must be performed for anyone purchasing a firearm from a federally licensed gun dealer. One way we can help improve the safety of purchasing firearms is by requiring mental health screenings for certain firearms. The further we

progress, the more we learn about the importance of mental health. When a firearm is given to someone mentally unfit, it can lead to tragic events like the incidents we have seen before. If we can make sure that a person is mentally sound and not considered a danger to others, we will be able to prevent future incidents. Statistics show that of the 37 mass shootings that have occurred between 1982 and 2019, 28 shooters that survived and went to trial were diagnosed with some type of mental illness (Cassata, 2021). If these individuals had received a mental health evaluation before they gained access to a gun, these events could potentially have been prevented.

During an incident: What can we do to ensure the best response when an event happens?

Recommendations for During an Incident

1. Active shooter drills. Improve the quality of active assailant drills and enforce existing requirements.
2. Improve training for first responders. Improve training for staff, school resource officers and all first responders to ensure quick response times.
3. Establish a clear notification system. Create a system to notify students and parents of an event.

Improve the quality of active assailant drills and enforce existing requirements.

The majority of active assailant drills performed by districts are ineffective and sometimes do more harm than good. According to Zullig (2020), 58% of youth reported that active shooter drills teach them what to do if such a situation presents itself, however they were uncertain of their ultimate benefit. Additionally, the drills they did receive caused emotional distress and about 60% reported feeling unsafe, scared, helpless, or sad as a result.

It is our recommendation that drills should act as a realistic simulation in order to best prepare students for an attack. These simulation drills should vary in intensity based on school levels (elementary, middle, high). The developmental level of the students involved should be taken into account, in order to avoid creating traumatic experiences for students and staff (Zullig, 2020). Students and staff should be informed in a schoolwide meeting that there will be a drill during the school day two weeks before in order to avoid unnecessary fear. However, they should not be informed of the time and location of drills as this could affect the drill's legitimacy. This meeting should also be open to parents/legal guardians.

The two-week window allows time for students to understand and review what will happen when the simulation occurs. It will also allow for guardians who feel their

students will not face this simulation well to send a request to have them not participate. The night before this drill is to happen the guardians of non-participating students will be notified to keep these students at home the next day. The day of the drill, school administration should do their best to enforce rules that would go into effect during an attack, possibly by disciplining students and staff who do not take drills seriously.

Administrators, staff, and school resource officers should assume the roles and responsibilities they would during an attack for them to be prepared, as well. Additionally, feedback from all stakeholder groups, including students and staff, should be obtained after exercises and drills to identify any remaining gaps in knowledge and skills and ascertain if participation caused any distress or other unintended consequences (Schonfeld, Melzer-Lange, Hashikawa, & Gorski, 2020).

As recommended by the Kentucky Department of Education's Active Shooter Drills resource guide (2020), it is important to heavily consider the use of simulated or dramatized effects such as fake bullets, actors, effects, etc., as there is no evidence such simulations enhance learning or preparedness, and they may raise anxiety. The resource guide also recommends clearly indicating this is a drill to distinguish a drill from an actual event but implementing realistic accommodations for staff and students with special needs. Lastly, make sure to include outdoor spaces, common areas and other facilities (not just classrooms), and meeting points in active shooter drills.

Improve training for staff, school resource officers and all first responders for a better understanding of an active assailant situation.

In order for a successful drill to occur, the staff, first responder teams, and school resource officers (SROs) need to know exactly what to do in the event that this situation becomes a reality. After the shooting in Uvalde, Texas it became apparent that the training of SROs, staff, and first responders is often lacking or needs improvement.

Training for active shooter events has become more prevalent since the Columbine massacre of 1999, but the actions of law enforcement in recent shootings, namely at Robb Elementary School in Texas and Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School in Florida, has proven that additional training is required for an effective response. Dedicated training centers exist in the United States, such as the Frank Deangelis Center for Community Safety in Wheat Ridge, Colorado. Their model is the most effective approach to dedicated training for first responders, SROs, law enforcement, and any other staff that may be involved in an active shooter situation.

Clear communication to students, staff and parents about the situation.

During a threat sometimes students do not understand the urgency of a situation well enough. If the situation is a drill, the administration and teachers mostly know about it. However, students are informed about drills and simulations in the same way. Emergency situations must have specific words such as “not a drill” or “real.” School

administrators should use the public announcement system to alert the entire building using clear language to let students, teachers, staff, and SROs know about the situation.

The current school safety legislation in Kentucky does not require a standard process for notifying those in the building. However, in order for the urgency of the situation to be felt this must be addressed. A key tool in an active shooter situation is communication. In addition to a code word to be said over the intercom to immediately let everyone in the building know that the lockdown is not a drill, a system for students, parents, and staff to get a notification with as many details as possible and instructions on how to proceed is also needed. Too often parents are seen attempting to run into the school itself during an incident or students are left not knowing what to do or where to go if they escape the building.

Fortunately, Kentucky currently utilizes a state-wide system called Infinite Campus where parents, students, and staff can receive notifications regarding attendance, academic performance and other school-related topics. All potentially affected parties could set up an Infinite Campus account at the beginning of the school year to receive emergency notifications. During a drill, the notification system could be used to send out that the school is currently having a lockdown drill. During the real event, a pre-written message could be sent to all parties detailing the instructions on how to proceed, such as providing instructions to parents on where to gather to receive information and pick up their student after a safety breach.

Students can use this notification to know where safe meeting places are set up to meet their parents, and staff can use the notification to know where to take their students. With these notifications, law enforcement and first responders can better focus on the actual situation rather than crowd control and missing students. However, the Infinite Campus system currently lacks the ability for students, school staff, and parents to communicate back with the school administration sending the emergency message. If we invested in a program that would allow for two-way communication, parents and students would be better supported in an emergent situation. As stated previously, a key tool in crisis response is communication, especially between students, parents, school staff and school administrators.

After an incident: If/When the next school shooting happens in Kentucky, how do we prepare to support that community?

Recommendations for After an Incident

1. Provide mental health support. Provide access to therapy sessions and other mental health professionals.
2. Host town-hall style meetings. Host town-hall style meetings for the community.
3. Repair and rebuild the school building.

Provide access to therapy sessions and other mental health supports.

School shootings leave behind a multitude of trauma for the victims and their families. According to the American Psychological Association, 28% of people who have witnessed a mass shooting develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and about a third develop acute stress disorder (Novotney, 2018). As schools reopen their doors following a traumatic event, students, teachers, and faculty often experience a sense of uneasiness and fear for the events that once occurred. Such traumatic stress can pose negative consequences on the learning environment and abilities of students.

While preventive measures are obviously the most effective at reducing the frequency of school shootings, we must face the realities of the aftermath of such tragedies. A school-based crisis intervention team needs to be in place to provide support and assistance to children in the aftermath of a crisis, including triage, short-term counseling, and referral to community services. After an incident, the number one priority is the mental health of the students, faculty, and staff. Even if the impacted school has a counselor, that individual would have experienced the trauma as well and might not be in the best position to counsel students. Bringing in outside mental health professionals with trauma training is what would be needed to ensure that every student who needs mental health supports will have access to those services. These professionals should be kept for the remainder of the school year, through the summer, and be available to students at all times without cost to the families.

Taking steps to ensure that the students feel safe when they ultimately come back into the school building is critical. This response may need to be tailored on an individual basis depending on what the students in that particular circumstance feel that they need. Additionally, the creation of support groups in the community may be needed. Students may feel more isolated due to experiencing a traumatic event and support groups may allow them to process and rely on others for help. Ultimately, after the situation happens, the main focus should be the immediate wellbeing of all members involved.

PTSD, depression, anxieties, grief, and much more can stem from experiencing a school shooting. Providing all staff members, and students with the opportunity to attend therapy sessions and have access to counselors is extremely important. Nearly one in four survivors of gun violence identified the need for additional counseling services. Gun violence survivors often reported needing counseling not just for the short-term but for longer-term care to be able to cope with the trauma from the experience. After the initial burst of support following a shooting, many struggle to access care (Everytown Research and Policy, 2022b).

Two evidence-based group treatments for trauma and traumatic loss are Bounce Back, for children in grades K-5, and Trauma and Grief Component Therapy (TGCT-A), for older children and teens. Bounce Back is a 10-session cognitive behavioral skills-based group intervention to teach elementary school children how to cope with and help recover from their traumatic experiences. TGCT-A is a manualized group or individual

treatment program for older kids and teens who have been exposed to trauma or are traumatically bereaved that can be implemented in a variety of service settings, including schools, community mental health centers, and clinics. Both treatments are currently being used in the Uvalde community as long-term tools and resources (DeAngelis, 2022).

Exposure to media should be kept to a minimum. Oftentimes, seeing and hearing reports of the tragedy is a catalyst for survivors to relive the incident over and over. It is also very frustrating for survivors and families when distant media figures warp and misinterpret the event to fit an agenda or push a certain narrative. Similarly, maintaining long-term support is key when feelings of lower self-value emerge as a result of decreased media coverage as society begins to forget about the tragedy.

Creating resource rooms or calming spaces for students and staff to use if they are feeling dysregulated, activated, or traumatized can provide important opportunities for processing. Schools can also promote the use of Family Resource and Youth Service Centers as a place for students to talk to a trusted adult or access things they may need, like mental health referrals. Some exist in schools but are underutilized by students.

The trauma experienced after a school shooting remains with students throughout their entire life. As such, policies should consider the residual effects of school shootings on student grades, achievement, and attendance. For example, schools can exempt final exams or produce a plan to retain the grade prior to the traumatic experience. By adapting to the emotions of students, schools can ensure the success of student achievement, while not forcing students to stress about both grades and the school shooting. Through this act, students will be less pressured with assignments in order to focus on recovering from the trauma.

Host town-hall style meetings for the community.

After a traumatic experience such as a school shooting the main focus should be the wellbeing of all involved, including families. Experts recommend local specialists build up a sense of community by encouraging open community, student-led vigils, support groups, and town hall and school board meetings in order to let families express their mourning and emotions (Iancu et al., 2019). There is an emphasis on local specialists because they know best how the community feels. Local counselors, mental health professionals, and leaders of faith-based organizations should be trained, in advance if funds allow, on trauma counseling. This counseling should be state subsidized if need be and funding may be awarded by the U.S. Justice Department's Office for Victims of Crime's Crime Victim Fund. It is important to emphasize that support is available, even if families and survivors don't take it. The overall objective is to promote connections and collective healing.

Not only do students, staff, and families have to deal with the mental aftermath of a school shooting, but there are financial burdens as well. As the community tries to

rebuild itself, donations are extremely important in funding funerals, vigils, and other relief services for those involved. Hosting educational town hall-style meetings for parents and caregivers to help them understand their children's potential reactions and behaviors over the coming months and how to help these youngsters integrate back into school is currently being implemented in Uvalde. Training volunteer clinicians is critical because many have not worked in such intense settings before (Novotney, 2018). Besides making sure these clinicians understand trauma and grief-informed best practices, the training will include information on how to prevent secondary traumatic stress and compassion fatigue among mental health providers. Holding community group therapy sessions might be something to consider as well. Being able to connect with those who have been through similar experiences is essential to healing. At these group sessions, information on helping family members and other resources can be shared.

Repair and rebuild the school building.

Environment can be very triggering to those involved in the shooting. Returning to school is already very tough but being constantly reminded of the events that took place just by looking around is even harder. Changing the environment, visually, and implementing more security aspects can make students and staff feel safer in school.

To prepare such means of support, the state should create some sort of emergency fund to help the community involved. Local leaders/organizations should create an online funding page so that outsiders and the larger community can donate and help survivors and families. Immediately after such an event, individuals across the nation often feel called to help in any way possible. A fund can help pay for counseling, food, shelter, improvement of school security and infrastructure, and other vital services.

Other than an emergency fund, it is very important for those involved to feel supported by the state and surrounding communities, not belittled. The state, and those who represent it, should be active and involved in helping and supporting the community. Whether that includes reaching out to some people who were involved, or personally attending community events, it is refreshing to know that the issue is being taken seriously and the voices that are meant to represent students and staff are doing all they can.

It should also be taken into consideration that after the incident, active shooter drills will still be required to ensure student safety. Although they are necessary, active shooter drills could be an incredibly triggering event for students that have experienced the significant trauma of a shooting. To help these drills be as efficient as possible for students and staff, they must be redesigned.

Each teacher should be informed when the drill will be taking place at least two weeks in advance. This will give the teachers time to process what will be happening and prepare themselves for the event. It will also give the teachers time to think about how they can best support their students during the drill. The students should also be informed beforehand to ensure that they are mentally equipped for the drill. This will also allow time for students to reach out for help if they feel they are not properly prepared or wish to opt out of the drill.

Helping Students After a School Shooting

By the American School Counselor Association, 2022

1. Try and keep routines as normal as possible. Kids gain security from the predictability of routine, including attending school.
2. Limit exposure to television and the news.
3. Be honest with kids and share with them as much information as they are developmentally able to handle.
4. Listen to kids' fears and concerns.
5. Reassure kids that the world is a good place to be, but that there are people who do bad things.
6. Families and adults need to first deal with and assess their own responses to crisis and stress.
7. Rebuild and reaffirm attachments and relationships.

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2022-2023 Commissioner's Student Advisory Council

The Commissioner's Student Advisory Council was created to advise the Commissioner of Education on issues relevant to high school students across the Commonwealth. This group meets monthly with the commissioner and Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) staff, both in person and virtually, to discuss how decisions made at the state level are affecting students and schools throughout Kentucky.

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