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Strengthening School Safety through Prevention of Bullying

Presented by

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My name is Scott Poland. I am a past president of the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), and I currently serve as coordinator of the Office of Suicide and Violence Prevention at the Center for Psychological Studies at Nova Southeastern University in Ft. Lauderdale, FL. I worked as a school psychologist in the public schools for 26 years, serving as the Director of Psychological Services for one of the largest Texas school systems for 23 of those years. School safety and crisis intervention and prevention have been my highest professional priorities. I have authored or co-authored four books and numerous chapters and articles on the subject and have presented and talked with school personnel more than 1000 times about these topics in every state and many foreign countries.

NASP is a professional membership association of 25,000 school psychologists who promote educationally and psychologically healthy environments for all children and youth. The association has developed many publications on school climate and school violence prevention. It has also partnered with the National Association of Secondary Principals to create a series of articles on topics such as the following:

1. Preventing school violence: A plan for safe and engaging schools
2. Threat assessment: An essential component for a comprehensive safe school program
3. Making schools safer for minority youth
4. Addressing sexual harassment
5. Promoting positive school climates through positive behavioral support
6. Suicide prevention in schools

These articles and the NASP Position Statement on School Violence and many other relevant articles are available at www.nasponline.org.

In 1997, I helped establish the NASP National Emergency Assistance Team (NEAT) and have served on the team continuously since its inception. Members of the team have provided on-site or consultative assistance to school communities on many occasions in response to school violence, natural disasters, and other tragedies that impacted schools. NEAT members also realized the need for more training on school crisis prevention, response, and recovery, so NASP developed a research-based crisis prevention and intervention curriculum to build the capacity of the whole school community. The name of the curriculum is PREPaRE, which stands for prevent, reaffirm, evaluate, provide and respond, and examine—PREPaRE,

I have personally led or served on crisis teams called into the aftermath of 11 school shootings, including providing intervention after the tragedies in Paducah, Kentucky; Jonesboro, Arkansas; Littleton, Colorado; and Red Lake, Minnesota. I have also provided consultation to other school communities after acts of violence including suicides of teachers and students, providing direct on-site assistance to five school communities that experienced suicide contagion and suicide clusters. I have seen the pain, shock, and confusion in these communities and their search for answers but also know that the answers are quite complex and involve many societal issues. I identified these issues in my testimony before

Congress on school violence in 1999 and 2000. I also discussed contributing factors such as gun availability, the influence of media violence (especially video games), lack of parental supervision, the failure of youth to understand the finality of death, lack of positive connections to school and adults, and the impact of school bullying. I also had the opportunity in 2001 to moderate the session on bullying prevention for the Children's Caucus of Congress.

The purpose of my testimony is to provide guidance to help strengthen school safety and ensure that all schools are nurturing environments for all students to learn. Students who feel threatened and harassed can not learn at an optimal level. It is our responsibility to make sure that every child feels safe at school and to implement suicide prevention programs. Although statistics reveal schools to be much safer places for children than their communities, even one violent death in a school in our country is unacceptable. Of great concern is the harassment and bullying that occurs in schools. For example, a study from the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) found that 65% of high school students had been bullied in the past year.

As a school psychologist, students were often referred to me who were bullied at school. I would ask them if they had notified their teacher about what was happening and a very common response was that the victim had notified the teacher but was often told to stay away from the students who were doing the bullying. This advice fails to address the need to provide consequences for the bully and to recognize that it is difficult to avoid the bully who rides your bus and is in your classes. We need to be especially concerned about the harassment and bullying that occurs at schools for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender students with surveys revealing that as many as nine in 10 have been bullied (see www.GLSEN.org). These students are at risk for increased suicidal thoughts and actions as a new term emerges: "bullicide." Grieving parents are attempting to hold the schools legally accountable for failure to stop the bullying believed to have greatly contributed to the suicides of their children. The Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey, completed most recently in 2007 by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, found that 6.9% of high school students surveyed had made a suicide attempt in the past year. Few school systems have the needed procedures and policies in place for suicide prevention and intervention, and the American Association of Suicidology (AAS) has recently developed a School Suicide Accreditation Program to

raise the standards, competency, and confidence of school personnel for prevention and intervention. More information about the accreditation program is available at www.suicidology.org.

In addition, NASP recently released the *NASP President's Call to Action to Prevent Youth Suicide* which is available at <http://www.nasponline.org/advocacy/suicidecalltoaction.aspx>. In this call to action, it is emphasized that few if any problems confronting our nation's schools are more urgent than youth suicidal behavior. Youth suicide continues to be a significant public health problem at a national level. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, suicide is the third-leading cause of death among young people in the United States, trailing only accidents and homicide. In the last decade, more teenagers and young adults died from suicide than from cancer, birth defects, AIDS, stroke, pneumonia, influenza and chronic lung disease *combined*. An alarming fact is that every five hours a child or adolescent in the United States dies as a result of suicide. Consequently, suicide prevention and intervention must be part of any comprehensive violence prevention effort.

In the years immediately following the Columbine tragedy, there were many excellent initiatives at both the state and federal levels to make schools safer. Virtually every school in the country devoted resources and time to safety planning. To assist schools in their efforts, NASP co-authored *Early Warning, Timely Response: A Guide to Safe Schools*, which was produced jointly by the Departments of Education, Justice, and Health and Human Services. The Department of Education and the Secret Service also released two reports on the study of targeted school violence and the FBI released a publication on school violence and school safety. Post-Columbine, most schools created safety task forces that were very active for a year or two, but that have now become inactive or nonexistent. School principals are intensely questioned and evaluated only based on the academic test scores for their school, and it is clear that the same scrutiny and accountability must be implemented for school safety. School leaders must make school safety a priority, including it in policies and procedures as a continuum of services that build on positive discipline and school climate. Each campus must also have crisis prevention and response team and a plan in which all community members know the part they play.

An important component missing from much of the initial planning and continuing to today is the absence of efforts to get students involved in their own safety. School safety is an “inside job” that requires a commitment from the students first, then from the staff, parents, and the community. Students are almost always aware of the homicidal and suicidal statements of fellow students and they certainly are aware of bullying. The commitment from students can be obtained by having them sign safety pledges that stress the importance of immediately reporting a weapon on campus to the nearest adult and of letting an adult determine the seriousness of a violent threat. One of the best strategies to reduce bullying is to reach the bystanders who laugh and thereby reinforce the bully’s behavior. Most school violence could be prevented through building better relationships with students and teaching them when to get adult help.

In an article for the *National School Board Journal*, *The 4th R-Relationships*, I stressed that safety, security, and belonging are as important as reading, writing, and arithmetic! Students also know what part of the school building is unsafe and what times of the day there is a lack of supervision. Classroom discussions and review of the floor plan for the school can pinpoint areas of concern.

I will never forget being in a classroom the day after a school shooting and thinking that things were going as well as could be expected with the classroom discussion until several students said, “That was so serious and I could have been killed. It could have been me that was shot but I still don’t think I would tell an adult if I saw a gun on campus tomorrow.” Not one student in the classroom disagreed publicly with that thinking. The teacher, counselor, assistant principal, and I could not convince students of the need to tell the nearest adult.

The literature says that students do not look to adults for help because of these reasons:

1. They fear retaliation;
2. They do not believe anything will happen;
3. They have been conditioned not to tell;
4. They do not trust adults; and
5. They do not want to get involved

We have done a very poor job in our society of teaching our youth how to separate incessant tattling about inconsequential things from the need to tell when someone may be harmed. We must begin to teach children at an early age through curriculum programs at every grade level that if they are feeling unsafe—and especially if someone is talking about homicide or suicide—they must get adult help right away. I have had the chance to ask many educators, “At what age does it start that kids won’t tell adults about serious situations such as a gun being on campus?” The answer that I most often hear is that between third and fifth grades a major portion of children stop looking to adults for help.

In order to strengthen school safety, it is very important for all school staff to know their students and know them well. Every staff member needs to build positive relationships with all students and be alert for signs of violence. We must ensure that all children and adolescents know where to get adult help and that they have been taught that they are an essential key to maintaining a safe environment. This is an ambitious goal because ending the “conspiracy of silence” will involve much discussion in schools, places of worship, community programs, and our families.

There has been much complacency in recent years; strengthening school safety needs to be a priority. It is clear that there is no lack of resources. Best practices for crisis prevention and school safety have been developed and widely disseminated; there is no need to recreate the wheel! The real issue is whether or not all schools are taking seriously their responsibility to ensure school safety and to create a climate where no child feels threatened or harassed. In this regard, a critical area to be addressed is the need for threat assessment teams. Too often, it comes out that one or more educators admit that they knew the student who threatened violence but felt there was nothing to worry about. Another worrisome extreme is when a student who appears to make a threat is swiftly and severely punished and receives harsh consequences such as expulsion, with very little investigation.

NASP cites data indicating that zero tolerance policies have contributed to juvenile justice facilities holding youth with mental health difficulties who have committed only minor offenses instead of getting them the help they urgently need. My experience has been that the wisest decisions are made by a team and in fact all of the reports and publications cited above recommend that every school create a threat assessment team composed

of the following: a teacher who knows the student in question, a school administrator, a mental health professional such as a school psychologist, and a law enforcement representative. A threat assessment team would carefully gather information by interviewing the student who reportedly made the threat, the recipient of the threat, and any witnesses that might have been present. All school records would be reviewed for the student in question. Threats would be classified into two types with the first type being "transient" and the second being "substantial." An example of a transient threat is something said in the heat of the moment that involves no planning, no means, and that is not the result of a long-standing grudge or feud. While all threats should be taken seriously and investigated, substantial threats that do involve planning, a grudge, and a means to carry them out should receive more intensive interventions and if necessary severe consequences such as suspension and expulsion. There is considerable controversy about the zero tolerance policies that have resulted in some schools being quick to expel students with little information about the incident. Unfortunately, sometimes the students who are expelled are quite young. Also, there is no guarantee that youngsters who have been suspended or expelled won't come back to school and commit violent acts. In fact, some have.

The following are a few recent examples that highlight the need for prioritization and on-going planning and training for all staff on school safety:

- The school principal had several programs in place to address school safety but wanted to survey students and teachers to pinpoint other areas for school safety improvement. He decided to use the School Safety Assessment and Resource Bank (SSARB), developed by researchers at the University of Montana. The SSARB targets 32 key areas of school safety and climate and helps schools meet NCLB expectations for anonymous assessment of school safety by staff and students. (More information is available at www.ssarb.com.) The principal carefully reviewed the instrument and then went to the superintendent's office for approval to utilize the survey. The principal knew the researchers and told the superintendent that he had been offered the opportunity to have his school utilize the SSARB at no charge. The superintendent denied permission, commenting

that if the survey of staff and students identified a problem the school would be held accountable to do something about it.

- In the spring of 2009, a parent of a fifth grader described the following scenario and expressed much frustration with her child's teacher and school. Her son knew that his classmate Billy had a gun in his backpack, and he tried repeatedly to get the teacher's attention for her action. The teacher told him to do his work and that Billy did not have a gun, but finally the teacher asked Billy aloud if he in fact had a gun in his backpack. Billy responded that he did have a gun in his backpack and then the teacher told Billy to bring the gun to the teacher. The teacher then told the entire class to keep quiet about the fact that Billy brought a gun to school so that Billy would not get in trouble.

- Nova Southeastern University (NSU), where I work, recently hosted two major events on school safety and bullying. NSU is located in Broward County, Florida, and three of the top 10 largest school systems in the nation are in South Florida (Dade, Palm Beach and Broward). NSU sponsored the International Bullying Prevention Conference (www.stopbullyingworld.org), with participants from all around the world. As one of the keynote speakers, I asked the participants how many were from South Florida and noted that almost no one locally was in attendance even though many thousands of educators are within about an hour's drive from the campus. NSU also hosted a school safety summit and invited educators from all three large county school systems mentioned above. One of the keynote speakers was Ron Stephens, the Director of the National Schools Safety Center, who is widely respected for his school safety expertise. Yet, his audience was quite small and mostly made up of university personnel.

- One principal said that she tried to set aside 30 minutes every day to work on problem solving, violence prevention, anger management, increased sense of belonging, and learning to appreciate everyone regardless of race and ethnicity, in all classrooms. However, many of the teachers refused to participate because of the pressure they felt to teach for success on the state academic accountability test.

- An administrator of a high school of 4,000 students implemented several safety initiatives, following the best practices indicated throughout the literature and in face-to-face training. Students, staff, and parents were an integral part of the process and many of the committees, intervention techniques, and relationship building venues were a result of collaborative effort. The administrator moved to another campus but returned for an evening event some months later and encountered a student who was her most avid safety council member. In great distress, he asked, "What happened to our safety council?" Her reply added to his distress. "It's dead, and our CPR (Concerned Person's Report) box is gone. Nobody cares here anymore!" The school experienced racial violence and several students were injured later that school year.

I have highlighted several examples of lack of commitment, complacency and low prioritization of school safety. It is very important to emphasize building positive school connections for all students and to focus on their emotional well being. There is considerable research by the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) that shows that by incorporating universal social-emotional curriculums into schools that academic learning can be significantly increased. In addition, by using these curriculums school bonding, positive pro-social behavior, social emotional increased while disciplinary problems were greatly reduced. Therefore, we do not have to choose between social-emotional and academic learning. Instead we now know that by increasing the social-emotional skills of our nation's youth, we actually boost their academic success as well as improve other important variables necessary for a positive school climate. This is extraordinary finding. (More information is available at www.casel.org)

I would now like to highlight the following very positive school safety approaches among the many that are being implemented around the country:

- The Volusia County Schools in Florida had threats of violence and made it a priority to create threat assessment procedures, working cooperatively with county resources in mental health and law enforcement to improve school safety. The superintendent focused her beginning-of-school administrative conference on school safety and the lead school psychologist and security personnel worked with

local and school resources to develop threat assessment procedures and provide training for administrative and support personnel. School safety procedures and the role that everyone and especially students play in safety are critical components of the program, which is in place at every school. Student safety pledges are now utilized. More information is available at www.volusia.k12.fl.us.

- In recent years, many states such as Iowa, Maryland, and most recently, North Carolina, have passed laws prohibiting bullying and harassment in schools and requiring enumerated (e.g., including students' sexual orientation and gender identity, among other groups) anti-bullying and harassment policies and reporting procedures for schools. HR 2262, The Safe Schools Improvement Act, would enact similar requirements at the national level. In many cases, it is the family members of bullied students who have committed suicide who lead efforts to pass laws prohibiting bullying and harassment.
- The Papillion-La Vista schools in Nebraska realized that in Sarpy County, Nebraska, nine teens had died by suicide in a 26-month period. The system organized a county-wide task force including mayors and civic leaders of the several small towns in the county and representatives from each school system in the county. The task force met repeatedly and included law enforcement and mental health personnel and implemented best practices suicide prevention programs for youth. More information about the work of the task force is available at www.paplv.esu.org.
- PSI, a private Ohio mental health education services firm, trains students, teachers and parents throughout Ohio to manage bullying by building student leadership skills. The program emphasizes individual responsibility and competent decision making by students. PSI programs have won the Ohio BEST Practices Award. More information is available at www.psi-solutions.org.

It is an honor to have the opportunity to provide testimony on strengthening school safety. This is a subject that is very dear to my heart, as I have seen the affects of school violence first hand many times and am very dedicated to prevention. Nova Southeastern University, where I now work, has made prevention and safety a high priority, and goals have been

set for every staff member and student to learn the warning signs of violence and suicide and to understand that safety and prevention are everyone's responsibility. Our Office of Suicide and Violence Prevention provides training to all staff and students that also includes sources of assistance for troubled students and staff. More information is available at SVP@nova.edu.

It is essential for school safety to become a priority in every school, and the best evidence-based practices need to be implemented to ensure the safety of all students. This will only happen when every school board, superintendent, and state and national entity requires the same accountability for school safety that we currently require for academic performance. In the near future, Congress will be asked to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and it is imperative that stronger requirements be in place for school safety and more emphasis placed on the social and emotional well being of children. School psychologists are the highest trained mental health professionals working in schools, and they are well trained in school safety, threat assessment, bullying prevention, and suicide prevention. Thus, they must be included as an important team member working on these issues in every school.

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