

## Most Schools Are Ill-Prepared for an Active Shooter Scenario

By Jim McKay on April 8, 2013

It will take an all-hazards tactic, additional campus safety personnel and a new approach to building design for schools to become more hardened against the threat of an active shooter on campus.

But before all of that happens, we will undoubtedly see more events like the one that shook the country on Dec. 14, 2012, when 20 kids and six staff members were shot to death at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn.

“The chilling fact is, it’s happened before and it will happen again,” said Bo Mitchell of 911 Consulting. “One danger here is that we always prepare for the last crisis, so we are all preparing for Hurricane Sandy and the Newtown massacre. Both were devastating but employers have to prepare for all hazards — bomb threats, suspicious packages, bullying at work and bullying at school are examples.”

There are people planning the next attack now, according to Bill Lowe, associate professor of emergency management and terrorism at Jacksonville State University in Alabama. He said copy-cats often fantasize about killing large numbers of people, but some never go through with it. They may post a threat on Facebook or talk about it, but their actions don’t go beyond the planning stage. “The ones I’m concerned about are the ones who aren’t stupid enough to put it on Facebook. They’re doing it silently, and it’s happening right now.”

Lowe said at some point schools will have to be built more strategically to harden them against intruders. That would mean building a school where access could be controlled by having fewer entrances, Lowe said. “The goal is to deny access to the building and delay access to victims.”

Lowe advocates having an all-hazards security officer on campuses. The officer would be trained for many different scenarios and be armed. “If you can justify having a librarian in the school, then how do you justify not having someone responsible for intruder protection, fire protection — someone trained to deal with emergencies?” Lowe asked. “I see this person being sort of multi-capability officer.”

During a traditional school year, this multidimensional first responder could work for the school district for nine months and the police or sheriff’s department for three, Lowe said. “The sheriff’s or police department could pay a quarter of his or her salary, and the school district pays the rest,” he said. “If you have somebody who can fill multiple roles, then you’re amortizing that cost over many different things.”



New Washington, Ohio, Chief of Police Scott Robertson talks with fourth grade students as they huddle in closet during a lockdown drill at the St. Bernard School. Photo courtesy of APimages.com/Craig Ruttle

In addressing whether teachers should carry firearms, Lowe said, “I don’t know that I embrace that.”

He said as children get older their propensity for violence increases and that makes colleges a likelier target of gun violence. The older children have more issues with mental health, access to drugs and firearms, and the capability to use them.

Many colleges and universities have a full-time police department and understand the risks, however, an active shooter situation is unknown until it happens. “If you were to ask any police chief or sheriff, ‘Is your community prepared for an active shooter event?’ all of them would say, ‘Absolutely,’” Lowe said. “That’s what they think, but they won’t be tested until it happens.”

An example is the Aurora, Colo., shooting where a gunman killed 12 people in a movie theater last July. The gunman began his rampage by releasing two canisters of pepper spray, which hampered police and emergency medical efforts. That was a new twist, Lowe said. “[Pepper spray] hangs around for a long time and once it’s on the victims, it affects them for a long time.”

## Most Unprepared

In general, Mitchell said, schools and businesses can and should examine their emergency plans and how they would respond, not only during a shooting but also during various potential hazards.

Emergency plans should be for all hazards, not just for an active shooter situation and should include trainings that incorporate everyone associated with that school or business, according to Mitchell.

Mitchell said schools are employers first and most employers are not well prepared. “For every one organization that is well planned, trained and exercised, there are 10 that are not,” he said. “Every employee has a legal right to review their employer’s emergency plan. That’s federal law.”

Schools and businesses all have the same problem: They think they are well prepared but they’re not. Mitchell said there is ample research done by the Government Accountability Office, the National Association of School Resource Officers and other national organizations that point to a lack of preparedness for K-12 schools and businesses.

The research shows that most schools have paperwork they call a plan, but it’s not all hazards and they don’t train all of their employees as required by federal law. “They’ll train ‘the team,’ but they don’t train all employees, and for emergency purposes that’s the contractors, the cafeteria staff, the security people and grandma who volunteers in the gift shop,” Mitchell said.

“They should train coaches, temps, volunteers, everyone because when something goes wrong, all those people will be considered employees at court, even if they didn’t get a paycheck.”

Mitchell said research indicates that schools aren’t well prepared because they don’t exercise. “Table top exercises, full-scale exercises done with and without emergency services in concert — both are great and more is better, but they aren’t doing it,” he said. “Some of this is, ‘Oh, we’ll scare the children or we’ll scare the parents.’ That’s bull. Locking down a school is very difficult, but that doesn’t alleviate your responsibility to do that.”

# The “Plan”

Every principal will answer in the affirmative when asked if his or her school has a disaster plan. But is that plan being exercised or is it “on the shelf?”

“A lot of it is on the shelf, a lot of it isn’t all hazards, a lot of it isn’t trained,” Mitchell said. “OSHA [Occupational Safety and Health Administration] says school is a workplace.

It says before you’re a school, you’re a workplace and every employee shall be trained in emergency planning, annually in a classroom. This is not happening on a wide spectrum from Maine to California.”

The reasons vary, from lack of education, to politics to denial and, of course, a lack of resources.

The feeling that “it won’t happen to us” is ubiquitous in the U.S., including schools and businesses. Couple that with the fact that school administrators aren’t emergency managers and that parents of students attending those schools may not know what questions to ask those administrators about emergency plans, which and it equals lack of preparation.

“Public schools tend to turn to their police chiefs and fire chiefs, which is all well and good but they’re busy people, and if all schools showed up at the police and fire departments, the system would collapse,” Mitchell said.

He also said politics play a role in that police officers and firefighters aren’t going to go to parents because they’d be going over the heads of boards of education. And boards of education are reluctant to turn to parents because they’re busy running schools and taking on security too is a daunting thought.

Mitchell said parents should ask school administrators if they have a plan, if it’s all hazards, if it conforms to the NFPA 1600 Standard on Disaster/Emergency Management and Business, have they trained it annually in a classroom and have enough people been trained, including the grandma volunteering in the gift shop.

Lowe said there are indications that Sandy Hook Elementary School personnel did some things that saved lives in the few minutes of chaos. “Keeping doors closed, turning off lights and keeping children quiet,” were smart things to do, he said. “It’s all about cover and concealment. How do you conceal yourself from the predator? Out of sight, out of mind and out of sound, out of mind. If the predator can hear people screaming and yelling out of fear, that just increases the prey drive.”

*<http://www.emergencymgmt.com/safety/Schools-III-Prepared-Active-Shooter.html>*