

## IMPROVING SCHOOL CLIMATE: SCHOOL SHOOTERS

**Minimum Time Required: 60 minutes**

### **Slide #2: Columbine as Crucible**

The phenomenon of the American school shooting began in the 1970s. That decade hosted a small number of incidents. The 1980s were the same; a few incidents were peppered throughout the decade. Then, in the 1990s something happened, and things changed. (The answer to what changed is complex involving the relationship between school and the social background of society... don't try to answer, just acknowledge it is complex and complicated.)

### **Slide #3: And This Decade**

School shootings became more common, and have continued nearly every year, since that time, and the pace continues. When the troubling pattern began to emerge, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta began to conduct some initial and very rudimentary research into what was taking place. This first attempt at finding out what was happening was primarily demographic; almost like using pushpins on a map of the United States. This initial demographic approach pointed out two similarities: the shootings were happening in the southern states, rural areas, on Native American lands and the shooters were all boys.

Then there was Columbine High School. We've never been the same. Why was the April 20, 1999 tragedy in Littleton, Colorado, the one that so shocked the entire nation? First, it was truly a school shooting of a magnitude never seen, or even imagined, before. But second, it was the first school shooting to happen in an upper middle-class suburban community. This aspect is key in explaining why Columbine was so significant in raising our awareness. Columbine demonstrated that no school in our nation could assume that it was immune to the risks of school shootings. Such tragedies were no longer a southern, ethnic or rural problem. They were a national problem, and one that might occur in any of our schools. \*\*\* ***Additional information for slide 5 can be found at the end of this facilitator guide.***

#### **Slide #4: School Shooters Learning Task**

*As a large group, sort the provided cards. Decide which are characteristics that all school shooters have in common and which are not.*

- ▶▶ Put all the cards out on the floor and allow the group to sort them in that way – this works quite well
- ▶▶ Do not tell them how many cards are correct – allow them figure it out on their own.
- ▶▶ At some point, groups may need a clue...First give the clue that there are 5 characteristics. If they need more clues, tell them that they have 4 (or however many) out of the 5 correct, then let them re-sort with additional clues.
- ▶▶ Once the group has decided on the correct cards, ask them to think of a student they know who presents with these 5 characteristics. Ask individuals to speak aloud the first name of that student.

#### **Slide #5: School Shooter Commonalities**

- ▶▶ These are factors related to rampage school shooters, not targeted shootings. In a targeted school shooting, the shooter has a specific person or persons in mind when the shooting is planned. In a rampage school shooting, there are no specific targets in the shooting.
- ▶▶ As noted, these are necessary but not sufficient characteristics. Not every student who presents with these characteristics will become a rampage school shooter. Most will either crawl under a rock or commit suicide.
- ▶▶ These factors relate to school shootings, not shootings that occur within a school. School shootings involve a shooter who is member of the school, not an outside individual who enters a school.

**\*\*\* Additional information for slide 5 can be found at the end of this facilitator guide.**

#### **Slide #6: School Shooters and Educators**

- ▶▶ Ask the question – Which do we as educators have the most control over?
- ▶▶ Allow participants to figure out the three that you know from the above is the answer.
- ▶▶ While we may have some influence over the other two, 3 stand out very clearly.

#### **Slide #7: What's the Flip**

- ▶▶ Next question – what is the flip to the 3 factors that we have identified that we have the most control over?
- ▶▶ Allow participants to answer the question.

#### **Slide #8: 3 Factors**

- ▶▶ Groups will come up with these 3 statements, or 3 very similar statements.
- ▶▶ The point? What happens if we create a climate where these 3 positive factors are now present? We no longer have the 5 necessary factors. We can impact a child's circumstances.

#### **Slide #9: What's the Flip Learning Task**

*In your school group, consider the 3 “flip” areas.*

*What are specific strategies for ensuring that “the flip” happens in each of these areas?*

*Write your responses on flip chart paper.*

- ▶▶ Provide each group with a piece of flip chart paper to record their responses.
- ▶▶ Remind groups to be as specific as possible.
- ▶▶ When groups have finished their lists, proceed to the next slide – do not process yet.

### **Slide #10: What's the Flip II Learning Task**

*In your school group, review your list of strategies.*

*Select 3 strategies to focus on in your school. Revisit these strategies and provide as much detail as possible, so that anyone in your school could implement them.*

*We will process as a large group.*

- ▶▶ Once groups have had a chance to revisit the strategies they have selected and filled in more details, have groups share what they have come up with.
- ▶▶ Ask other participants to ask questions to clarify and encourage further details.
- ▶▶ You could ask them to circle the three strategies
- ▶▶ You could ask all groups to post the charts so that everyone can view the strategies as a large group.
- ▶▶ Allow for large group processing of all of the groups' lists.

### **\*\*\* Slide 3: Additional Information**

Note: All of this information is applicable and deep background to the remaining slides...**NOT to present the details.**

Columbine is analogous to 9-11. There had been many terrorist attacks on American interests around the world prior to the planes hitting the Trade Towers in New York City – as we know, there had even been earlier attempts on the Trade Towers themselves. But such attacks on our own soil had not been successful, so we continued with our lives, and for the most part we were not really prepared for such a devastating attack. As with terrorism, with school shootings we need to change our orientation away from reaction to events after they have happened to prevention, making sure that they do not take place at all. Please note that I am not naïve; as with terrorism, we do the best we can to prevent school shootings, knowing that there is probably no way that we can ever guarantee 100% security.

The study findings that I now want to discuss focus primarily on the elementary through high school contexts. Currently, research is much more spotty for the post-secondary environment, although my hunch is that the same, or very similar things, will be found. We don't yet know enough about Steven Kazmierczak, the shooter at Northern Illinois University, but the qualities that are shared by all of the school shooters in the elementary and secondary schools were also present in the case of Cho Seung-Hui at Virginia Tech. The fact that universities are dealing with a perceived “adult” student population in open campuses makes prevention a great deal more tricky, but certainly not impossible.

**\*\*\* Slide 5: Additional Information**

Note: All of this information is applicable and deep background to the remaining slides...**NOT to present the details.**

The United States Secret Service, through the National Threat Assessment Center and working in cooperation with the national Department of Education, were the next agencies to provide a research base on school shootings, examining earlier cases with the intent of prevention. Their final report was issued in 2002. The findings in this report are critical to understanding the phenomenon of school shootings. These researchers obtained permission to interview and videotape every living school shooter

(a number of the school shooters had, as you know, committed suicide at the pinnacle of their rampages). The research team also reviewed every school-related document they could get their hands on: student cum files, student work, computer files, journals and creative projects, among other items. The team entered prisons and detention facilities and asked these young men to speak about why they “shot up their schools.” The information gleaned is profound. All of the young men who were the shooters indicated that they now sincerely regret their actions, but reported that at the time of the shootings they felt that they had no other way out of their personal horrors.

The most recent research that has taken place subsequent to the United States Secret Service study, and which has served to “nail down” with certainty what has been true for every school shooter since the shootings began in the 1970s, has been conducted by a team of researchers from Harvard University. This research provides us with a clear pathway toward prevention of school shootings. This team of researchers, led by Katherine S. Newman, hypothesized that there still seemed to be some missing pieces in the school shooter puzzle. To date, no one had seriously looked at the larger social context in which these school shootings occurred. What this group speculated was that the culture and climates not only in these schools but also in the wider communities might provide some additional insights to the school shooter phenomenon. The team obtained permission to look closely at two of the highest profile school shootings that had occurred to date. They then used these two cases as their case studies.

The first case took place in West Paducah, Kentucky. On December 1, 1997, Michael Carneal, age 14, entered Heath High School before the first bell rang. He opened fire around a large circle of students and teachers who were engaged in their daily early morning-prayer session. Three students were killed and five more wounded. It is significant that in this public high school, sectarian prayer was standard practice. The second case happened in Jonesboro, Arkansas. On March 24, 1998, two of the youngest school shooters there have ever been, placed an arsenal of firearms on the perimeter of their elementary school playground which abutted some woods, pulled the fire alarm and when students and teachers exited the building, Andrew Golden, age 11

and Mitchell Johnson, age 13, killed four students and one teacher, and wounded eleven others.

Newman's team traveled to these two communities and lived in them for nearly a year. They took up residence and became community members. They banked in the banks, shopped in local stores, and did everything else residents in these communities would normally do. They interviewed every person possible and at the end of their stay came up with a working theory about what were common factors in these shooters' lives. This theory was then held up against all of the country's previous school shootings. The final puzzle pieces were now identified. In every case around the country, where there had been a school shooting, there were five common factors that existed.

Before I share this set of factors with you, it is important to understand that these following five things are basically the toxic recipe for disaster; not four or three, or some other list, but *all* five and *only* these five. Students having this profile are ticking time bombs. Not all of them, of course, will engage in rampage school shootings. Some will take their own lives without bringing others down with them. And still others, and I believe the majority of them, are simply doomed to exit our schools and will never lead healthy and contented adult lives because they are so hurt and distrustful of others. As adults, they will be non-productive and disengaged members of our communities. We need to identify all of these children, and we can. We then need to provide them with immediate and appropriate interventions. We also need to address the social maladies of the schools that permitted these individuals to suffer.

An important point that I want to make here is that while we now know these five factors, not all of them can be addressed by educators. In fact, only three of the five are matters that we can really address – but three of the five is sufficient. As I go through this list, please reflect upon which three of the five we adults in school have direct influence on and can positively impact and which two we have little, if any, control over.

The **first** thing that all of these children shared was that they were all subjected to on-going, relentless and unforgivable peer cruelty. It went on for weeks, months and years.

The cruelty took many forms and happened on the way to school, during school and after. None of us, and certainly no child, should ever have to suffer as they did. One particular way in which it appears that most, if not all of the shooters, were harassed was by enduring homophobic slurs. This aspect takes on ominous proportions, as you will see.

The **second** element that was shared by all was that they all tried to get help from adults in school to make the peer cruelty stop, and they were greeted with silence. Some of the students were asking directly for help and they were met with comments such as, “Can’t you take a joke?”, “You need to tell them off!”, “It’s really no big deal...you just need to suck it up,” or even remarks such as “It builds your character.” Some were telling their friends, hoping that the information would be brought forward so that the cruelty would end. Others were acting out or skipping classes, hoping beyond hope that the proverbial neon sign that they were wearing to announce to the world they were being mistreated would be noticed. For all of them, it was a voice in the wind. The help they sought never materialized and the abuse continued. In a very real sense, these students were invisible to the adult population who had the power to make a difference. An important footnote to this second factor is that there are a relatively small number of students who are actually capable of self-advocacy. Shy or reserved personalities would rather die than stand up to a peer with inherent power advantages. It would be like telling someone to grow as a solution for being teased for being short.

The **third** thing that these children all had in common were layers of personal problems. These problems fell into two categories: personal and family. All had one or the other; some had both. The personal issues were things like depression, anxiety, a special education challenge that made them stand out. On the family side, they might have been a pawn in a nasty divorce, or in an environment of abuse, neglect or violence. In a word, their families were not healthy and in a number of the shooting events, family members were killed at the hands of their tortured children.

The **fourth** thing common to all of the shooters, and I will share that for me in the work to improve school climate, this frames the territory, is that all of these students went to



school in places where it was abundantly clear what it meant to be an acceptable school community member, and they fell outside of those boundaries. Another way to say this is that the climate of the school was constricting and being different was not OK. For example, Columbine was described as a “Jock” culture. What this meant is that if you played sports, cheered at sporting events or watched sports, you were “in” and acceptable. However, if you were not interested in sports, as was true for Dylan Kleibold and Eric Harris, you were marginalized severely. We now know that it was the football players who were the cruelest to these two individuals.

In any given school, the climate or culture could be determined by what music is listened to, what clothes are worn, who are your idols, what food is eaten, or what religion is embraced. It could be anything that makes the school unique. Being unique is not always accepting of difference. Michael Carneal’s public high school allowed prayer circles because in a religiously homogeneous school community, no one questioned the illegality of the behaviors. In fact, there has never been a rampage shooting in an inner city school. The experts now believe that this may be due to the inherent diversity where there is a much easier time for each student to find his or her own niche. In too many schools, there are not enough opportunities for students to explore their individual interests, find others who share them within the school setting. Offering a variety of activities beyond the typical high profile ones, such as sports and band, will allow many more students to want to engage. Every individual needs to feel he or she is part of the school.

**Finally**, all of these young people had easy access to guns. Is it any wonder that shooting up schools has been exclusively a male province? Boys, who are raised in a culture that delivers constant messages that the one emotion they can show without being marginalized is outward anger and aggression, pick up guns to prove they are not weak, sissies or gay. Using a gun in an environment that so hurt them is the ultimate show of revenge, especially after being told again and again that they were not “real” boys, as Harvard’s Dr. William Pollack notes. The shooters were not the ones who meted out the cruelty; they took it. They all were the targets. These targets eventually snapped, with unspeakable results.

Take a careful look at this list. What can we adults in the school environment impact and change to make it better for our students? If we are honest, with systemic attention we can diminish, and even eliminate, the peer cruelty. We can also structure our schools so that students develop meaningful connections with adults. And, we can work to make our schools accepting of each and every individual. Difference would be celebrated and embraced rather than ostracized. When we focus on the firearms these children obtained, and mental health or family issues that were accidents of birth, we are dealing with matters that are largely out of our control.

One additional footnote. Around the tenth anniversary of Columbine, Jonathan Fast, psychologist wrote a book called, Ceremonial Violence. In this book, he looks carefully at the personally psychology of the shooters. It turns out that those with the five qualities that acted out through a rampage school shooting had a clinical condition called “malignant narcissism.” In ordinary language, these young men had a severely overinflated sense of self. Without going into unnecessary detail about this condition, it is only necessary to understand that IF any of them had not experienced ANY of these five “toxic” elements, their psychological deficiency would not have manifested itself in tragedy. Hence, the Harvard research stands without change. Adults in schools need to focus on the three conditions that can be managed and not focus upon the personal psychology of individual students.