



EDUCATION

Metal detectors, bulletproof glass, steel doors: How do we keep students safe at school?

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Students at the Florida high school where 17 students and teachers were gunned down on Valentine's Day will soon have another daily reminder of the shooting: clear backpacks they must wear.

As they switch to see-through backpacks — in the wake of two students being arrested for carrying knives and the shooting suspect's brother being charged with trespassing — survivors continue to call on Congress for tougher gun laws and better school security.

"We are sick and tired of the inaction here in Washington and around the country," David Hogg, one of the Parkland school shooting survivors who joined others marching over the weekend for gun control, has said.

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Congress has taken steps to help by allocating millions for metal detectors at schools and working to improve the nation's criminal background check system for those buying guns. Bills have been filed to do everything from raising the age limit to buy some weapons to letting law enforcers take weapons away from those who pose a threat.

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Three North Texas House members are among those who have proposed school safety plans that range from metal detectors to funding safety assessments at schools.

The Star-Telegram submitted those plans to safety authorities who independently reviewed the three proposals and found pros and cons in most of them.

"We can't just sit and wait until the next one," said Patrick Fiel, a North Carolina-based security consultant who has spent more than three decades managing law enforcement and security organizations. "There are measures we can put in place."

He and others praised congressional leaders for trying to find a solution and said each plan has the potential to protect students and teachers across the country.

"There is a massive outcry now from students, families, parents, teachers," said Jeff Halstead, a former Fort Worth police chief who now serves as a police technology consultant based in Las Vegas. "This is a tough task."

"But we have got to remain focused on the safety of our children."

Here's a look at what the safety experts thought of the plans by local members of Congress.

Metal detectors

U.S. Rep. Kay Granger's plan, "Securing Children in Schools Act," creates a federal grant program to help public schools pay for and install metal detectors. The Fort Worth Republican has stressed that her plan, funded through a \$500 million federal grant program over the next decade, is just one step Congress could take to protect students.

An omnibus spending bill recently approved by Congress includes \$25 million for schools to buy metal detectors in fiscal 2018 and \$33 million for more metal detectors between fiscal 2019 and 2028. "We will keep trying to increase the overall amount for safety in schools," Granger said.

"It sounds really good," Halstead said of Granger's plan. "The only troubling thing is when we look at what we did at the airports after 9-11. Look at the time it will take to enter the school."

"Now every educational facility has to have a definite ingress and egress point," he said. "There could be a massive time delay. And this is extremely expensive."

A potential problem with this plan is that some schools may not be equipped for metal detectors, said Fiel, founder of PVF Security Consulting and a former executive director of security for Washington, D.C., schools.

"Many schools are not fitted to put a security screener at the entrance and would need construction," he said. "We don't want our schools to look like prisons, but we want to stop the shooters."

Antonio Orozco III of Houston, a school safety officer trainer, questions the use of metal detectors.

“Are students not smart enough to know not to bring in a gun at an entry with a metal detector stationed at it? What’s not to keep someone from tossing a handgun over a fence to be picked up later?” he asked. “Shooters will adjust, hide further away and take pot shots.”

Not only that, but metal detectors would have to be manned around the clock to prevent someone from coming in after hours and hiding a weapon somewhere in the school, said Ken S. Trump, president of Ohio-based National School Safety and Security Services.

Safety assessments

U.S. Rep. Roger Williams, R-Austin, filed a bill to let schools seek funding from the U.S. Department of Education to put in place whatever safety measures — metal detectors, steel doors, bulletproof glass, safety training, magnetometers, security assessments — local officials believe are needed to protect students and teachers.

The education secretary would review those requests and grant however much of the department’s \$63 billion budget is deemed necessary to those schools, according to the plan by Williams, whose district stretches from the edges of Tarrant County through Austin.

“This would be the route I would go,” Fiel said.

“The reason this has such strong merit is that it’s giving school districts from Florida to Maryland to Louisiana the capacity to customize a plan that best suits their district or school,” Halstead said. “It has a lot of merit.

“Some schools are already advanced in security,” he said. “Others don’t do as much.”

Orozco said this plan is similar to others that have been made.

“But no one suggests [taking] the guns out of the kids’ hands first,” he said.

A broad focus

U.S. Rep. Joe Barton, R-Ennis, has said his plan includes talking with the National Rifle Association, Republicans, Democrats, the Texas congressional delegation and the Freedom Caucus to work behind the scenes to find a solution.

Among his proposals: buckling down on background checks and giving law enforcers more authority to screen, investigate and even detain people who are believed to be a threat of shooting others, said Barton, whose district includes most of Arlington and Mansfield and all of Ellis and Navarro counties.

“His plan is what has been going on for years,” Halstead said. “Action is required. I know they want to bring all the stakeholders together. But we’ve got to come up with definitive solutions.”

Orozco said Barton’s plan would take too long.

“By the time millions upon millions are subjected to what he considers a plan, hundreds or thousands more children could have been killed,” he said. “Call the NRA — [that’s] not a plan. He’s just letting off steam.”

Other options

Kenneth Trump, who consults on school security cases ranging from active shooters to wrongful deaths, said security systems aren’t the sole solution.

“While the facts and merits of each case vary, the common thread is that the majority of cases involve allegations of failures of people and procedures, not security products and hardware,” he said. “This tells me that we need to focus on the people side of school safety — training, planning, prevention, mental health supports, reasonable drills and exercises, etc. — not a skewed approach to hardware. If anything, we need more mental detectors, not more metal detectors.

“We know what works: regular assessment of security and emergency preparedness plans and practices, reasonable diversification of drills such as during lunch periods or upon student arrival without going over the top [and] creating a culture of students reporting plots and weapons.”

Trump said the focus should be on mental health and promoting a “see something, say something and do something” culture.

This year, there have been more than a dozen school shootings across the country in which someone was injured or killed, according to a tally by CNN, including one when a 15-year-old was shot in the cafeteria at the Italy High School, south of Waxahachie.

Hastead stressed the need for law enforcers to use technology that lets them share critical information as quickly as information spreads these days on social media.

“It’s shocking how fast the world can communicate,” he said. “We have to start leading at the same rate. We are way behind.”

Fiel suggested finding a way to put police officers at all schools and begin more tip hotlines so anyone can notify authorities if they see or hear of any threat.

And Ozorco said legislators should raise the age to buy rifles such as the AR-15 to 21.

“If their daddy wants them to have one, there is nothing anyone will be able to do about it — but at least make it difficult to get one,” he said.

He also said teachers and administrators need more training.

“Do everything else everybody else suggests,” Ozorco said. “All of it.”

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Though there is no single profile for school shooters, people at risk for hurting themselves or others often exhibit warning signs before committing acts of violence. Knowing the signs can help prevent crimes and get people the help they need. McClatchy — Nicole L. Cvetnic / McClatchy

