

EDUCATION

Robb Elementary shooting a watershed moment for school security

Experts discuss the tragedy and its implications for the larger industry moving forward

Joel Griffin

Columbine, Sandy Hook and Marjory Stoneman Douglas are names etched into the consciousness of nearly every American as being among the deadliest school shootings in U.S. history. Robb Elementary in the Texas city of Uvalde now joins this growing list after an 18-year-old gunman walked into the school on Tuesday and opened fire, killing 21 people, including 19 children.

The usual refrain from both sides of the political spectrum has already begun – per usual – with calls for increased gun control on one end and arming teachers and staff members on the other. However, those who eat, sleep and breathe school security as a part of their daily lives know that neither of these proposed solutions will truly eliminate the threat of mass shootings.

Despite a plethora of federal- and state-funded studies and vows to address the problem from lawmakers, the fact is that very little has been done to address the deficiencies that exist in the industry.

Patrick Fiel, Founder of PVF Security Consulting and the former Executive Director of Security for the Washington, D.C. Public School System, lays blame for this inaction on school boards and administrators.

“It is a lack of funding, a lack of knowledge and a lack of empathy where they don’t care,” he says, adding that they need to be “held accountable” – whether that be through federal mandates or some type of monitoring instrument.

Access Control Breached

While details surrounding Tuesday’s shooting are still scarce, school security experts agree that there was clearly a breach of access control on the campus and that authorities are going to have to determine how the gunman was initially able to enter the building.

“It’s like putting a fox into a hen house. That is what I call that because if the fox is in there, damage is going to occur,” Fiel adds. “It can’t happen.”

“Security should, especially in an elementary school, have a single point of entry and every other exterior door is closed and locked,” adds Paul Timm, Vice President of Facility Engineering Associates and author of the book, *School Security: How to Build and Strengthen a School Safety Program*.

“And, in every school, we should be teaching with the classroom door closed and locked. Both the Sandy Hook and Stoneman Douglas after action reports said the bad guys never breached a locked, classroom door. Why is it that we feel entitled to have either the school accessible or a classroom accessible? Mostly it is because we will trade security for convenience.”

In his experience, Timm says he has yet to encounter an incident of this type that did not involve some failure of access control. While many will point to a lack of budget or training, Timm says it is the security culture within schools – or lack thereof – that is one of the biggest contributing factors to mass shootings and other incidents of violence on campuses.

“I’m not saying schools couldn’t use more funds or pieces of equipment, but let’s face it: the value of the security systems and products we have depends on the people that are utilizing them,” he says. “If we’ve spent maybe \$10,000 on

an electronic access control system, but somebody is allowing tailgating – or worse, propping a door open and leaving it unmonitored – we just rendered the value to zero. I generally find that this time of year schools have cabin fever and we're having field days or whatever it is, and everybody is kind of just making it till the end of the year and maybe are not as sharp as what we would have been in the middle of the semester. I hope that's not the case. I hope they weren't leaving everything accessible, but again I wonder how if the elementary school has a single point of entry and a secured vestibule how that bad guy gets in."

Kenneth Trump, President of consulting firm National School Safety and Security Services, agrees and says that the even the best security technology is only good as the people behind it and that lawmakers cannot continue to just throw money at the problem and hope it goes away.

"I'm seeing the limited investments of resources that have been thrown out by state legislatures or governors have been nearly 100% or very heavily skewed towards hardware and technology," Trump says. "Superintendents and principals are struggling because it is easy to beef up physical security and point to something tangible, but we are not seeing investment in training school staff."

Though schools now largely do a much better job of developing emergency plans and improving response protocols, Trump believes the training needs to be shifted to emphasize heightened situational awareness.

"Today we're dealing with more unknowns that are much harder to train for. We are a society now where people are engulfed in their digital worlds, heads in the smartphone and not aware of what is going on around them," he says. "Educators [must be aware] that everything is not going to come on a checklist, and that by having physical security measures or even a police officer or a

security officer on campus, doesn't exclude the responsibility of everyone else. Security is everybody's job."

Immediate Steps

Among the first things that all schools can do in the wake of this incident, according to experts, is to evaluate access control and visitor management systems to ensure that they are not only working properly, but that all internal policies are being strictly followed.

Beyond the budgetary issues that are commonly cited by school leaders when it comes to improving campus safety, Trump says that time is actually a rarer commodity these days, as security must compete with academic considerations.

"Right now, I'm having conversations with school administrators who will tell me they want to bring me in for training, but I am in competition with the academic side of the house just to get on the agenda," he adds.

Fiel says that there needs to be a school resource officer (SRO) always stationed on school property and that they also need to take a more proactive approach to security overall. "At a lot of schools, security is on patrol in the vicinity," he says. "That is a little bit too late when seconds count."

Additionally, Fiel says that schools should be able to implement a lockdown on a moment's notice. "When I say lockdown, that means a working PA system where you can announce 'code red' (or whatever they decide to call it) and create a secured environment," he says. "A shooter is not going to waste time kicking in doors and all of that, they are just going to look for open areas where people are located."

An Integrator's Perspective

Shaun Castillo, President of Texas-based Preferred Technologies, LLC, says the shooting really hits home to his company, which does a lot of work in the K-12 market with many employees who have children in local school districts. And while funding may not play a role in ensuring schools follow security protocols, he says it is very much a factor in what solutions they are able to deploy, which could play a major role in mitigating against active shooter situations like the one in Uvalde.

“This one really lands on our hearts very hard,” he says. “Unfortunately, there is a very wide variance in funding for school districts. Some can afford top-of-the-line security solutions, which can include a lot of general construction of entry vestibules and that sort of thing. Obviously, security technologies can get expensive across a whole district. And not everyone can afford a high level of security.”

Castillo adds that he hopes many of the bonds that have gone out recently across Texas will make the financial impact of security systems less of a factor in the future.

“Having a top-of-the-line security solution is not cheap by any means, and funding is already limited for education,” he says. “It is tough to keep teachers and meet the demands of what students need to make them successful citizens. Once you start to incorporate all that needs to be done in schools today and the limited amount of funding available, unfortunately school districts have to make tough choices. Sometimes that means not having an ideal security solution or posture.”

One thing that integrators, consultants, architects and engineers can do, according to Castillo, is help design campuses to deploy security technology in a more cost-effective manner. “We can help design spaces that enhance security for as minimal amount of money as possible,” he says. “Beyond

physical security barriers, there are policies, procedures and other things we can do besides add more cameras and card readers.”

Holding Administrators Responsible

Even with all the shootings that have taken place in the wake of Columbine, which shocked the nation and shined a spotlight on the importance of school security, Fiel believes that schools have largely put a “Band-Aid” on these issues, which now quickly turn political.

“The issue is how do we make our schools similar to a fortress where we have to protect these kids while they are in the school environment,” Fiel says. “You have to use technology and other resources, but I just got done talking to a school board that had all of these [measures] implemented, but there were no checks and balances. If they are saying all of their doors are locked and secured, but if I’m walking in the cafeteria door and I’m walking in the backdoor, I should be able to write them up and report it to the superintendent like I have in the past. We have to hold the administrators accountable.”

Timm says that he would also make school safety part of the overall evaluation for administrators, as it varies so much from one campus to the next even within the same district. “I could be in a district where we are all supposed to be wearing IDs and I walk in and the principal will say, ‘yeah, it is just too hard to do that,’” he says. “I can walk into another building in the same district and the principal will say, ‘everyone wears an ID here. I require it.’ We could objectively evaluate principals based on the safety of the school.”

Even in the wake of tragedies like this, Timm believes that the security posture of public schools overall in the U.S. today is still much better than it was two decades ago. “In general, schools have secured vestibules at the main entrance and, in general, schools are required to practice drills more than just for fire. The number of incidents that have been averted because we were successful

with threat assessment or by running a closed campus – we couldn't possibly keep an accurate count.”

Adds Trump: “What we are seeing now is legislators and governors throwing some money at quick fixes with hardware and equipment after an incident and leaving it all there. There is a role for security hardware and equipment, but it has to be one part of a comprehensive approach.”

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Arming Teachers

Aside from calls for passing better gun control legislation, one of the ideas traditionally recommended as a possible solution to shootings like the one at Robb Elementary has been to arm teachers or other faculty members; however, experts say this type of action is littered with potential pitfalls.

According to Timm, there are number of questions that schools thinking about implementing a policy of this sort need to ask themselves, including:

- When will armed personnel officially be on duty? Is it when they arrive in the parking lot? In the building? In their classroom? When are they off duty?
- Can we agree on what type of firearm they are going to be carrying?
- Is everyone in agreement on what type of psychological background screening that has to take place?
- What will armed personnel have to wear so that they are not mistaken for the shooter if police arrive on campus?
- Where will weapons be stored?
- What kind of firearms proficiency must armed personnel demonstrate on the range?

“Once we start to arm people who are not law enforcement, we introduce more risks than we address,” Timm says.

Trump is also of the opinion that anyone allowed to carry a firearm on a school campus should be a trained and certified police officer. “When we talk about giving someone a couple dozen hours of training to be a guardian or marshal, that means they are getting

trained on the mechanics of a firearm – how to use it, clean it, store it, holster it – not getting the hundreds of hours of training and the years of experience to be a police officer and then the specialized experience to be an SRO that is offered through different organizations.”

Fiel says the majority of people who would be asked to carry a firearm in these situations are also not familiar with them, and that most are not comfortable with the idea anyway. “When I was in D.C. [public schools], we found more weapons from teachers in their bookbags or in their cabinets or desks – leaving them unsecured,” he explains. “The one thing we don’t want is to have more weapons inside of a school. There are some schools that are doing it, but I don’t believe in it. I think teachers should educate.”

On the flip side, even if tighter gun control measures were implemented immediately, Fiel says it would do little to solve the immediate challenges facing schools when it comes to mitigating against active shooters.

“There are over 400 million guns in the U.S. that we know of, so if we stopped all [gun purchases] today, you still have these guns in the streets and they are still going to make their way into soft targets,” Fiel says. “The issue that we are having is weapons are coming onto school campuses; so how do you stop that? If you go into an airport,

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