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[1] Schools are very safe places: *physically* safe places, that is. Every one of us here today is safer in a school than in our homes, or indeed almost anywhere else in our own community, on any given day. In fact, statistically we are more likely to win the “power ball” than we are to be killed in a school. This is why the targeted or “rampage” school shootings are so incredibly troubling. Our schools are known to be safe places. They are places that we trust to be safe; more important, they are places where we trust that our children will be safe. It is the rash of school shootings that have taken place in the past month that bring us here today. What can be done to prevent such events from recurring?

Fortunately, there are now concrete and definitive answers to this question. It is possible to prevent students from believing that they have no alternative than to pick up guns and hurt themselves and others. [2] Unfortunately, these solutions are not as simple as installing metal detectors, requiring ID cards, mandating clear backpacks or using profiling software. Interviewed school shooters admitted that metal detectors in their schools would never have stopped them from racing into these schools with guns blazing.

The solution is actually quite different than the kinds of security apparatuses that we often think about. It is a matter of educating school personnel and community members, from school board members to administrators, to teachers and pupil personnel staff, to parents, about what is fundamentally necessary to improve the lives of children who are languishing, hurting and wandering alone within the social fabric of the school. This is not just another item on the “to do” list that can be easily checked off. We all must roll up our sleeves and get to work; our children’s health, safety and success, both academic and social, are on the line.

Although our schools are physically safe places, they are far from being either emotionally or intellectually safe places. In other words, if we are to address issues of school safety in a meaningful way, then we must think about safety in very broad terms. This is something of a paradigm shift for many adults, since we have traditionally focused almost exclusively on *physical* safety at school. Interestingly, children are far less concerned with physical safety because so many of them see themselves as being invincible. It is the emotional and intellectual violence which plagues them day in and day out, and all too often it is with this emotional and intellectual violence – the sort that they most need help in dealing with – that adults fail them.

Physically violent behavior includes not only suicide and homicide; it includes pushing, shoving, hitting, tripping, stuffing individuals in garbage cans, throwing them against lockers or dunking heads in toilet bowls. Emotional cruelty includes threats, name-calling, teasing, laughing at, making fun of, excluding, nonverbal actions and so on. And, when these behaviors happen within a classroom setting, they directly impact a

student's ability to learn. This, in turn, is intellectual cruelty. [3] Students who are targets of intellectual cruelty shut down; they either don't show up physically, or they choose not to participate. Whether they put their heads down on their desks or "opt out" and make frequent trips to the school nurse or to guidance as a way of escaping their classroom pain, they are sending an important message to any adult who will listen. Students cannot learn if they are not physically or emotionally present for instruction.

[4] This is where we must begin: we have to recognize how dangerous the hurtful non-physical actions, verbal and non-verbal exchanges, tones of voice and uses of inherent power advantages are for young people. For example, younger children have great difficulty standing up to older children and those outside the "popular" group rarely have the courage to tell off a student in the "in-crowd." Little incidents escalate into more serious acts. If we can stop minor problems before they escalate, we can prevent more serious ones from ever materializing. [5] All serious school violence committed by peer against peer initially begins with words. In a real sense, words are the most deadly and dangerous weapons imaginable, and their use as weapons is rampant in almost every school here in Connecticut and throughout the country. If we really want to address issues of school safety, the place to begin is by removing these verbal weapons.

[6] Both verbal and non-verbal emotional daggers matter to students most of all, and hurt far more than do most physical wounds. Even though we should remember better from our own childhoods, as adults we far too often we treat these verbal and non-verbal emotional harms as just a normal part of growing up, chalking it all up to inevitable rites of passage that we all need to live through. I want to suggest that such behaviors are anything but inevitable, and are certainly nothing that we should simply take for granted. If an adult were guilty of such acts, he or she would likely be arrested. Somehow, though, because students are kids, and "kids will be kids," it is all acceptable. And, once it has gotten completely out of hand, and an individual has finally snapped -- after the gunshots have been fired, then it is too late. And we are mystified -- we didn't see it coming, how could we have known, and so on. But of course we *could* have known, and we certainly *should* have known -- if only we had been paying attention. All of the signs were there, as we will see.

Let me back up for a moment before going further with describing the solution path that we all need and seek. [7] 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. School shootings became more common, and there have been at least a handful every year since that time, and the pace continues. [8] 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 stab 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 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? I believe there are two main reasons. 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, I think, 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 or rural problem. They were a national problem, and one that might occur in any of our schools.

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. [9] 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.

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. [10] 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. [11] 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.

[12] 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 me 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 that I do, 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.

[13] I would like to pause briefly and share some powerful video with you. This *60 Minutes II* segment aired about a decade ago when the United States Secret Service was finishing up their research. It preceded the Harvard work that I just presented. What is fascinating is that in telling the story about the school shooters, the youth themselves highlight the five toxic qualities that we now know align to result in tragedy. When you listen to Luke Woodham speak about his experience at his high school in Pearl, Mississippi, when he was sixteen, it is hard not to relive his tortuous treatment at the hands of his peers. He speaks about not having an adult that would care about him and about how he was called, “gay.” The videotaping was conducted a full two years after the October 1, 1997, Pearl High School rampage where two students were killed, seven others wounded and his mother stabbed to death at her son’s hands. I still feel his obvious pain. Obviously, it is not all right to kill your peers or your mother. I know that; we all do. But it is also not OK to be hurt by them. You will also see another shooter, Clay Nathaniel Shrout. On May 26, 1994, seventeen year-old Clay killed his parents and two of his sisters before going off to his school, Ryle High. Like Woodham, he was treated as an oddity and forced to the fringes of the school culture. You will hear a poem of his read. The poem is titled, “They.” This poem speaks of the constricting boundaries he experienced in his school. His school climate had no room for him and his peers hurt him because of it. The researchers will also share what was said by one of the shooters who wished to remain anonymous. This young man acted out with increasing intensity in the hope of getting adults in school to notice his plight, and intervene to stop the abuse he received at the hands of his peers. There is no question that these two adolescents had mental health and family struggles as well as easy access to firearms. What these schools neglected to deal with was the peer cruelty, constricting school climates and lack of adult advocacy to make these schools safe for them. As you watch this, look carefully and you will see our own Gerald Terrozzi in a cameo appearance!

Maybe you have noticed that to this point, I have used the word, “cruelty” rather than “bullying” as is used in the video we just watched. This is done purposefully. Everyone here has heard that bullying was a major contributing factor for these students.

When the United States Secret Service agents said, “most of the shooters were bullied,” we know that they were all subjected to unimaginable peer cruelty, it just wasn’t called bullying. The word itself is highly problematic.

Thirty-four states have some form of an anti-bullying law and nine others are considering so legislating. Every one of these statutes has been passed post-Columbine. They contain thirty-two different definitions of what constitutes “bullying.” Not only is the word itself alienating, but also, focusing on “bullying” is fundamentally not at all helpful in managing the epidemic of meanness that is at the heart of the problem addressed today. No one knows exactly what to look for, and since “bullying” implies some kind of repeated-over-time pattern of hurtful behavior, we adults tend not to stop things until we are sure they are really verified acts of bullying. This is far too late in the escalating cycle. And many schools shun claiming they host any bullying most likely for fear of being labeled a “persistently dangerous school” by community members.

[14] Either of these reasons allows us to deny responsibility. Why should we wait until some arbitrary time after the cruelty has begun? The overarching intent or spirit of all of the anti-bullying legislation throughout the county is to create safe schools. Typically, schools satisfy the letter of their requisite laws; the policies are in place and when bullying is actually identified, interventions occur. School personnel do care deeply about the welfare of their students. Now the gap between the letter and the spirit of these laws must be closed; it’s not just about intervention after an act of bullying has been identified, it’s about preventing it in the first place.

[15] Research again demonstrates that the earlier in the cycle of cruelty we stop such behaviors, the easier it is to quell them. We need to intervene the first time we observe hurtful behavior. If we stop using the words “bully” or “bullying” and use “mean” or “cruel” instead, we will have a much easier time in practice. No child wants to be told he or she is a bully or is engaged in bullying, and the same is true for parents and guardians about their children. [16] Everyone understands “mean” and are much more likely to admit they are mean from time to time than that they are a bully. Five year-olds understand “mean,” as do fifteen year-olds. I am giving sound advice here. I like to think of “bully” and “bullying” as just other four-letter-words, and as words that we should avoid using.

Let me suggest something radical here. School shootings and other school-related violent acts committed by peers against each other is *our* problem. We adults have created environments in which individual children fail to experience the safety and connections that they require for social and academic success. Michael Dorn, an international leader in the area of school safety, calls this, “negligent privacy”: [17]

Negligent privacy occurs when those who supervise and monitor children do not remain vigilant and unwittingly provide the opportunity for victimization to occur. Negligent privacy can occur on a playground filled with second graders, in a crowded high school cafeteria, during a youth group camping trip or even 10 feet away from a teacher in a classroom. Simply put, negligent privacy occurs when adults are not paying close attention to children under their care.

Please don’t misunderstand me. My point is that we cannot do this alone. School leaders, teachers and students need to work together to accomplish this. However, *we*, the adults, are the models and *we* set the boundaries and standards of appropriate treatment. Typically in schools, ten percent of the population are adults and ninety

percent are students. Those student bystanders must be empowered to assist. [18] But, it begins with us. We're the ones who guide and mentor children. We're the ones who set the standards. We are their role models, whether we want to be or not. We have a choice...we might as well be good role models. We must create climates of respect that do not support any mean-spirited behaviors and satisfy the spirit of our anti-bullying laws that have attempted to legislate physical, emotional and intellectual safety for all. Unfortunately, we're not there yet.

[19] In order to create respectful schools, everyone has to learn what "respect" looks like, feels like and sounds like so that these elements can be experienced. Far too often we criticize children for being disrespectful. Since they have been told from the time they were in pre-school that they need to respect people and property generically, by the time they get in school, it is likely that they really do not have a clear sense of what respect *specifically* embodies. How can anyone demonstrate respect without internalizing the elements that comprise it? [20] Respect is something that is earned; you must give it to receive it in return. Demanding respect may yield obedience, but not likely anything more.

[21] First, a central feature of respect is that common courtesy is used. Polite language and behavior are the hallmarks of courtesy; given or chosen names are used to address one another. Second, and of great importance is listening; listening beyond head nodding; listen with engagement and concern. If we really respect others, we listen to them actively and thoughtfully and respond accordingly. Listening does not imply "just waiting to talk." Young people often equate real listening with fairness, even when in the end, their side is not taken. Next, respect includes being considerate and compassionate; caring for someone else. Fourth, being respectful includes fair and appropriate treatment of others. Fifth, respect means that there is an appreciation and even celebration of differences. These differences may be physical, ethnic, religious, racial, sexual or political, for example. Respect also means that there is honest and forthright behavior and communication. Respect also means that one is willing to give heartfelt apologies for the mistakes that we all make from time to time, no matter how old and experienced we are. There may be other elements of respect that we could all identify, but these are the central aspects. This is what respect looks like, feels like and sounds like. In schools where climates of respect are the rule, no individual is alienated from another and from the larger school culture. Hurting another would be foreign and unnecessary.

Simultaneous with the studies being conducted in the school-shooting arena, there has been some compelling research into the importance of something now referred to as "school connectedness." [22] Work led by Robert Blum at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore has pointed to identical conclusions about what the school shooters have lacked. What Dr. Blum has confirmed is that "when students feel they are a part of school, say they are treated fairly by teachers, and feel close to people at school, they are healthier and more likely to succeed."

[23] Five very simple measures can make or break the difference in the overall success and health of our young people. When children feel a part of the school, feel close to people at school, are happy to be there, perceive that teachers treat them fairly and feel physically, emotionally and intellectually safe, nearly every detrimental social risk factor disappears. [24] Children who report that they are very or quite a bit connected in these ways do not experience emotional distress (including attempted

suicide), they do not engage in risky sexual behaviors, they do not abuse substances and they do not engage in violent or deviant behavior. [25,26,27,28] Furthermore, they are more likely to achieve to their academic potential. Adults in school ought to make deliberate efforts to recognize and acknowledge individual students continually, with the primary goal of getting to know them well. This is an important way to foster the kind of positive relationships that yield positive life outcomes. Every student has unique gifts and these must be celebrated and communicated to all of them. [29] More important than anything else, determining whether an individual student feels successful, hinges on that child's belief that his or her teachers like him or her.

[30] The single most important feature of connected schools was found to be school climate. [31] No set of policies could be determined to make a difference, but schools hosting a culture of harsh discipline worked against high levels of connectedness. [32] In these studies on school connectedness, class size doesn't matter. The demographic setting of the school doesn't matter. Schools housing over 1,200 students must be made to feel smaller, because school size does matter. Children need to be connected to school. It's that simple. This reality is known to be true in the elementary, secondary and university settings.

[33] What is school climate really? Very simply, it is about relationships: relationships among adults, relationships among adults and children and relationships among peers. It's about the quality of those relationships and in essence whether individuals inside schools treat others appropriately. It boils down to this. And, it is not something that is solved through a curricular program; it cannot be accomplished through lessons directed toward students that happen once a week for an hour. [34] Ensuring that adults and children treat each other appropriately all of the time and in every corner of the school physically, emotionally and intellectually, must be woven into the normal business of the school. This is what solves it. [35] Safe schools have this kind of a high quality school climate. They live by the Golden, or even better, the Platinum Rule: [36] Treat others the way in which they wish to be treated. After all, every one of us, adult and student, is a person and deserves to be treated accordingly. [37] Dr. Seuss' Horton the Elephant told us this same thing over 50 years ago; "a person's a person, no matter how small."

[38] In closing, we've been lucky here in Connecticut. We have never experienced the horror of a rampage school shooting. We've had some close calls, but due to eleventh hour interventions, we've been spared. My fondest hope, and I know that all of you share this with me, is that we never do have to live through such a tragedy. Let it not just be a matter of luck or last minute actions, though. We know how to prevent such a tragedy. Let's all work together to create physically, emotionally and intellectually safe schools in which every child feels connected and cared about. We can do this, and we must. Not only will marginalized children be helped, but also each and every other child will benefit exponentially. I look forward to helping you all in this work in any way that I can. Thank you. [39]