

No Child Left Inside and School Safety

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With each deadly school shooting our natural reaction is to “harden” up our schools with every possible security measure we can think of to prevent anymore of these hideous acts. These include hiring armed security guards on campus (or arming our teachers), to installing a “threat suppression system” in all the school buildings that supposedly drenches the active shooter with a burst of spray to impair their further actions. It’s easy to become so scared and pessimistic that we end up converting our schools into maximum security facilities with double bolted doors, few windows, X-ray scanning machines at each point of entrance and egress, and closed campus policies.



When I was child my three younger siblings would join me out in the mini-forest behind our house in rural Massachusetts. When my stay at home Mom would want to get work done uninterrupted, she would yell; “go out and play”. With big smiles on our faces we would run around freely for hours climbing trees, crossing the creek and playing Cowboys & Indians. I always chose to take on the role of some famous Native American Chief I had been reading about in school. When it was time for dinner my Mom would ring this big bell that would echo throughout our own little Sherwood Forest. I miss those days, and remember them fondly.

When I was designing the master facilities plan for our 40 acre Gateway College Preparatory School we are now constructing in Phase 3, I wanted to incorporate some of my Mom’s “No Child Left Inside” philosophy on raising children. She knew, and I learned as a child, I’m happiest outdoors. In fact, public health research confirms that even small doses of nature improve our moods and well being, but also our ability to think, remember, create and daydream. So with this in mind, we designed an open campus setting, like a small private

college, where the students could get outside several times during the day for some sunlight, fresh air, to walk amongst some flowers, and to see and hear some water. I designed a campus where the students would purposely need to walk outside to get from building to building. Inside I wanted lots of natural light with open collaborative learning areas.



Picture of the Texas Christian University courtyard interconnecting several buildings

How does my vision of what a school campus should look and feel like, intersect with the problem of school violence, and the natural inclination to tighten up security? I believe we can find a balance that gives our school community a little more peace of mind, while staying vigilant to the dangers that lurk inside the mind of really sick individuals.



The first thing I would point out is that the safest schools are the ones where everybody knows everybody. I mean, really knows them. Most of the harm is carried out by older students or adults. Our high school has less than four hundred students, and we are a “school of choice”. It is much less likely that we would have a disillusioned student on a downward spiral of mental illness, or violent obsession, and remain under our radar. Kids do get lost in large schools, and are more likely to become disenfranchised. It is nearly impossible to “get lost” in our school. When students don’t like it here, they leave and transfer to another school. As a student I

coached once told me regarding what “bugged him” about our school; “everybody is into my business”, he said. That is not a bad thing, and I believe, is the first line of defense in preventing school violence.

The second thing is that I don’t have my head in the sand. In this day and age, we must consider how our school building design can prevent, or least minimizes, injury and death from weapons used to harm. Phase 3 construction does include the necessary restriction of access to the campus that will allow for closer surveillance of students and visitors. Unlike our current situation, where several temporary portable buildings are spread out all over our property, with the completion of Phase 3 construction all the Learning Centers, Student Union Building, Main Gymnasium and Multi-Purpose Building/Auxiliary Gym will be interconnected. During the beginning and ending of each school day, there will be only one point of entry and egress, the east side of each Learning Center. If you need to come to the school after the first period has begun, you must come through the secure reception area in the Student Union Building. Access to the open court yard between all the buildings can only be gained from the secured buildings, and a tall rod iron locked fence will border the southern portion of the court yard.

Once we have limited our points of entrance and egress to and from the campus, from there we will re-consider how much further we should go in the surveillance of students and visitors. Should that include x-ray scanners and/or armed security personnel? We should have a good debate about the pro’s and cons’ of such while keeping in mind how the assumption for violence, and the increased body scanning that comes with it, along with the presence of law enforcement in our schools, impacts the psyche of the school culture. What is gained, and what is lost, when we turn our schools into airport terminals?



Unfortunately there are no full proof measures to guarantee some very sick mentally ill person or terrorist won’t harm somebody when they have the intent and the means to carry out their actions. Gun control legislation won’t address bombs or weaponized drones, and knives kill as well. While we study and debate what else we should do to keep our kids safe while at school, please don’t forget, that the greatest health risk to your children, by far, are car accidents and impaired driving.