

School safety – can we learn from the past?

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At the end of 2001, I received a grant from the Catholic Education Office in Canberra that allowed me to visit the United Kingdom to study school security. My school at the time had a significant enrolment of children of international diplomats, and the issues of security were prominent in the minds of many parents so soon after September 11 that year. I looked for answers to their concerns and finally settled on the UK because of the incredible tragedy that had occurred in Dunblane, Scotland, six years earlier. I wanted to see how the British Isles had responded to one of the greatest educational disasters of all time.

You might remember that in March 1996, a heavily armed Thomas W Hamilton, an out-of-work former shopkeeper, entered Dunblane Primary School and started a shooting spree, firing his weapons over 100 times. Starting in the gym, he first targeted the three adults, killing one and wounding the others, and then attacked the children, leaving 15 children dead. He then

moved outside where he killed another student and wounded other children and staff members, before killing himself. On that peaceful March morning, Hamilton sent through all schools a shock wave that still reverberates today.

My brief study revealed many things but more than anything it aroused in me a sense of the utter helplessness of any educator when under gunfire. Dunblane is not the only scene of such a tragedy but it remains the best known, perhaps because of the scope of the tragedy and also perhaps because the children were so young – they were five and six year olds. In a country that justly prides itself on its advanced civilisation, it is hard to think of a more harrowing fate than the one that befell this beautiful cathedral city not far from both Glasgow and Edinburgh.

In modern history, massacres have occurred in educational institutions in many countries, usually involving a single perpetrator armed with guns. Australia has been relatively free

of such incidents, recording shootings in two Victorian universities but none in schools. Sadly, this doesn't mean that we are immune from such events in the future. The Australian media responsibly play down such events to dissuade copycat killings, and this attitude is to be lauded. However, even more powerful than media restraint is the importance of taking preventative steps to avoid such tragic events.

Attitudinal change needed

If you were reliably informed that you were going to have a car smash on the way to work tomorrow, I imagine you would drive more carefully than usual. The problem is that we never get that sort of warning, and sometimes our driving habits are more reckless than they should be. The same might be true of the way we view safety in our schools.

In that regard, it is possible to learn some lessons from Dunblane. We need to ask ourselves: how safe are our schools? This might

seem to some to be an over-reaction, but I wonder if that view would be shared by the families of the 18 killed in a school shooting in Texas five years ago, or the 18 killed in Erfurt in Germany in 2002, or the 14 victims of the Montreal Massacre in 1989.

I am certainly not suggesting that we rush out and build high protective fences, capped with razor wire, with perhaps an odd guard tower or two, to protect our students, but I do think that we need to abandon the blasé attitude that says “It will never happen here.” As I wandered through the peaceful streets of Dunblane, I couldn’t imagine a more peaceful setting; it didn’t strike me as a place where fears of a student massacre would have surfaced in the mind of any normal citizen.

The best form of protection is surely an increased awareness of possible dangers and a determination to respond appropriately to these. If you have a river running past your school, you need to be conscious of the dangers and then decide to obviate these – perhaps by erecting a safety fence or by having an enforced safety zone that the students must not violate, thus keeping them away from danger. If you are in an area where predators could lurk – and it is hard today to find a place where they don’t – you need to be aware of this without, of course, becoming obsessive.

We have to walk the fine line between paranoia and responsibility. We don’t want to turn our schools into fortresses – as has happened in some overseas countries – and we would all prefer a more laid-back, easy going attitude where everyone is welcome in our schools. Sadly, modern reality calls for a strategy somewhere between these two mind-sets. This is one of the modern faces of duty of care.

There are some steps that we need to take to ensure that our safety provisions are adequate to cope with the possible threat of a predator in our school. These steps are not unrealistic, but they do reflect the real experiences that some schools have taken and that have already proved their value.

List the stakeholders

Three groups need to be considered – staff, students and parents – as each of these will influence the success of any plan to make our schools safer. Each of them may need to change their paradigm about safety, with more emphasis on the protection of all concerned and a willingness to undergo minor inconveniences in order to achieve this security. Some of the following points apply to each of the three groups, while others relate to one or two groups.

Explain your reasons

Most parents assume their children will be safe in school, just as they were, a generation ago. They know about the threats of bullying, and many are also trying to get their heads around cyber-bullying, but the idea that their children will be under threat from unwelcome visitors

does not occur to most of them. It is therefore very important to explain, simply and without causing undue anxiety, that the new measures are being taken to ensure that an unlikely but still possible event has been considered.

Develop awareness

Help everyone to understand that school security is a shared responsibility. In one school that I visited, all external doors could be opened only with a key, thus keeping out intruders. Sadly, on the day I was visiting, a teacher had left her key in her handbag but needed to get to the library outside the main building and then back to her class at the far end of the school; she used her initiative and kept the security door ajar by wedging a book in the opening. Too bad for her that her security-negating strategy was witnessed by her principal and an Australian visitor!

I saw other breaches like that in a very small number of schools, and I suspect that it was complacency, rather than rebellion, that caused such lapses.

Establish and enforce identification processes

Staff name badges and ID badges for visitors are very common these days but unless everyone is expected to wear them, they are useless. It is fine to say that everyone knows the staff, but this is not necessarily true, especially in a large school or in a school with a large age range (e.g., P–12). Everyone should know that adults in a school are entitled to be there – and the badge says just that. It is useless to ask parents to pick up and wear the badges if you are not going to challenge every person in the school who fails to wear one. A few words is all that you need to remind people that you take safety seriously.

For visitors, it is important to have a control system so that they don’t walk out of the school with your official badges. As a minimum, visitors should sign for the numbered badges so that you can chase them up. This might seem cumbersome at first, but parents are usually grateful to know that their children’s safety is being protected, and they usually fall into line readily.

Watch for common lapses

Systems often come undone during peak periods. For example, if you have a sign-in/ sign-out system, where people coming into your school write their name and the time in a book, this process can become very burdensome when there are a lot of parents coming in at once – such as for a school assembly. However, it is at times like this that extra care is needed, because these are the times when a stranger is less noticeable in a school. Perhaps the answer is to have several different sheets all being completed at once – as often happens at large funerals – but the point is that you don’t dispense with procedures just because they cause a little inconvenience.

One might well ask whether any lives have been saved or any gunmen thwarted by a

protocol that insists that visitors call to the front office before going into a school. Possibly the answer is No. However, it is equally reasonable to suggest that some would-be mass murderer might have been deterred by recognising that a particular site was security-conscious. Why risk their own safety when there are other places to practise their butchery – don’t bother with those places that have personal security on the agenda.

Build on existing structures

When schools started to employ lock-down systems, they often used the same procedures they used to warn people of a fire drill. If your fire alert system was three short blasts on a hooter, you might use a similar code – perhaps a continuous 10 second blast – to signal *lock down*. On hearing this signal, teachers would be alerted to lock doors, pull blinds, and advise the students to take up the appropriate position. (Some schools get their pupils to sit on the floor around the room, others to gather near the back of the room and so on.)

Other existing policies will also be used: rolls will be called in the usual manner, to ensure that you have everyone present; students will be instructed to keep their mobiles turned off (you don’t want to cause a panic outside the school!); students outside their normal classroom will move in accordance with preset rules, just as they do in a fire drill. One major difference, however, relates to the way we communicate with the school office: do not send a child with the message. If there is no intercom, use an adult to alert the administration about a perceived threat.

This link with normal safety procedures should be maintained when introducing any new security system – and this means that the concepts (though usually not the details) will be shared with parents at meetings or through newsletters. This is how you avoid anxiety-causing revelations around the dinner table the first time you set up a new system. Keep all stakeholders informed, and that means all staff (don’t forget the casuals), students and parents or carers. Hopefully, your education system might have a policy that you can easily follow.

Safety is your goal

There are many lessons to be learned from schools around the world. Some of these are positive, others less so. The lessons about student safety can be garnered from the experiences of those schools that have faced disasters. From their pain, we can learn how to improve our own performance, and thus avoid repeating the disasters that send chills down our spine. Surely we owe this much to those in our care. **ET**



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