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SUBURBS

In wake of Florida school shooting, we should embrace troubled kids, not push them away, experts say

By TED GREGORY AND JOHN KEILMAN

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Florida school shooting

Peter Wang's mother, Hui, cries as she is helped into a waiting car with her family after the memorial service for her 15-year-old son in Coral Springs, Fla., on Feb. 20, 2018.(Taimy Alvarez / Sun-Sentinel)

Amid the heartbreak and horror of yet another mass school shooting is the persistent sentiment that schools must do more to protect students by expanding security, installing more obstacles to attackers, even arming staff and teachers.

But local school administrators and experts on school violence also are emphasizing a tandem approach, one whose aim is to embrace troublesome students instead of separating them from their schools and peers.

Addressing the west suburban Lyons Township High School community on Thursday, Principal Brian Waterman underscored how the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Florida that killed 17 people “reminds us of the importance of regularly reviewing, updating, and familiarizing ourselves with our emergency planning procedures.”

But Waterman also said it’s important to build relationships with students, something that he brings up when talking about school safety.

“I consistently mention that the most effective strategy we have is our ability to build positive relationships and connections with individual students,” he said.

In addressing the nation after the shooting, President Donald Trump vowed to work with state and local authorities “to secure our schools and tackle the difficult issue of mental health,” calling improved school safety a top priority.

Closer to home, many school administrators said that while there is no foolproof way of preventing a school shooting, making troubled students feel a part of the community is at least as important as physical barriers to keep trouble out.

“I really think that the most important thing that parents and students can do is have that connection with the school so that there’s a sense of community and belonging,” said Jim Conrey, spokesman for Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire.

Dewey Cornell, a University of Virginia professor of education and forensic clinical psychologist, is conducting a federally funded study of school climate and bullying in more than 700 Virginia secondary schools. He has spent almost 20 years researching that state's "threat assessment" approach to violence prevention.

Aiming to distinguish serious risks to school safety from nonserious ones, threat assessment is appropriate for schools because students' aggressive behavior can vary greatly, from "mild teasing and bantering to serious altercations and, in rare instances, severe acts of criminal violence," Cornell said.

It is a distinct departure from a zero-tolerance model.

"Zero tolerance is the problem," he said, "and threat assessment is the antidote."

Cornell said his research has shown that schools using threat assessment report less bullying, more willingness by students to seek help for bullying and threats of violence, and fewer long-term suspensions.

The quick expulsion or suspension of a student who may be engaging in conduct that actually is very minor misbehavior or confusion — as can happen under zero tolerance — can have the exact opposite of the desired result, Cornell said. It ostracizes and alienates, cuts off the student from the school — and often serves to further enrage the student, he said.

Rather than punish students who commit minor infractions, he said, the aim should be to engage them.

"There's a great deal that we can do to prevent school shootings," Cornell said. "Unfortunately, there's so much attention on what to do after the shooting starts that we're neglecting what we can do before the gunman shows up."

He said one of the problems for school administrators is that parents overreact to misconduct and pressure the school to suspend or expel a student who may not deserve it.

“School principals feel like they have a public relations problem,” Cornell said, “and that they have no choice but to remove the kid from school.”

In fact, Cornell predicted that in the wake of the Florida shooting, “All across the country, kids are going to be suspended left and right for the next week because everyone’s in a state of uproar when this happens.”

Eric Arnold of the Illinois School and Campus Safety Program, a state-sanctioned organization that trains schools on conducting threat assessments, said the inquiries are not meant to be punitive, or to single out children who simply have an unusual appearance or an eccentric manner.

A true threat assessment is based on troubling behavior, he said. A U.S. Secret Service guide used by the program said warning signs could include episodes of bullying, explicit threats of violence, or essays or school projects that include violent content.

The process allows teachers, administrators, counselors, psychologists and even police to share information and craft a proper response, Arnold said. The goal is to get a child help early, before his or her behavior reaches a critical point.

“The hope is that when you do that, you will be identifying behaviors at a much lower level, knowing that some of those behaviors do compile into a higher risk situation,” he said. “If we can intervene earlier, what we’re trying to avoid is that manifesting into a threat.”

Local 10 News in Miami reported Friday that school administrators had recommended last year that a threat assessment be performed on Nikolas Cruz, the suspect in the shooting, but the outcome of any inquiry remained unknown.

Superintendent Daniel Cates of Palatine-based Township High School District 211 sent a video message to that district’s community in response to Wednesday’s shooting. In it he said, “We all get stronger by pulling together” and that “when we stand shoulder to shoulder, we are unshakable.”

Cates did not mention anything about more physical barriers to intruders.

Instead, he said: “Our greatest gift we can offer, and our greatest strength we have, is to simply be present in our hallways, in conversations with students, in reaching out to those we may not know and in hearing those who may not have words to express what they are feeling.”

Stevenson’s Conrey noted that reports about school shooters often describe the attacker as a loner who was disconnected from the school.

The way to fight that disconnection, he said, is “trying to establish that sense of belonging for all students.” Administrators, teachers and staff at the school of about 4,200 students try to emphasize that Stevenson is a community.

“We think that approach can reap just as much reward in the long run as anything else,” he said.

But Stevenson also has taken structural measures to discourage shooters or other undesirable intruders, Conrey said. Those include door locks on every classroom and gates to block halls, both of which can be activated by the push of a button.

Stevenson also has “tons of video cameras” in and outside the school’s buildings, a security guard that roams the parking lot, shatterproof windows in some places and planters that block vehicles from crashing into the buildings.

Yet there are no quick fixes, Conrey said. “It’s a lot more complicated than that. It requires a lot more effort and time.”

At Highland Park and Deerfield high schools, “active threat” drills have been adopted in recent years, and staff members have been trained in a text messaging alert system that would be deployed in the case of a real emergency.

Each new school shooting provides a grim opportunity to take another look at those and other security and preventive systems to see if updates are needed.

“We change up the scenarios so we are not having the same ‘active threat’ (drill) repeatedly, in order to keep us on our toes if something ever does happen,” Superintendent Christopher Dignam of Township High School District 113 said.

The district also has developed STOP, an online reporting system that enables students to anonymously report attacks, bullying, possible self-harm, theft, vandalism, or the presence of weapons or substances. A student can upload supporting photos, videos, screenshots or other evidence at the time they submit the form.

“If we do receive a report of social media activity that is troubling, we will review and monitor that posting and notify other agencies if appropriate,” Dignam said. “Our commitment is to maintaining the highest level of security possible and increasing the safety of students.”

For all such advancements, though, Dignam said it’s frustrating to see that nearly 20 years after the massacre at Columbine High School in Colorado, the carnage on school campuses continues.

“It is disheartening that in those 20 years, we have had children who have grown up ... in an environment where this can happen. It's not just an anomaly that can never happen again,” he said. “That was not the case when I went to high school.”

Pioneer Press reporter Karen Berkowitz contributed.

tgregory@chicagotribune.com

jkeilman@chicagotribune.com

Twitter @tgregoryreports

Twitter @johnkeilman



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