Trauma Informed School Safety

School shootings and youth suicide must be recognized as an outcome of trauma and addressed in accord with trauma informed practices

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Across the country, state or district school safety teams are creating new School Safety Plans. Many schools have also been focusing on integrating trauma informed practices. Educators are encouraged to fully integrate the understandings of Trauma Informed Care into their revised School Safety Plans.

Background

Over the last years, there has been an increase in school shootings, as well as youth suicides and attempts. School shootings, although significantly tragic, remain exceptionally rare. Other forms of violence, such as physical bullying and assaults are a more frequent concern.

Students who engage in school shootings or other forms of violence or who attempt suicide do not fit into one singular profile. There are always multiple factors involved in these situations.

In the case of school shootings, most attackers engaged in some behavior prior to the incident that caused others concern or indicated a need for help. Most attackers had difficulty coping with significant losses or personal failures. Moreover, many had considered or attempted suicide. Many attackers felt bullied, mistreated, or injured by others prior to the attack. All of these factors are evidence of the experience of trauma.

Students who have experienced trauma have disrupted relationships with adults, can be more easily triggered, and have challenges in problem solving, especially in challenging relationship situations.

Very often in these situations there has been a recent disturbing "triggering" event to which these students have felt helpless in resolving and they do not feel they can obtain assistance from anyone at school or in the home. Engaging in a school shooting is often an act of attempted suicide.

Being bullied and engaging in bullying is a well-documented factor in youth suicide. Youth suicide attempts are most prevalent during the school year. The quality of the school climate must be considered a contributing factor. Students who are bullied and feel unsafe are more likely to bring weapons to school.

Students who have engaged in bullying should never be blamed for the decisions of other students. Blaming tragic incidents on students who engaged in bullying ignores the multiple factors, can increase copy-cat behavior, and unfairly blames students for what are overall school climate concerns.

School-based violence appears to have declined since the 1990's, with one exception. Despite efforts of school leaders over the last decade, the evidence is that what most schools are doing in the area of bullying prevention is not having any positive impact. The Center for Disease Control has included a bullying question on its Youth Risk Behavior survey since 2009. There has been no decline in the number of students reporting being bullied. This is a huge concern that must be better addressed.

The majority of students who are being bullied do not report what is happening to the school. Ample research indicates that students think reporting does not resolve the problem or it makes things worse.

The fact that the majority of students think that reporting bullying to school staff will not lead to an effective result is a huge "red flag" of concern in relation to school safety because effective Threat Assessment requires that students report concerns.

Upstream, Midstream, Plunge, Downstream

It is helpful to think of school safety strategies in the context of where they lie on a river that turns into rapids, that go to a waterfall where the water plunges to dangerous rocks below. Strategies can be considered:

- Upstream, where the river is calmer and it is easier to help students get out of the water.
- Midstream, where water is moving more swiftly in rapids indicating there is a higher risk.
- The end of the rapids and the Plunge, where students go over the waterfall and crash into the rocks below
- Downstream, into the rocks below and the future direction of the river.

Downstream

Postvention activities are those that occur Downstream after the Plunge—after a suicide, suicide attempt, or significant act of violence. Every school must have a postvention plan developed in conjunction with regional mental health providers to help students and staff recover from what has happened and to prevent further Plunges.

An individualized postvention plan is essential for any student who has attempted suicide, engaged in violence, or was the victim of violence. It is necessary to assess and correct any situations at school may have been causing distress and to put a positive support plan into place for these students.

Plunge

The presence of more armed personnel may prevent more carnage if, and only if, the armed personnel are in the right place at the right time—which is highly unlikely. The likelihood of armed personnel rapidly climbing the cliff and catching students in a net before they Plunge into the rocks is exceptionally slim. Most shooting incidents are stopped by means other than law enforcement intervention.

More armed personnel including law enforcement of armed staff should not be considered an effective Midstream deterrent to school shootings because most school shooters desire "suicide by cop." Increasing armed personnel will only increase the potential for success in their ultimate goal.

Prior to the Plunge, is where some technical security might be placed. It is of course necessary for schools to be adequately secure. However, there is no research-based evidence of effectiveness of reliance on increased technical security. Some technical security measures are relatively low cost and thought to be helpful. This includes entry control, identification tags, communication technologies, site alarms in secluded areas, and emergency alerts. GPS tracking systems may be helpful for more vulnerable students and school buses.

Video surveillance can reduce property crimes, but is likely to displace violence to unmonitored areas. Comprehensive video surveillance systems are exceptionally expensive and require consistent monitoring by staff. The minute or two it would take for a school shooter to shoot numerous victims is insufficient time for a video monitor to notice, call law enforcement, and for law enforcement to respond.

Metal detectors are now being strongly promoted. These technologies cannot distinguish between different objects made of metal, thus such determinations must be made by trained employees. To facilitate entrance of hundreds of students will require a significant number of staff members.

Metal detectors raise concerns that include students being late to class and infringing on students' rights. While metal detectors may protect students once they enter a school building, there are many places where students will be present without such protection—such as the long lines that have formed in front of the building to get through the metal detector. Metal detectors also create a prison-like atmosphere for students and can be very expensive.

Increased technical security features communicate to students that their school is not safe—thus contributing to increased student distress. Increased technical security may create a public perception that the school is dedicated to school safety. Absent any research evidence of effectiveness, such appearances are entirely deceiving.

Midstream

In the Midstream rapids, right before the falls is when student behavior should alert someone that this student is under distress and is considering an act of violence or self-harm.

Security technologies are also being promoted for this region of the river. Anonymous tip lines have become quite popular. There is no research evidence, but anecdotal evidence suggests they are helpful. A concern about anonymity is that it is not possible for the responder to obtain what might be critically important further information. This can complicate the investigation.

It is also important to consider the reasoning for why some might think it is necessary to provide anonymity and what it might say about the school climate that a student does not feel safe asking to talk confidentially to a principal or counselor.

The bottom line is that the effectiveness of an anonymous tip line will be dependent on the responsiveness of the staff to the reports. If the students perceive this responsiveness to beneficial, they may use such a tip line. If the responsiveness is not so perceived, tips will decline.

Companies are also marketing social media monitoring technologies. This software scans online content for indicators of school safety concerns. This software only scans public posts, not private messages. There is no research on effectiveness of the technology itself or in preventing violence. Every school has a significant number of "social media monitors"—walking around the halls

wearing jeans with their cellphones in hand. School efforts to increase the likelihood of students reporting concerns would be preferable to reliance on fallible software.

Establishing an effective Threat Assessment process is essential. Effective Threat Assessment can catch at-risk students in a net prior to going into the Plunge and possibly taking others along.

However, for the Threat Assessment process to work, the net must span the rapids. While it is true that most students who are suicidal or potentially violent present warning signs, school leaders will not know of such concerns unless other students report. If students do not think it will make things better to tell school staff about such concerns, there is less likelihood they will report.

The Secret Service just released new guidance for schools, *Enhancing School Safety Using a Threat Assessment Model*. This document provides helpful guidance on an effective Threat Assessment process—with a caveat that is discussed below.

In the Introduction to the guidelines presented findings from a prior report on school shootings: "(P)rior to most attacks, though other students had information about the attackers' plans, most did not report their concerns to an adult."

The willingness of students to report will be directly connected to the degree to which they feel they have positive connections with school staff and they trust that the Threat Assessment process will help, and not harm, their distressed friend.

The key factor that must be immediately corrected to ensure school safety is diligent efforts to increase positive staff-student connections and the effectiveness of reports of concern, so students will trust reporting will lead to a positive outcome for their friend.

Effective Threat Assessment requires an in-depth understanding of the role of trauma that the student who is engaging in threatening behavior has and likely is experiencing. It is essential the Threat Assessment team includes professionals with expertise in trauma.

The caveat to the Secret Service guidelines is that they do not reference concerns associated with trauma. In fact, the term :"trauma" is not present in the guidelines. Without an understanding of the role and impact of trauma, schools are less likely to engage in the actions necessary to effectively address the concerns of the student about whom the report was made.

Schools are encouraged to identify what traumatic situations this student has experienced and recent distressing situations this student is experiencing that has caused significant distress and has led to the concern he or she may cause harm to self or others. Schools must implement comprehensive corrective actions if these concerns relate to how this student is being treated by other students or staff. Schools must develop a positive action plan to assist this student in resolving the current triggering situation and gaining greater resilience.

The assessment must never ask, "What is wrong with this student?" The assessment must always focus on "What wrong has or is happening to this student and how can this be corrected?"

Upstream

Vitally important Upstream initiatives can help to prevent students from falling into the river in the first place and getting them out when the water is still relatively calm.

In many states, there have been calls for more counselors or social workers in schools. This is clearly imperative. More rapidly, however, it is necessary to shift the current responsibilities of counselors away from such non-counseling activities as course enrollment to allow them to use their counseling skills to assist students who are experiencing emotional distress.

The vitally important additional Upstream initiatives will involve all school staff in a comprehensive approach to improve school climate in accord with Trauma Informed Care practices to increase student resilience and actions to better foster more staff-student and student-student positive relations.

About the Author

Nancy Willard has a M.S. in Special Education from the University of Oregon and a J.D. from Willamette University College of Law. She entered the field of bullying prevention by writing the first book ever published on cyberbullying, *Cyberbullying and Cyberthreats: Responding to the Challenge of Online Social Cruelty, Threats, and Distress* (2007, Research Press). She is also author of *Cyber-Safe Kids, Cyber-Savvy Teens, Helping Young People Use the Internet Safety and Responsibly* (2007, Jossey Bass). *Cyber Savvy: Embracing Digital Safety and Civility* (2011, Corwin Press).

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