



Lessons Learned from Past School Shootings

- **By Patrick V. Fiel Sr., Rick Shaw**
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Two experts are working together and collaborating on new ways school campuses can develop a proactive and comprehensive security plan.

For three consecutive years, the U.S has had a record high number of school shootings resulting in a repetitive cycle of grievances, anger, and frustration. The U.S. had 344 school shootings in 2023 which surpassed the record-breaking number of 308 school shootings in 2022 as reported by K-12 School Shooting Database.

On January 5, 2024, a mass shooting occurred at Perry Middle School in Iowa that left an eleven-year-old student dead. Seven other individuals received wounds or injuries of varying degrees during the shooting event. The victims included the school principal, two staff members, and four students. The shooter, a student, died from a self-inflicted gunshot wound at the scene.

Media reports indicate it took law enforcement 7 minutes to respond to the Perry Middle School shooting. When an active shooter is on campus, “seconds count.” This is why all schools need to have a permanent School Resource Officer assigned.

It has to stop; our students and teachers deserve better and need to have a safe and secure school environment. Parents should not have to worry about their child or children in school.

There are numerous questions coming from the Iowa school shooting and other past shootings, including whether it could have been prevented.

What can we do? Are there lessons learned from past school shootings? Is this about politics, gun control or mental illnesses? Why do we immediately know more about the shooter after the incident?

Is there technology that can help collect and connect red flags or warning signs before a known at-risk individual escalates to a shooting?

2023’s record levels of shootings, suicides, overdoses, hate crimes and other incidents are red flags that new technology is needed to equip schools, colleges, workplaces, and communities to better identify known at-risk individuals and help keep them from falling through the cracks.

With soaring numbers of at-risk individuals, we know that until we seriously embrace a collaborative, proactive, pre-incident intervention and first preventers approach, we will continue to see the high numbers of deaths and injuries associated with school shootings and mass shootings.

Lessons learned from past school shootings have proven that they are thoroughly planned for days, weeks, months, or even years, but the shooters fell through the cracks. We do know that past shooters have researched past shootings that have made national news, especially the Columbine school massacre. We also know from research and National Threat Assessment Center reports that most shooters shared messages or images on social media or told someone about their intentions.

The key to safer schools is collecting scattered warning signs exhibited by at-risk individuals so threat assessment teams can see the bigger picture and act on them to help the at-risk individual(s) before they end up taking the lives of innocent children and adults in schools and communities.

Through careful planning, it is possible for schools to develop a quality security crisis plan that meets campus needs without breaking the budget. Together with a school security expert, school administrators, their staff and local emergency responders can complete a thorough risk assessment to include an all-hazards approach of all their schools and campuses. Schools are soft targets, and their campuses are unique and have their own individual challenges, i.e., size, age, location, design or type of construction and other factors.

The risk assessment pinpoints critical areas of vulnerability and will identify the school's security strengths, as well as any security weaknesses. The whole process is designed to reduce incidents and try to anticipate any emergencies that might occur on campus.

Any plan will undoubtedly include security technology, but no single security implementation will protect a school; true protection comes from many layers of security protocols and ongoing intervention processes.

It is highly recommended that schools implement a closed-campus policy to deny unwanted individuals. All entry, exit, and classroom doors should be locked throughout the day. If there is an early arrival of students before school starts, a designated door should be identified and monitored by a staff member.

In closing, school administrators should ensure they have a comprehensive safety and security plan in place. The plan should be a living document that is continually updated to meet the challenges of a particular school and campus and to eliminate the common blind spots that allow at-risk individuals to fall through the cracks. Protecting students, staff and visitors to a school campus is a huge undertaking that requires planning, diligence, and ongoing attention.

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