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Can our schools truly be prepared?

Drills ready suburban kids for the worst, and empower their teachers

BY MADHU KRISHNAMURTHY

Aside from installing locks and cameras and conducting active shooter drills, can schools mentally prepare students, parents and employees for the possibility of a mass shooting?

That question has haunted Larry Bury of Bartlett with every school shooting the last 20 years. His fears for the safety of his two daughters attending **Elgin Area School District U-46 schools** are heightened once again.

After the Feb. 14 shooting at a Florida high school where a gunman killed 17 people, Bury again sat down his freshman at Streamwood High School to have the talk.

"You can never mentally prepare yourself or prepare your children, that if this were happening in real life, how are they going to be able to react," Bury said. "You can hope. You can pray. But what is that going to do? Until we address the real problems here, our kids are at risk."

Bury said he changes the channel every time news of a school shooting comes on TV so as not to frighten his fifth-grader at Sycamore Trails Elementary School in Bartlett.

"We don't want her to get to the point where she's afraid to go to school because of these fears. This stuff gives her nightmares," said Bury, whose wife, Jen, teaches sixth grade at Glenbrook and Streamwood elementary schools. "You can put as many defensive measures in place as possible, (but) it can be disrupted by somebody who can gain access to a deadly firearm. You can't say, 'That's a Florida problem' or 'That's a California problem.' It's an American problem."

Preparing for worst

Illinois law requires all public school districts and private schools to conduct annual drills preparing for potential school shootings and review security measures.

Vigilance about school shootings is as acute today as nuclear explosion drills -- in which students were told to "duck and cover" -- were in the post-Cuban Missile Crisis era, said John Heiderscheidt, U-46 director of school safety.

"It's a shame kids are growing up in a society where these things are becoming commonplace," he said. "To have schools that are absolutely impenetrable is nearly impossible. School safety is everybody's responsibility. We can build bigger walls around schools and more fences, and what is it going to become?"

U-46 schools practice three fire drills plus lockdown and severe weather drills while classes are in session. Teachers prep students through lesson plans and age-appropriate discussion.

"It is really at the teacher's discretion," Heiderscheidt said. "There's less preparation for high school kids as they have been doing drills since they were in kindergarten."

Students don't participate in active shooter training exercises led by law enforcement, which is conducted outside the school day with school employees.

District employees also receive annual training on dealing with emergency scenarios, including having a shooter on campus, modeled after the Federal Emergency Management Agency's "[Run. Hide. Fight.](#)" directive. It emphasizes creating a barrier, such as a locked door, between oneself and harm.

"Getting away from danger is essentially what you are trying to do ... trying to get yourself into a place where you are locked down ... or you can hide," Heiderscheidt said. "That is a survivable skill in these situations. Getting out and getting away comes with your awareness to your surroundings, the sounds of danger, and going the opposite direction."

Empowering teachers

Some experts say the run-and-hide model doesn't work for schools. Programs such as [PREPaRE](#), developed by the [National Association of School Psychologists](#), and [ALICE \(Alert, Lockdown, Inform, Counter, Evacuate\)](#) are helping train teachers on how to handle trauma before, during and after a school tragedy.

The Glendale Heights Police Department has five ALICE-qualified trainers who work with Queen Bee District 16 and Marquardt Elementary District 15.

"The old system was lock your doors, stay in place and nothing bad will happen to you," Police Chief Douglas Flint said. "Teachers have to have that autonomy to make the decision of what's in the best interest of the kids."

During active shooter training on campus, police carry real guns and assault rifles loaded with blanks. The simulation involves teachers and school employees.

"The first couple of years we did it, we had teachers breaking down in tears and scared for their lives," Flint said. "Every teacher in Glendale Heights has heard the sound of a rifle."

While classroom doors are always locked, in an active shooter situation teachers are allowed to lead students out of the classroom and even outside the school building.

"They have given the teachers and the students the ability and empowerment to fight back," Flint said. "If somebody comes into their room and they have a weapon, the teacher has the authority to throw scissors, books, desks, anything they can do to get that person out of the classroom."

Getting school districts to buy into the idea is the hardest part, he added.