

Security Steps Said to Avert More Deaths at Conn. School

Experts warn against knee-jerk changes elsewhere

By **Nirvi Shah**

By nearly all accounts, the administrators, teachers, and students at Sandy Hook elementary did everything right Friday—and long before that day—when a young man armed with powerful weapons **blasted his way into the school with gunfire**.

A school security system delayed the shooter, at least by a few seconds, from just walking through the front door. A secretary switched on the Newtown, Conn., school's public address system as shots rang out, alerting the entire school that something was amiss without saying a word. Teachers and other school employees quickly herded students into closets, kept them quiet, and locked their doors while the principal and school psychologist tried to act as human shields.

"At Sandy Hook, a number of things went very well," said Ronald Stephens, the executive director of the **National School Safety Center**, an advocacy and advisory group in Westlake Village, Calif. But when someone is intent upon committing an act of crime or violence, "we have to realize that even on the best of days schools have certain limitations," he said. "The standard of care that schools have at the end of the day... is whether or not the schools took reasonable steps."

The death toll at Sandy Hook—20 1st graders and six staff members—makes it the deadliest K-12 school shooting in American history. For years, especially following **the massacre at Columbine High School** in Jefferson County, Colo., in 1999, schools have been redesigning security systems and practicing the steps they would take in emergencies. Some of their decisions have been driven by finances; others by the message the measures might send.

From the 1999-2000 school year to the 2009-10 school year, the **Indicators of School Crime and Safety** show that there was an increase in the percentage of public schools reporting installing features such as controlled access to their school buildings and grounds during school hours, requiring faculty to wear badges or photo identification,

using security cameras, equipping individual classrooms with telephones, and requiring students to wear uniforms.

Dennis McCarthy, a former U.S. Secret Service agent in Blue Valley, Kan., who consults on school safety and security issues, said that safety procedures such as lockdowns, which have become more common since the school shootings in Columbine, likely saved lives in Newtown.

Mr. McCarthy said that school administrators responding to the shootings at Sandy Hook should make sure that students and school staff are well-trained in such drills. "Have a close look at your current procedures. Do you really do your lockdown drills? Are they efficient? Do you train staff, including substitute teachers, to identify, assess, and manage threats?" Having a single point of entry to a school or using guidelines like **Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design**—a strategy that aims to thwart crime through schools' architecture—could also help reduce threats, Mr. McCarthy said.

While visible security measures are a necessary deterrent, overdoing those and overusing emergency drills can actually be counterproductive, especially with younger children, said Richard W. Fry, the superintendent of the 3,000-student Big Spring School District in Pennsylvania.

"If you do more than [necessary] they're going to internalize it," Mr. Fry said. "Making them love school—how can you do that if you're scared?"

That's especially challenging with young students, he said.

Avoiding Worse

The massacre at Sandy Hook could have been much worse.

"The loss of life could have been in the hundreds," said Randall I. Atlas, the president of **Atlas Security & Safety Design**, a Fort Lauderdale, Fla.-based security consulting firm. "Essentially, the killing zone was confined to two classrooms. It was a bad day for them, but many others survived because of the design, technology, training, and practice put into place because of Columbine and Virginia Tech."

While promoting ways to increase security-related intelligence may be worthy endeavors, such as providing ways for students to report rumors or concerns and ensuring that

students trust and feel connected to adults at their school, one school safety expert cautioned district leaders against rushing to introduce other additional security measures in the aftermath of the Newtown tragedy. Placing armed police officers at elementary schools may be a natural reaction for wary school administrators he said, but such decisions have to be carefully considered.

“If you are going to rush this week to fix things, you are probably going to make some mistakes,” said Michael S. Dorn, a former schools police chief in Georgia who runs the Atlanta-based **Safe Havens International Inc.**, a widely consulted, nonprofit school-safety organization. “Districts need to take their time and build something that will work for the next decade.”

Chiefly, Mr. Dorn said, security measures and preparedness have to make sense for numerous emergency scenarios that can unfold at school, not just an active shooter, which is still quite rare.

Training every staff member to look for signs of “off behavior,” even subtle ones, from people who come into school buildings, is critical. It could be how a person walks, he said, how they shift their eyes, or speak. That same training applies in many other, more common scenarios in schools, he said, including learning to spot signs of students who are having a medical emergency, for example.

“You need to be comprehensive,” he said. “You want to do things that are going to give you benefit on every single school day.”

Indeed, said Eric C. Eshbach, the superintendent of the 3,200-student Northern York County School District in Pennsylvania and the president of the state’s association of school administrators, good decisions, not knee-jerk ones, are required right now.

That said, he asked parents in his district Monday to provide feedback about any school security concerns they may have.

“We really need their help in being vigilant,” Mr. Eshbach said. “If they’re seeing things that they think are holes in our processes, let me know about that.”

If a parent notices a door being propped open, for example, or wasn't asked for his or her identification when picking up a child, "we need to know that so we can shore up some of the loose ends."

Regardless of school safety experts' opinions, some districts plan long-term change following last week's mass shooting.

In the Los Angeles public school district, city Police Chief Charlie Beck said at a press conference Monday that by January, police will visit schools in the system at least daily.

"This is a significant, significant task because as you well know, we have over 600 of these schools," Chief Beck said. The offer will be extended to charter and private schools in the nation's second-largest school district's boundaries as well.

"Our schools are safe. We'll make them safer. We can't let a tragedy, no matter how great it is, 3,000 miles from here, affect the education of our children."

However, what schools may be more likely to take away from the horrific events in Connecticut is whether they provide adequate mental health screenings and services for students, Mr. Fry, of the Big Spring district, said.

While the shootings and acts of violence such as those at Columbine reshaped school safety procedures, he said, "I think three months from now, six months from now, I suspect it will be more looking at the mental health side of how we serve children throughout the day here," noting that the suspected shooter in Newtown was a product of the public school system to which he laid siege. "That's what districts will be talking about—not the procedures or drills that they obviously did oh so well."

Education Week staff writers Catherine Gewertz, Lesli A. Maxwell, Sarah D. Sparks, Andrew Ujifusa, and Jackie Zubrzycki contributed to this report.