

Partnering for School Safety



Noeuth Orm, Farmington Middle School West

*Shamus O'Meara &
Tom Heffelfinger*

Minnesota suffered two fatal school shootings within a period of 18 months. On Sept. 24, 2003, a 15-year-old student shot and killed two students at ROCORI High School. On March 21, 2005, at Red Lake Senior High School in the Red Lake School District, a 16-year-old student killed five students, a teacher and security guard, and also injured five students after killing his grandfather and a companion.

The tragedies have reverberated throughout school communities. These incidents, and issues of school violence and prevention, have led to a comprehensive and committed partnering between Minnesota school districts, federal, state and local law enforcement, and the Minnesota and U.S. Departments of Education to prevent incidents of violence in our schools and to properly handle these incidents should they occur. The Minnesota Legislature also passed laws mandating lockdown and armed intruder drills in schools, anti-bullying measures, and the development of a school safety task force.

Minnesota is not alone. School shootings have occurred across the country. Following the shootings at Columbine High School in Colorado in April of 1999, school and law enforcement officials developed school crisis plans, and experts trained teachers and school staff to handle potentially violent situations.

Other efforts to prevent violence in schools have also existed for a number of years. In 1994, for instance, the U.S. Congress passed the Gun-Free School Act, which required school officials to develop "get tough" policies relative to school violence. In addition, the federal Safe and Drug Free Schools Act funded anti-drug and anti-violence programs. In Minnesota, the legislature passed laws that directed school boards to develop, adopt, and annually review district-wide school discipline policies. The Minnesota Department of Education and Minnesota School Boards Association have developed model policies for crisis management and violence prevention.

School-based violence prevention programs have also been initiated, such as GREAT (Gang Resistance Education and Training), a U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) - sponsored project that teaches young people the perils of gang affiliation. In addition, initiatives on behavioral programming to prevent violence have been used in Minnesota schools for a number of years. For instance, the non-profit Minnesota Institute of Public Health has been a leader in developing programming such as its recent AVERT Center for Safer Schools that adapts prevention research, diffusion and new products and services focusing on conditions that precipitate school violence and methods of prevention.

In the aftermath of the Minnesota school shootings, the Minnesota Department of Education reviewed school safety and crisis management policies throughout the country. The department focused on augmenting successful policies and procedures with those in Minnesota to develop a systemic, hands-on program of safety within our schools. Alice Seagren, Commissioner of the Department of Education and a former school board member, commented on this approach, "The issue of school safety is vitally important to all Minnesotans. The Minnesota Departments of Education and Public Safety have made school safety a priority. The concept of partnering between school administration, law enforcement and state and federal governments to prevent violence before it occurs, and to have in place a rapid response system should it occur, is vital to our schools and the families and communities they serve."

Following the Red Lake shootings, the U.S. Department of Education worked directly with the Red Lake School District as well as local and state governments to provide comprehensive assistance in school safety and violence prevention. William Modzeleski, Associate Assistant Deputy Secretary for the U.S. Department of Education Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, described this approach:

"The U.S. Department of Education has been involved in efforts designed to create and maintain environments that are safe and conducive to learning for over 15 years. The two most significant things we have learned are: (1) that students cannot learn to their fullest potential if they feel threatened or if they are victims of either serious crimes or inappropriate behavior such as bullying; and, (2) schools have the capacity to prevent crime and violence, provided they take appropriate actions. These two findings are extremely important because we now know that crime and violence in schools is tied directly to learning and that schools can take actions, sometimes relatively simple actions, that impact positively on behavior and learning. By ensuring that students who are in need of help are identified and provided the help they need, by ensuring all students are "connected" to adults, and by setting high standards (both academic and behavioral) and providing the wherewithal to achieve the standards we can help create the type of culture and climate that promotes teaching and learning and not punching and name calling."

The U.S. Department of Education, in coordination with the U.S. Secret Service, also worked directly with the U.S. Attorney's Office for the District of Minnesota and the Minnesota Department of Public Safety to hold a well-received conference on school safety (*School Safety: Lessons Learned*). A few months later the Secret Service and former U.S. Attorney Tom Heffelfinger presented at the 2006 Minnesota School Boards Association Leadership Conference on these issues.

Early this year, the U.S. Attorney's Office's publication, *School Safety: Lessons Learned*, was provided to all Minnesota superintendents. This publication focuses on the U.S. Secret Service Threat Assessment Protocol to help identify threats and deal with potential violence situations within schools. The protocol was developed from the U.S. Secret Service and U.S. Department of Education Safe School Initiative, a comprehensive study of school shootings that occurred in the

United States from 1974 - 2000. The Safe School Initiative examined the thinking, planning and other behaviors of students who carried out school shootings by studying journals and letters of shooters and interviewing ten of them in jail. Close attention was paid to "identifying pre-attack behaviors and communications that might be detectable or "knowable," and could help in preventing some future attacks."

The study concluded there was "no simple solution" to stop school shootings. However, it indicated that *some* future attacks could be prevented "if those responsible for safety in schools know what questions to ask and where to uncover information that may help with efforts to intervene before a school attack can occur."

The study found that students who engaged in school shootings did not "just snap." Typically, the behavior began with an idea, became a plan, progressed to securing the means to carry the plan out and culminated with the attack. Because the time frame between the student's decision to commit the attack and the actual incident is often short, any indications the student may pose a threat should be acted upon immediately by school administrators and law enforcement. The study concluded that before most incidents someone (friends, schoolmates, siblings) knew about the attacker's plans; however, the information rarely made it to an adult. As such, students are a very important part of prevention. In an effort to develop good information, the study recommended that schools break down the barriers that may discourage students from reporting this information. Specifically, schools should ensure they have a "fair, thoughtful and effective system to respond to whatever information students do bring forward."

The study found that most attackers did not threaten their victims prior to the attack. Consequently, school administrators need to respond immediately to any student who makes a threat. Those students who pose a threat (i.e., engage in behaviors that indicate an intent, planning or preparation for an attack) should be investigated. Notably, it found that *there is no accurate or useful profile to determine which students may pose a threat*. The study concluded that "knowing that a particular student shares characteristics, behaviors, features, or traits with prior school shooters does not help in determining whether that student is thinking about planning for a violent act." Thus, relying on profiles to predict future school violence carried two risks: (1) nearly all students who fit the "profile" of a school shooter do not pose a risk of violence; and (2) profiles inevitably fail to identify some students who pose a risk of violence. As such, school administrators should focus on whether a student engages in behaviors that suggest a possible attack so intervention may be possible.

The study also found that most attackers engaged in some behavior before the incident that caused others to be concerned. As such, educators and other adults need to pick up on a student's "direct and indirect signals" and make referrals. The study found that most attackers had difficulty coping with "significant losses or personal failures." Concerns that a student is having difficulty coping with "major losses or perceived

Continued on page 18

Continued from page 17

failures, particularly where these losses or failures appear to have prompted feelings of desperation and hopelessness,” should be investigated. Also, most attackers felt bullied prior to the attack. Educators need to ensure bullying is not tolerated and that students who know of bullying inform teachers or other school staff.

Most attackers had “access to and had used weapons prior to the attack,” according to the study. Although student access to weapons is common, *any* effort to “acquire, prepare, or use a weapon or ammunition may be a significant move in the attacker’s progression from idea to action” and must be investigated. The study recommends that school and law enforcement work together to develop policies and procedures for responding if a student has brought a firearm to school.

Additionally, the study found that other students were typically involved in the attack in some capacity. Therefore, any investigation of a student regarding a potential attack should include that student’s friends to assess their involvement, if any. Finally, most attacks were brief and stopped by someone other than law enforcement. Because the attacks were short, school officials should develop preventative measures to any emergency planning already in place. These preventative measures should include “protocols and procedures for responding and managing threats...”

The Secret Service/Department of Education study has a consistent theme stressing the importance of information sharing and partnering among all parts of the community who are interested in promoting safe schools.

The Safe School Initiative suggests ten components and tasks for creating a safe/connected school climate.

1. *Assess the school’s emotional climate.* Students, faculty, parents, administrators, school board members should be systematically surveyed regarding a school’s emotional climate. The survey’s findings can help increase safety and respect within the school.
2. *Emphasize the importance of listening in schools.* A school should foster a culture of “two-way” listening between students and staff to prevent and reduce violence. Listening must be expanded beyond academics so students can express the “disenfranchisement, hurt, or fear that they may feel.”
3. *Take a strong, but caring, stance against the code of silence.*
4. *Work actively to change the perception that talking to an adult about a student contemplating violence is considered “snitching.”*
5. *Find ways to stop bullying.*
6. *Empower students by involving them in planning, creating and sustaining a school culture of safety and respect.*
7. *Ensure that every student feels that he or she has a trusting relationship with at least one adult at school.* School

administrators should make sure that at least one adult at school knows what is happening with each student.

8. *Create mechanisms for developing and sustaining safe school climates.*
9. *Be aware of physical environments and their effects on creating comfort zones.* In large schools, school administrators should consider changes in the school’s physical characteristics that would permit the assignment of teachers and students to smaller, mutually intersecting and supportive groupings within the building.
10. *Emphasize an integrated systems model.* Include students, teachers, administrators, school board members, parents, law enforcement personnel, after-school and community-based groups when developing a safe school environment.

The Safe School Initiative and Minnesota’s experience with school shootings leads to the conclusion that comprehensive partnering is the recommended approach to effective school safety. ROCORI Superintendent Scott Staska shared his perspective on partnering: “Our experience is that school violence can occur even in a close-knit community. We have learned that an integrated, student-oriented approach to school safety is important. This means that our entire school community—students, parents, school staff, and law enforcement—must be willing to find ways to connect with each of our students. This is especially true of students whose behavior seems out of place—even if it is difficult to do so. Involving all of our resources to facilitate open communication and trust with our students is a vital part of being a safe school.”

A number of excellent federal, state and local resources are available to assist school districts in addressing safety and violence prevention in school. These partners can help provide practical programming for school staff to foster recognition of possible violence before it occurs, and focus on conflict resolution and character building. This can lead to a student community that believes it is appropriate to tell school officials or other adults about the threatening behavior of other students. Partnering with our students to change these perceptions is vital to a successful school safety program. Additionally, it is important to have in place a specific, coordinated response within the school and emergency responders if an incident of violence does occur. Working together, our efforts to reduce senseless acts of school violence can and will prove successful.

Shamus O’Meara is a partner with Johnson & Condon, P.A. in Minneapolis. He is counsel for the Red Lake and ROCORI school district shooting incidents, and a 2005 Attorney of the Year selected by Minnesota Lawyer for his work representing school districts. Tom Heffelfinger is a former U.S. Attorney for the District of Minnesota, and currently a partner at Best & Flanagan, LLP in Minneapolis, practicing in the areas of white collar crime and Native American issues. Mr. Heffelfinger handled the federal prosecution in the Red Lake shootings. The authors have presented on school safety and violence prevention issues at several state and national forums.