

***School Violence:  
“Are You Ready?”***

This document addresses three facets of the school violence issue

- Notes from a recent conference conducted by Dr. John Dudley.<sup>1</sup>
- Notes from an article related to violent offender profiles.
- Excerpts from an article related to early and imminent warnings of school violence events.

**Random thoughts and observations from the most preeminent national authority on school violence/shootings:**

**“Extensive loss protocols are always preceded by extensive loss.”**

According to Dr. Dudley we **must** be more proactive as educators.

One watchdog organization, The Bully Police U.S.A. (<http://www.bullypolice.org>), ranks states on the basis of effective anti-bullying laws. Kansas has received a grade of “F” ([http://www.bullypolice.org/ks\\_law.html](http://www.bullypolice.org/ks_law.html)).

**“Security is inconvenient.”**

Just ask those that travel via the airlines frequently. However, lessons learned from school violence events over the last 10 years tell us that a pound of prevention is worth an ounce of cure.

**“After intensive interviews with perpetrators that survived and were imprisoned a common theme of inequity emerged.”**

Time after time the offenders repeated the theme that their reality was that school rules existed for some but not for all, this lead to disenfranchisement and disaffection.

**The most dangerous intruders in a building are non-custodial parents.**

Each year there are 200,000 attempts of this form of abduction.

**Lesson learned from school violence events:**

- **Most school shootings last about 2 minutes.** Rapid response (RAID- Rapid and Immediate Deployment) is more effective than tactical response (SWAT Teams) in active violence events. Much criticism was leveled at the Jefferson County (Littleton/Columbine) Sheriff’s Department for a slow reaction. Law enforcement is now trained to deploy immediately in a diamond formation and seek out and “resolve” the problem.
- **Good communication saves lives.** At the Littleton event 5 different law enforcement agencies converged on the scene and none of them could

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Dr. John Dudley, *Are You Ready? Addressing School Safety and Security*; Jones Institute, Emporia State University, 2007, [www.schoolcrisis.org](http://www.schoolcrisis.org)

communicate with each other. As a result common communication links between agencies have been developed.

This issue of effective communication correlates to educational planning as well. For example we've learned that classroom phones need to have the **exact** procedure for dialing 9-1-1 on them; including the number necessary to connect to an outside line. Another example is for LEA's to provide **all** law enforcement agencies updated maps of facilities; with all of the new construction schools have initiated many responding agencies would not be familiar with the building layout.

Perhaps just as importantly, crisis plans need to be developed based on relevance and timeliness (plans must be meaningful to participants). Each staff member must be trained and drilled in exactly what is expected of them and instructions should be printed in short specific terms and **large font**. Studies indicate that 90% of training will be lost on participants during real crisis.

An interesting study note from Littleton was that of all the cell phone calls made during the crisis 70% were made to 9-1-1; 30% were made to the media. Asked why they called the media the primary reason given was that students received "free cell minutes" if they reported a crime.

- **Crisis creates chaos.** Several examples illustrate this point; let's look at the Jonesboro, Ark. event. Two facts placed more people in harms way than would have otherwise occurred. First, in order to obtain targets for their attack one of the shooters ran inside the building and pulled a fire alarm, thus creating a steady flow of targets from the building. To compound the situation the doors automatically locked after a predetermined amount of time, thus depriving the students/teachers an opportunity to seek shelter (**reverse evacuation**). This reverse evacuation planning has saved lives as a result of drive-by shootings in Florida and California.

Secondly, word spreads very quickly and parents respond immediately. Perimeters don't work and rural areas represent the greatest risk. In Jonesboro as 90 shots rang out and 14 victims fell the traffic backup was so snarled that the closest an emergency vehicle could get to the scene was 1/3 of a mile (300 yards).

As such parent re-unification plans and alternate sites must be written into any crisis plan.

- **Never call off activities.** For years psychologists have pleaded with schools to be careful of memorials and funerals in school buildings because many children will always associate the loss with the location. Although appropriate means of bereavement need to be made available schools must realize that schools need to return to a safe and "normal" place as soon as possible. Studies of school violence now teach us that many of the shooters associate memorializing with the

previously mentioned inequity issue. A recent hostage negotiation situation in Tennessee illustrates this point. The juvenile offender was embittered because the untimely death of a star athlete had been memorialized while the death of a marginal student had not. This was interpreted as labeling one death appropriate and the other not.

**Researchers from the Secret Service (*Safe School Initiative*) have completed a detailed analysis of 37 school shootings. Here are some of the findings<sup>2</sup>:**

- **Planning.** They don't "snap." The attacks were neither spontaneous nor impulsive. In almost all cases the attacker developed the idea well in advance. Half considered the attack for at least two weeks and had a plan for at least two days. Two years before the Littleton event Dylan Klebold wrote in his journal, "I'll go on my killing spree against anyone I want." One student showed his friends four bullets; three for people he hated and one for himself. And that's just the way he used them.
- **Concern.** Almost all attackers had come to the attention of someone (school officials, police, fellow students) for disturbing behavior. One student worried his friends by talking often of putting rat poison in the cheese shakers at a pizza restaurant. Others wrote poems about homicide and suicide.

Adults didn't investigate, remaining unaware of the depth of the problem. Few of the boys had close relationships with adults. Few participated in organized activities and most often the likely original targets were girls.

Before Littleton, the local Sheriff had been given copies of Eric Harris' web site, describing his pipe bombs, with page after page of threats: "You all better f----- hide in your houses because I'm comin for EVERYONE soon, and I WILL be armed to the f----- teeth and I WILL shoot to kill and I WILL F----KILL EVERYTHING."

- **Communication.** They aren't "loners." In more than three fourths of the cases, the attacker told someone about his interest in mounting an attack at school. In more than half of the incidents, the attacker told more than one person. Some people knew detailed information, while others knew something "spectacular" was going to happen on a particular date. These communications were usually with friends or schoolmates; in only two cases was the confidant an adult. In less than one-fourth of the cases did the attacker make a direct threat to the target. "I'm going to kill her sometime today or tomorrow," a student warned.
- **Bystanders.** Those who knew in advance of the attack sometimes encouraged the attack and sometimes urged an escalation of the plan, but only rarely told anyone

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<sup>2</sup> Adapted from a *Chicago Sun-Times* article provided by Dr. Dudley.

or shared their concerns with others before the attack. In about one-third of the cases, the attack was influenced or dared by others or a group. A friend of Harris asked him what he was going to do with bomb-making equipment. "He said he was going to blow up the school." A friend of one shooter was told what would happen. "I was his friend. Calling someone would have been a betrayal. It just didn't seem right to tell."

- **Mental Illness.** Few shooters have been diagnosed with a mental illness, or had histories of drug or alcohol abuse. **But more than half had a history of feeling extremely depressed or desperate.** About three-fourths threatened to kill themselves, made suicidal gestures or tried to kill themselves before the attack. Six killed themselves during the attack. Luke Woldham's journal: "I am not insane. I am angry. I am not spoiled or lazy, for murder is not weak and slow-witted, murder is gutsy and daring... I killed because people like me are mistreated every day...I am malicious because I am miserable."

Woodham says now, "I didn't really see my life going on any further. I thought it was all over with...I couldn't find a reason not to do it."

- **Motives.** Many shooters had more than one motive. The most frequent motivation was revenge. More than three-fourths were known to hold a grievance, real or imagined, against the target and/or others. In most cases, this was the first violent act against the target. In his journal, Kip Kinkel of Springfield Ore., wrote, "Hate drives me...I am so full of rage...Everyone is against me...As soon as my hope is gone, people die." Eric Houston wrote:"My HATEtrid tord humanity forced me to do what I did...I know parenting had nothing to do with what happens today. It seems my sanity has slipped away and evil taken it's place...And if I die today please bury me somewhere beautiful."
- **Problem Solving.** Many saw the attack as a way to solve a problem. **Bullying was common.** Two-thirds of the attackers felt persecuted, bullied or threatened-not teasing but torment. Other problems they were trying to solve: a lost love, an expulsion or suspension, even a parent planning to move the family. Loukaitis: "Some day people are going to regret teasing me." "I just remember life not being much fun," a shooter recalls. "Reject, retard, loser." I remember 'stick boy' a lot; because I was so thin." Houston: "Maybe to open up somebody's eyes to see some of the stuff that goes on...of how the school works, and make them understand a little bit some of the stuff I went through."
- **Stress.** In more than three-fourths of the incidents, the attackers had difficulty in coping with a major change in a significant relationship or loss of status, such as a lost love or a humiliating failure. Woodham: "I actually had somebody I loved and somebody loved me for the first time in my life, the only time in my life. And

then she just, all of a sudden one day she broke up with me and I was devastated, I was going to kill myself.”

- **Targets.** These weren't rampage killers. Many of the killers made lists of targets, even testing different permutations of the order of the killing. Students, principals, and teachers- all could be targets. In about half of the cases, the actions appeared designed to maximize the number of victims. Scott Pennington said he did not dislike his English teacher, Deanna McDavid, whom he killed in Grayson, Ky. His writings had concerned her; she shared her concerns with the school board, which told her it was his family's responsibility to get him help.
- **Violence.** Most were not bullies, were not frequently in fights, were not victims of violence, had not harmed animals. Six in ten showed interest in violent video themes in media, games, or, more frequently, their own writings. Scott Pennington said he read Stephen King's "Rage," about a school murder, after his violent act, not before as has been reported.
- **Weapons.** Getting weapons was easy. Most of the attackers were able to take guns from their homes or friends, buy them (legally or illegally), or steal them. Some received them as gifts from parents. More than half had a history of gun use, although most did not have a "fascination" with weapons. "F---- you Brady." Eric Harris wrote in his journal about the Brady gun bill. "All I want is a couple of guns and thanks to your f--- bill I will probably not get any! Come on, I'll have a clean record and I only want them for personal protection. It's not like I'm some psycho who would go on a shooting spree."
- **Police.** Most incidents were brief. Almost two-thirds of the attacks were resolved before police arrived. The attacker was stopped by a student or staff member, decided to stop on his own, or killed himself. SWAT teams would not have helped. In only three cases did police discharge their weapons.

## **Familiarize Yourself With The Early Warning Signs Of School Violence<sup>3</sup>**

### **Principles for Identifying the Early Warning Signs of School Violence**

Educators and families can increase their ability to recognize early warning signs by establishing close, caring and supportive relationships with children and youth, getting to know them well enough to be aware of their needs, feelings, attitudes, and behavior patterns.

*Unfortunately there is a real danger that early warning signs will be misinterpreted.*

Educators and parents and in some cases students can ensure that the early warning signs

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<sup>3</sup> Adapted from *Early Warning, Timely Response*, USDE, 1998.

are not misread by using several significant principles to better understand them. These principles include:

- **Do no harm.** There are certain risks associated with using early warning signs to identify children who are troubled. First and foremost, the intent should be to get help for a child early. The early warning signs should not be used as rationale to exclude, isolate, or punish a child. Nor should it be used as a checklist for formally identifying, mislabeling, or stereotyping children. Formal disability identification under federal law requires individualized evaluation by qualified professionals. In addition, all referrals to outside agencies based on the early warning signs must be kept confidential and must be done with parental consent (except referrals for suspected child abuse and neglect).
- **Understand violence and aggression within a context.** Violence is contextual. Violent and aggressive behavior as an expression of emotion may have many antecedent factors, factors that exist within the school, the home, and the larger social environment. *In fact, for those children who are at risk for aggression and violence, certain environments and/or situations can set it off. Some children act out if stress becomes too great, if they lack positive coping skills and if they've learned to react with aggression.*
- **Avoid stereotypes.** Stereotypes can interfere with and even harm the school community's ability to identify and help children. It is important to be aware of false cues including race, socioeconomic status, cognitive or academic ability, or physical appearance. *In fact, such stereotypes can harm children, especially when the school community acts upon them.*
- **View warning signs within a developmental context.** Children and youth at different levels of development have varying social and emotional capabilities. They may express their needs differently in elementary, middle, and high school. *The point is to know what is developmentally typical behavior, so that behaviors won't be misinterpreted.*
- **Understand that children typically exhibit multiple warning signs.** It is common for children who are troubled to exhibit multiple warning signs. *Research confirms that most children who are troubled and at risk for aggression exhibit more than one warning sign, repeatedly, and with increasing intensity over time. Thus it is important not to overreact to single signs, words or actions.*

## Early Warning Signs

It is not always possible to predict behavior that leads to violence. However, educators and parents and sometimes students can recognize certain early warning signs. In some situations and for some youth, different combination of events, behaviors, and emotions may lead to aggressive rage or violent behavior toward self or others. *A good rule of thumb is to assume that these early warning signs, especially when they are presented in*

*combination, indicate a need for further analysis to determine an appropriate intervention.*

*We know from research that most children who become violent toward self or others feel rejected and psychologically rejected and psychologically victimized. In most cases, children exhibit aggressive behavior early in life and, if not provided support, will continue a progressive developmental pattern toward a severe aggression or violence. However, research also shows that when children have a positive, meaningful connection to an adult whether it is at home, in school or in the community the potential for violence is reduced significantly.*

***The following early warning signs are presented with the following qualifications: They are not equally significant and they are not presented in order of seriousness. The early warning signs include:***

- **Social withdrawal.** In some situations, gradual and eventually complete withdrawal from social contacts can be an important indicator of a troubled child. The withdrawal often stems from feelings of depression, rejection, persecution, unworthiness, and lack of confidence.
- **Excessive feelings of isolation and being alone.** Research has shown that the majority of children who are isolated and appear to be friendless are not violent. In fact, these feelings are sometimes characteristic of children who may be troubled, withdrawn, or have internal issues that hinder social affiliations. However, research also has shown that in some cases feelings of isolation and not having friends are associated with children who behave aggressively and violently.
- **Excessive feelings of rejection.** In the process of growing up, and in the course of adolescent development, many young people experience emotionally painful rejection. Children who are troubled often are isolated from their mentally healthy peers. Their responses to rejection will depend on many background factors. Without support, they may be at risk of expressing their emotional distress in negative ways including violence. Some aggressive children seek out aggressive friends, who, in turn, reinforce their violent tendencies.
- **Being a victim of violence.** Children who have been victims of violence including physical or sexual abuse in the community, at school, or at home are sometimes at risk themselves of becoming violent toward themselves or others.
- **Feelings of being picked on and/or persecuted.** The youth who feels constantly picked on, teased, bullied, singled out for ridicule, and humiliated at home or at school may initially withdraw socially. *If not given adequate support in addressing these feelings, some children may vent them in inappropriate ways including possible aggression and violence.*

- **Low school interest and poor academic performance.** Poor achievement can be the result of many factors. It is important to consider whether there is a drastic change in performance and/or performance becomes a chronic condition that limits the child's capacity to learn. In some cases, such as when the low achiever feels frustrated, unworthy, chastised, and denigrated acting out and aggressive behaviors may occur. It is important to assess the emotional and cognitive reasons for the academic performance change to determine the root cause(s) of the problem.
- **Expression of violence in writings and drawings.** Children and youth often express their thoughts, feelings, desires, and intentions in their drawings and in stories, poetry, and other written expressive forms. Many children produce work about violent themes that for the most part is harmless when taken in context. However, an overrepresentation of violence in writings and drawings that is directed at specific individuals (family members, peers, other adults) consistently over time may signal emotional problems and the potential for violence. Because there is a real danger in misdiagnosing such a sign, it is important to seek the guidance of a qualified professional such as a school psychologist, counselor or other mental health specialist to determine its meaning.
- **Uncontrolled anger.** Everyone gets angry, anger is a natural emotion. However, anger that is expressed frequently and intensely in response to minor irritants may signal potential violent behavior toward self and/or others.
- **Patterns of impulsive hitting and chronic hitting, intimidating, and bullying behaviors.** Children often engage in acts of shoving and mild aggression. However, some mildly aggressive behaviors such as constant hitting and bullying of others that occur in children's lives, if left unattended, might later escalate into more serious behaviors.
- **History of discipline problems.** Chronic behavior and disciplinary problems both in school and at home may suggest that underlying emotional needs are not being met. These unmet needs may be manifested in acting out and aggressive behaviors. These problems may set the stage for the child to violate norms and rules, defy authority, disengage from school and engage in aggressive behaviors with other children and adults.
- **Past history of violent and aggressive behavior.** Unless provided with support and counseling, a youth who has a history of aggressive and violent behavior is likely to repeat those behaviors. Aggressive and violent acts may be directed toward other individuals, be expressed in cruelty to animals, or include fire setting. Youth who show an early pattern of antisocial behavior frequently and across multiple settings are particularly at risk for future aggressive and antisocial behavior. Similarly, youth who engage in overt behaviors such as bullying, generalized aggression and defiance, and covert behaviors such as stealing, vandalism, lying, cheating, and fire setting also are at risk for more serious

aggressive behaviors. Research suggests that age of onset may be a key factor in interpreting early warning signs. For example, children who engage in aggression and drug abuse at an early age (before 12) are more likely to show violence later on than children who begin such behavior at an older age. In the presence of such signs it is important to review the child's history with behavioral experts and seek parent's observations and insights.

- **Intolerance for differences and prejudicial attitudes.** All children have likes and dislikes. However, an intense prejudice toward others based on racial, ethnic, religious, language, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and physical appearance when coupled with other factors may lead to assaults against those who are perceived to be different. Membership in hate groups or the willingness to victimize individuals with disabilities or health problems also should be treated as early warning signs.
- **Drug use and alcohol use.** Apart from being unhealthy behaviors, drug use and alcohol use reduces self-control and exposes children and youth to violence, either as perpetrators, as victims, or both.
- **Affiliation with gangs.** Gangs that support anti-social values and behaviors including extortion, intimidation, and acts of violence toward other students cause fear and stress among other students. Youth who are influenced by these groups, those who emulate and copy their behavior, as well as those who become affiliated with them may adopt values and act in violent or aggressive ways in certain situations. Gang-related violence and turf battles are common occurrences tied to the use of drugs that often result in injury and/or death.
- **Inappropriate access to, possession of, and use of firearms.** Children and youth who inappropriately possess or have access to firearms can have increased risk for violence. Research shows that such youngsters also have a higher probability of becoming victims. Families can reduce inappropriate access and use by restricting, monitoring, and supervising children's access to firearms and other weapons. Children who have a history of aggression, impulsiveness or other emotional problems should not have access to firearms and other weapons.
- **Serious threats of violence.** Idle threats are a common response to frustration. Alternatively, one of the most reliable indicators that a youth is likely to commit a dangerous act toward self or others is a detailed and specific threat to use violence. Recent indicators across the country clearly indicate that threats to commit violence against oneself or others should be taken very seriously. Steps must be taken to understand the nature of these threats and to prevent them from being carried out.

## **Identifying and Responding to Imminent Warning Signs**

Unlike early warning signs, imminent warning signs indicate that a student is very close to behaving in a way that is potentially dangerous to self and/or others. Imminent warning signs require an immediate response. No single warning sign can predict that a dangerous act will occur. Rather, imminent warning signs usually are presented as a sequence of overt, serious, hostile behaviors or threats directed at peers, staff, or other individuals. Usually, imminent warning signs are evident to more than one staff member as well as to the child's family.

### **Imminent Warning Signs May Include:**

- **Serious physical fighting with peers or family members.**
- **Severe destruction of property.**
- **Severe rage for seemingly minor reasons.**
- **Detailed threats of lethal violence.**
- **Possession and/or use of firearms and other weapons.**
- **Other self-injurious behaviors or threats of suicide**

When warning signs indicate that danger is imminent, safety must always be the first and foremost consideration. Action must be taken immediately. Immediate intervention by school authorities and possibly law enforcement officers is needed when a child:

- Has presented a detailed plan (time, place, method) to harm or kill others particularly if the child has a history of aggression or has attempted to carry out threats in the past.
- Is carrying a weapon, particularly a firearm, and has threatened to use it.

In situations where students present other threatening behaviors, parents should be informed of the concerns immediately. Schools communities also have the responsibility to seek assistance from appropriate agencies, such as child and family services and community mental health. These responses should reflect school board policies and be consistent with the violence prevention and response plan.

### **Using Early Warning Signs To Shape Intervention Practices**

An early warning sign is not a predictor that a child or youth will commit a violent act toward self or others. Effective schools recognize the potential in every child to overcome difficult experiences and to control negative emotions. Adults in these school communities use their knowledge of early warning signs to address problems before they escalate into violence. Effective school communities support staff, students and families in understanding the early warning signs. Support strategies include having:

- School Board policies in place that support training and ongoing consultation. The entire school community knows how to identify early warning signs, and understands the principles that support them.

- School leaders encourage others to raise concerns about observed early warning signs and to report all observations of imminent warning signs immediately.
- Easy access to a team of specialists trained in evaluating and addressing serious behavioral and academic concerns.

Each school community should develop a procedure that students and staff can follow when reporting their concerns about a child who exhibits early warning signs. For example, in many schools the principal is the first point of contact. In many cases that do not pose imminent danger, the principal contacts a school psychologist or other qualified professional, who takes responsibility for addressing the concern immediately. If the concern is determined to be serious but not pose a threat of imminent danger the child's family should be contacted. The family should be consulted before implementing any interventions with the child. In cases where school-based contextual factors are determined to be causing or exacerbating the child's troubling behavior, the school should act quickly to modify them.

It is often difficult to acknowledge that a child is troubled. Everyone including administrators, families, teachers, school staff, students, and community members may find it too troubling sometimes to admit that a child close to them needs help. When faced with resistance or denial, school communities must persist to ensure that children get the help they need.

Understanding early and imminent warning signs are an essential step in ensuring a safe school. The next step involves supporting the emotional and behavioral adjustment of children.

Excerpted from *Early Warning, Timely Response: A Guide to safe Schools* published by the U.S. Department of education as a public domain document.

This guide was produced by the center for Effective Collaboration and practice of the American Institutes for research in collaboration with the national Association of School Psychologists, under a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, Office of Special Education Programs. Copies can be ordered from USDE by calling 1-877-433-7827 or e-mailing: [edpuborders@aspensys.com](mailto:edpuborders@aspensys.com).