

ACTIVE-SHOOTER SITUATIONS IN SCHOOLS: CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION

By Ken Wallentine

Each month, I send out a [legal newsletter called Xiphos](#), which reviews a few recent case decisions affecting law enforcement. In last month's issue, I asked for reader thoughts on meeting the challenge of the active shooter in schools. Thanks to the officers who sent thoughtful responses. Not surprisingly, many of you had ideas for placing more officers in schools. Among the ideas: creating an easier path for retired cops with degrees to become certified teachers, hiring retired officers as part-time school workers in a variety of positions and co-locating neighborhood policing offices in schools. Some focused on arming teachers and school staff. One recently retired officer told me he would love to work in an elementary school part-time, as a substitute teacher or even a custodian, but state retirement rules prohibited him from *any* public employment for one full year after retirement.

Perhaps the most novel idea suggested was an "adopt an officer" program. This officer suggested pairing street cops and detectives with schools that would "adopt" the officer. The officer would be invited as a special guest to assemblies and other events, and to eat lunch at the school on a regular basis. Other thoughtful ideas involved better designs for physical security and taking advantage of existing locks to provide a single point of entry. Also, additional training and emphasis on challenging unidentified or suspicious school visitors. This point resonated with me personally when my daughter's car wouldn't start and she asked me to pick up my grandson and take him to school.

When I walked my grandson into the school, he took off like a lightning bolt and I followed him down the hallway. When I tried to open the classroom door, I found it locked. A teacher looked briefly through the narrow window, then disappeared. I think she called the office, because within a minute, someone approached and demanded that I identify myself. Obviously, I did so. Even though I identified myself as a law enforcement officer, I was told quite directly not to bypass the office, but to check in before trying to enter the school halls. I later discovered that the school staff also called my daughter to verify my grandparent status and to let her know that I'd been at the school! I thanked the staff for taking my grandkids' safety seriously. I hope they keep up the vigilance.

Over the past week, I've participated with dozens of school district executives, school resource officers, principals, vice-principals and counselors in a series of school shooting scenarios. The [VirTra 300 system](#) allowed us to experience an active school shooter scenario in penetrating virtual reality, using actual weapons and feeling the impact of gunfire. At the end of each virtual reality session, we gathered cops and educators to debrief. Ideas and questions flowed freely. Conversations that began in virtual reality will continue as partnerships strengthen.

I learned about programs that help students report concerns and/or reach out for help. The best of these is a smartphone app called "[SafeUT.](#)" It is a spectacular resource for students, parents and educators. Students and parents can submit tips, chat with a qualified mental health professional, make

an immediate one-button call for help, and monitor existing tips and helpful hints for safety and well-being. Other states are creating similar apps (if you want more information about SafeUT, the tech geniuses are happy to share—just send an email and I'll put you in touch).

One power of the SafeUT app is that tips are acted on. "See something and say something" gets turned into "do something." The app has a solid track record of intervention with potentially violent students and success in saving kids from suicide. (One officer described a school shooter as a "suicide by cop who happens to pick a school to force the outcome.")

Just last week, a middle school student in my community threatened to shoot up his school. Classmates who heard the threat said something—several used the SafeUT app. A cop went to the home and spoke with parents and the student. He and his partner searched the kid's bedroom and found an AR-15 and a handgun. The app, powered by students willing to say something, worked. Mass shooting prevented? Probably.

I hope that conversations about safer schools and safer kids are happening across the country and that the conversations include local public safety officers, teachers and parents. Those conversations need to be far broader than just hardening the targets. Let's join the community in talking about prevention. Let's be sure that our departments and schools are social media smart. Are we watching out for and reaching the kids who signal trouble? Are our schools fostering an emotionally healthy environment? Are there safe places and trusted people for kids who are bullied, abused or emotionally struggling?

One officer told me of a club formed at Bingham High School in South Jordan, Utah, called the Golden Gate Club. The club takes its name from a man who killed himself by jumping from the Golden Gate Bridge. He left a note that read, "If someone smiles at me on the way to the bridge, I won't jump." No one did. The officer reports that the Golden Gate Club is having great success on pulling marginalized kids into the mainstream of a friendly culture in the school.

As public safety servants, we prepare tirelessly for many events that will never happen in our community. With the violence at Parkland and Great Mills, the focus right now is on school shootings. Even so, we know that the odds of a child dying in a school shooting are less than one in one million. There is a slight uptick this year in school shootings, but the track record shows less than one incident per year where two or more kids died in a school shooting. As a point of perspective—and not to diminish our current somber discussion—based on our national track record, the average American public school can expect to see a mass shooting about once every 150,000 years.

Still, we don't just play the odds; we prepare the best we can. In our sheriffs' offices and police departments, let's talk about something that we know about: threat assessment. When we get a tip, do we have a system in place to quickly bring a school official, mental health professional, school resource officer, and—as appropriate—parent or guardian together for a risk analysis and intervention plan?

Our preparations will necessarily lead to deeper connections with educators, parents, kids and our entire community. Our preventive efforts will pay off, too. As we stretch our reach to kids on the fringe, we may or may not prevent a school killer, but we may just make life better for a lonely kid.

I appreciate the thoughtfulness and concern in your responses. I saw, once again, the individual compassion and commitment to keeping your communities safe. I also deeply appreciate that the officers who responded clearly recognize the many possible root causes and intervention paths for a school shooter. Your community needs not only your cop skills, but also your critical conversation contributions.

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