

The Violence At Red Lake: Further Reflections

About Creating Safe Schools

Robert Brooks, Ph.D.

Sadly, last month another school in the United States has borne witness to acts of murder and violence. Jeff Weise, a 16-year-old, shot his grandfather and the grandfather's girlfriend before driving to Red Lake High School on his Indian reservation in Minnesota. According to accounts in several newspapers, he shot an unarmed security guard and then roamed the school killing a teacher and five students and wounding seven others before taking his own life. It was the second worst school massacre in the United States, eclipsed only by the murders at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado six years ago.

Based on my visits to many school districts, I am very aware that issues of safety are on the minds of administrators, faculty, parents, and students, more so in some districts than others. Understandably, when an event such as Red Lake occurs, these issues assume greater prominence as reflected in the scope of media coverage and the renewed urgency in which questions are posed to experts in the field. Questions include:

Can school violence be predicted?

Can school shooters be identified before they act violently?

What are the most effective ways to prevent school violence?

Is school violence on the rise?

Is school violence primarily a reflection of what is occurring in schools or is it basically a reflection of what is transpiring in our society?

Should the outside doors of schools be locked throughout the day to protect students and staff from intruders?

Should all schools be equipped with metal detectors?

Obviously, given the complex factors involved in youth violence, there are no simple answers to these or related questions. I have shared some thoughts about several of these questions in previous articles. I want to expand on some of these ideas in this article, especially drawing on a comprehensive report issued jointly by the United States Secret Service and the United States Department of Education in 2002 titled "Threat

Assessment in Schools: A Guide to Managing Threatening Situations and to Creating Safe School Climates.” Two of the authors are Dr. Bill Pollack, a good friend and colleague and author of the bestselling book *Real Boys*, and Dr. Robert Fein, a psychologist with whom I have presented at several conferences. Dr. Fein works closely with the Secret Service and has been involved in interviewing youth who commit homicide. I highly recommend that those interested in the topic of school violence read this document.

As I noted in an earlier website article (March, 2002), I strongly support measures that enhance the safety of a school, whether these measures include installing metal detectors or cameras in the corridors or keeping outside doors locked. I also believe that each school and community (educators, parents, law enforcement personnel) is in the best position to decide what actions are most appropriate for its district to insure that schools are as safe and secure as possible. What one school or community deems necessary may be very different from that of another school or community.

However, we must recognize that there are limits to these safety measures. Metal detectors, cameras, and similar devices provide some modicum of protection, which is very important, but they fail to address what I consider to be a vital ingredient of school safety and violence prevention, namely, the relationship that is developed and reinforced by staff with each student. If students do not feel a connection to adults or their peers in school, then exclusionary cliques or gangs will readily fill the void and relationships among the entire school community will be fractured. When students experience a sense of belonging and caring, they are less likely to engage in bullying or angry behavior.

I am not implying that acts of bullying or violence perpetrated at schools are just a “school problem” or can be traced solely to the existing school milieu. The roots of anger, violence, and mental illness stretch far beyond the schoolyard to encompass the homes and communities in which students reside. Comprehensive programs are necessary to address such issues as poverty, the easy accessibility of guns to our youth, the widespread use of drugs, and the need for parenting programs, mental health services, and activities that enrich the lives of youngsters and help keep them off the street. However, schools are an integral part of the community and thus are in a position to assume a vital role in addressing the issue of youth alienation and violence.

The Secret Service and Department of Education report cautions against the belief that school shooters can be identified before they engage in violent acts. One of their “key findings” is that “there is no accurate or useful ‘profile’ of students who engage in targeted school violence.” They note that in reviewing school shooters, “the demographic, personality, school history, and social characteristics of the attackers varied substantially. The use of profiles to determine whether a student is thinking about or planning a violent attack is not an effective approach to identifying students who may pose a risk for targeted violence at school or – once a student has been identified—for assessing the risk that a particular student may pose for targeted school violence.”

The report recommends that “rather than trying to determine the ‘type’ of student who may engage in targeted school violence, an inquiry should focus instead on a student’s behaviors and communications to determine if that student appears to be planning or preparing for an attack.” The authors of the report contend that “the process of thinking and planning that leads up to an attack potentially may be knowable or discernible from the attacker’s behaviors and communications.” This appeared to be the case with Jeff Weise as well as with other students who have engaged in violent acts.

A similar conclusion about the limitations of identifying school shooters was offered by Edward Mulvey and Elizabeth Cauffman of the University of Pittsburgh in their article “The Inherent Limits of Predicting School Violence” published in the October, 2001 issue of the *American Psychologist*. They write, “Preventing violent incidents in school does not require either more sophisticated methods for assessing students individually or a magical, uniform method for intervening with them for a short while after they have been identified.” Mulvey and Cauffman cite empirical evidence that indicates “promoting healthy relationships and environments is more effective for reducing school misconduct and crime than instituting punitive penalties. . . . Students who are committed to school, feel that they belong, and trust the administration are less likely to commit violent acts than those who are uninvolved, alienated, or distrustful.”

They observe that the best source of information about the activities of students in schools is other students. “A long line of research has demonstrated that students are well aware of the problem children in their own classrooms. Peers and teachers who talk with problem students can often provide the most useful information about when such

students are in trouble.” Mulvey and Cauffman conclude, “Establishing school environments where students feel connected and trusted will build the critical link between those who often know when trouble is brewing and those who can act to prevent it.”

The power of connections is also accentuated in the “Threat Assessment in Schools” report. “Connection through human relationships is a central component of a culture of safety and respect.” The report advocates a proactive approach in developing these connections, especially for students who feel alienated. “Schools that emphasize personal contact and connection between school officials and students will take steps to identify and work with students who have few perceptible connections to the school. For example, during staff meetings in a school in a California School District, the names of students are posted, and school faculty members are asked to put stars next to the names of the students with whom they have the closest relationships. Faculty members then focus on establishing relationships with those students with few stars next to their names.” As I read this, I thought, “Wouldn’t it be wonderful if all schools engaged in this practice? What a beneficial impact it would have on each student.”

The report also emphasizes that the establishment of these nurturing connections helps to break the so-called “code of silence” that exists among youth. When students trust adults in school they are more likely to approach these adults when they have problems or are concerned about classmates who are encountering difficulties.

In an Associated Press article by Ben Feller that appeared in *The Boston Globe*, experts shared thoughts about the Red Lake killings. Bill Bond was principal at Heath High School in western Kentucky in 1997 when a student shot eight of his classmates, killing three of them. Bond observes, “People want to have metal detectors and security guards and all of this, but the real thing that makes a difference is working with the kids and adjusting to the kids. These kinds of situations are just like terrorist situations. When people have so much hate in them that they don’t mind dying, you don’t have any deterrents left.”

Feller writes that while Federal government figures have shown a significant decrease in violent crime in schools between 1992 and 2002, critics believe the data are already out-dated and fail to portray accurately the problem of bullying and violence in

our schools. “More broadly, the numbers don’t capture what safety specialists say is the most critical goal: changing school culture. That means adults who model good behavior, monitor warning signs of violence, and even train students to help stop peers from bullying.”

William Lassiter, school safety specialist at the Center for the Prevention of School Violence in Raleigh, North Carolina observes that the Columbine shootings prompted greater attention to the creation of more physically secure buildings. “What’s missing is we need to make sure that students feel connected to their community and to their school. We must make sure they have a trusted adult.”

I recognize that a number of my writings emphasize the theme of connectedness. These include the books about resilience that I have co-authored with my colleague Dr. Sam Goldstein as well as my May and June, 2004 website articles that focus on the report “Hardwired to Connect.” I am also aware that one must be careful not to filter all information through the lens of a particular concept such as connectedness, lest tunnel vision dominate one’s thinking. However, I continue to be impressed by the emphasis that professionals in different fields such as law enforcement, education, and mental health place on the importance of connectedness in lessening school violence.

Thus, while we must not neglect efforts to have buildings that are physically secure, we must also appreciate the life-altering impact that one adult can have on a child or adolescent’s emotional well-being. In my March, 2002 article I wrote, “In the absence of a positive relationship, students often experience discipline and rules as arbitrary impositions to be broken. They experience our attempts to teach them about respect and dignity as hollow preachings that lack genuineness and conviction. As others have said and I wish to reinforce, ‘Students don’t care what we know until they first know we care.’ It is within this caring, authentic relationship that our interventions will prove most successful and our schools will become more supportive and safe.”

Given the pressure that many educators (and students) are experiencing in relation to the increased emphasis on standardized tests and the need to prepare students for these tests, I should like to end with this thought. The development of a relationship with a student should never be interpreted as an “extra curriculum” that takes valuable time away from academics. Instead, when students feel safe and secure, when they are not

worried about being bullied or humiliated, and when they have a trusting relationship with a teacher, the learning process will be enhanced. A student who feels known in a positive way in school is more likely to behave in a caring, responsible manner and will be more motivated to achieve. It is difficult for the seeds of violence to flourish in a field in which students feel supported and respected.

<http://www.drrobertbrooks.com>