Preparing Schools for Terrorism

If terrorists want to strike at the hearts of Americans, they could strike at our schools. The devastation of a terror attack upon our nation’s schools would have both a huge emotional toll as well as significant financial impact on the business of education that would likely be shut down in the days and weeks following an attack.

The good news is there are steps we can take to reduce risks and better prepare for a catastrophic attack. The bad news is that our political and administrative leaders are hesitant to discuss the matter out of fear of creating panic among the parents of school children around the nation. Fortunately, schools in general have improved security and emergency preparedness in the decade following the 1999 Columbine High School attack, but the fact remains that especially for sophisticated individuals with ill intentions, our schools remain soft targets.

THE TERRORIST THREAT TO SCHOOLS:
SOFT TARGETS

Although a terrorist attack upon a school in the United States may be improbable, the first step toward preparedness is admitting that it is at least possible that terrorists could strike a school or schools in our country. Even the U.S. Department of Education, a federal agency characterized for years by its denying and downplaying of the potential for a terror attack upon American schools, issued an advisory to schools in October of 2004 with recommendations for heightening security and emergency preparedness in light of the Beslan, Russia, school terror attack months earlier (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).
Terrorists attack their targets to accomplish the following:

- Attack a symbolic target.
- Send a message far beyond the actual target itself.
- Produce mass fear and panic.
- Alter the ways people live and do business, including having an adverse economic affect on the target’s community.
- Instill a lack of confidence in the government.

By attacking a school, all of these objectives would be met. According to the National Advisory Committee on Children and Terrorism (2003), “Every day 53 million young people attend more than 119,000 public and private schools where 6 million adults work as teachers or staff. Counting students and staff, on any given weekday more than one-fifth of the U.S. population can be found in schools.” Hundreds of students and staff fill the same elementary schools each day, while several thousand may fill the high school just down the street. And each day, the same school buses pick up the same several dozen children at the same corner at the same time.

So the potential targets are in place 5 days a week and behave in a relatively predictable manner. It would only take a bit of surveillance on the part of the terrorists to figure out the routines and get a feel for a particular school or school bus.

**DOMESTIC VS. INTERNATIONAL TERRORISM**

From the perspective of the targeted school(s), whether an act of terrorism is domestic or international in origin likely would not matter. Either way, the threat of harm and actual harm to children and school staff would have a devastating impact.

Educators and safety officials increasingly recognize that the threat of terrorism—domestic or international—is real. We now know from 9/11 that international terrorists have been, and some likely still are, among us here in the United States. Likewise, we know the evolving face of terrorism has introduced the possibility of homegrown terrorists, that is, American citizens recruited by foreign nationals to perform terrorist activities. And the threat of domestic terrorism, whether hate, social, political, or other motivated extremists, continues to pose a threat to not only our society, but also our schools.

Education and school safety leaders, therefore, cannot assume that a potential terrorist would only be someone who is of Middle Eastern descent, speaks with an accent, or otherwise appears to be of international
origin. A female having blonde hair, blue eyes, and an American dialect as easily poses a threat. The key is to focus on behavior, not on appearance or related characteristics.

In examining school safety threats, we must therefore recognize that schools, school buses, and our children in general are potential targets for terror. September 11 brought the focus on the airlines and terrorists, and the 2004 Beslan, Russia, school siege brought the focus briefly on schools. But America never really took the Beslan incident to its full level of meaning for schools in the United States, largely because of denial and due to the perceived adverse political and public panic implications if our leaders did so.

OVERCOMING THE DENIAL, FEAR, POLITICS, AND NAYSAVERS

The difference between a target of opportunity and a target not selected can be good security and preparedness. The key to successfully preparing school communities without creating panic is for school and public safety officials to be candid about the possibility that schools can be impacted by terrorism. Success in managing the issue also requires that officials communicate terrorism issues in a balanced and rational context, and that they educate their school communities on the roles that everyone plays in keeping schools and communities safe.

Denial (or the Ostrich Syndrome) and inconsistent messages exacerbate, not reduce, fear and panic. We frequently used weak arguments from the naysayers who misguidedly attempt to downplay the possibility of a terrorist attack on U.S. schools. Some of these arguments, and my response, include the following:

Naysayers: “Terrorist attacks upon schools in the United States and abroad are statistically rare events. It has been an extremely rare event when terrorists attack a school.”

Reality: The Columbine High School attack in 1999 was an extremely rare event that no one anticipated. It was an attack in an American school at a level for which no prior precedent had been established. The impact of Columbine changed the landscape of the school safety profession forever, causing many schools to play catch-up with decades of neglect in security and emergency planning, while setting a new threshold for best practices in school safety.

The 9/11 terror attacks on America were extremely rare events that no one anticipated. These were attacks on the United States at a level for
which no prior precedent had been established. The impact of 9/11 changed the landscape of American homeland security forever, setting an unprecedented focus on heightened security and emergency preparedness measures comparable with no other time in American history.

To state or imply that we should ignore or downplay the possibility that terrorists would strike American schools defies logic and is contrary to the lessons learned on 9/11, at Columbine, in Beslan, Russia, and elsewhere. It is this mindset of denial and Ostrich Syndrome that makes us most vulnerable. It is also a mindset contrary to the overall goals of our U.S. Homeland Security policy that encourages thinking outside of the box and being proactive to prevent a future terrorist attack, rather than looking for ways to rationalize that “It can’t happen here” until such an attack occurs again.

_Naysayers:_ “Talking about the possibility of terrorist attacks upon schools only furthers the terrorists’ goals of creating fear.”

_Reality:_ Talking about terrorists possibly using airplanes to attack American buildings did not instill the fear that occurred on and after 9/11. In fact, our failure to talk about the possibility of such an event before it occurred has been identified by many professionals as creating a climate that made us more vulnerable.

School and public safety officials nationwide now proactively pursue prevention programs, security measures, and emergency preparedness measures to prevent a future Columbine-like attack in their schools. The failure to talk about the possibility of such an incident occurring and the failure to take steps to prevent such an occurrence would be considered as negligence in the eyes of most educators, public safety officials, parents, media, and courts. Talking about the possibility in a balanced and rational way does not create fear, but instead it reduces fear, improves preparedness, and has resulted in many death plots being foiled thanks to a heightened awareness.

The naysayer mind-set that talking about the possibility of terror attacks upon our schools furthers terrorist goals of creating fears is contrary to our overall national approach to homeland security. Our President, Congress, military, homeland security, and other federal officials talk regularly and openly about the potential for terrorists to strike our airlines, military facilities, government offices, and other American interests right here in the United States, and in turn our need to be appropriately prepared. If we followed the logic of the naysayers who claim we should not talk about terrorism and schools, we would also not be talking about the
possibility of terror attacks on our airlines and other government facilities. In fact, using their logic, there would be no need for a Homeland Security Department . . . and it is this mindset that makes us the most vulnerable.

Fear is best managed by education, communication, and preparation—not denial. Educate school community members to define the issues and appropriate context. Communicate with school community members to discuss risk reduction, heightened security, and emergency preparedness strategies. Be prepared for both natural disasters and man-made acts of crime and violence by taking an all-hazards approach to school emergency planning.

*Naysayers:* “Money spent on preparing schools for terrorism is wasted money that could be better spent elsewhere. Just prepare our first-responders in the community and they will take care of the schools if something happens.”

*Reality:* Teachers, administrators, school support staff, School Resource Officers (SROs), school security personnel, and other professionals on the front lines of our nation’s school are the first-responders to any emergency that occurs in their schools. Although we value our community public safety partners and we encourage our schools to work hand-in-hand with them in emergency planning, the reality is that those working inside a school will be the ones immediately responding to and managing an emergency incident while police, fire, emergency medical services, and other community first-responders are en route. School officials will also be the individuals working with community first-responders once they arrive and throughout the emergency incident. In fact, if an event occurs on the scale of the 9/11 terror attacks, school officials may be forced to manage a school-based emergency with minimal support from community first-responders if these responders are tied up managing other aspects of the emergency elsewhere in the community or if they cannot get to the school. School officials will also be the individuals left to carry the school a long way through the recovery phase after an emergency.

Although no public budgets are unlimited and no blank checks exist for school security and emergency preparedness efforts, the trend in recent years to cut school safety budgets is disturbing. It is also counter to the direction America is going in heightening security and emergency preparedness efforts at other public and private facilities. It makes no sense that at a time when our nation’s leaders have pushed to increase funding for protecting airlines, bridges, monuments, and even the hallways of Capitol Hill that they simultaneously cut funding to protect the children and teachers in the soft target hallways of America’s schools.

Funding for school security and emergency planning should not only be spared from cuts, but should also be incrementally increased as we continue
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• to increase our national defense and antiterrorism preparedness in other public sectors.

A terror attack upon American schools would create fear and panic, disrupt the economy if the business side of school operations were shut down on a large scale, and instill a lack of confidence in our school and community leadership. Such terror tactics have already been employed elsewhere, including attacks upon schools and school buses in the Middle East, and most recently the Beslan, Russia, school terror attack. Although it may not be a probability that terrorists will strike our schools, we must acknowledge that it is a possibility and take reasonable steps to prevent and prepare for such an incident.

HEIGHTENED SECURITY PROCEDURES FOR SCHOOLS

A terror threat to our schools would trigger immediate calls for parents for heightened security. But most school administrators would likely not have a good sense of exactly what heightened security might look like in real terms in a school setting.

Before schools can heighten security, they need to have their fundamentals in order. The fundamentals include issues discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, in particular. And as I have so often said, the first and best line of defense is always a well-trained and highly alert school safety and student body.

What constitutes heightening security at school? Some examples of what school leader can do include the following:

• Train teachers and support staff, evaluate and refine security plans, and test/exercise school emergency plans.

• Encourage school personnel to maintain a heightened awareness for suspicious activity and to report same. This may include suspicious vehicles on and around campus, suspicious persons in and around school buildings, including those taking photographs or videotaping, suspicious packages around the building perimeter or in the school, and suspicious information-seeking efforts by phone or by unknown visitors.

• Provide special attention to perimeter security and access control issues. Have clearly defined perimeters for schools through the use of fences, gates, environmental design, signage, and other professional security measures. Use designated parking areas especially for visitors and register staff and student vehicles. Provide supervision and monitoring of parking lots and outside areas as appropriate. Train custodial, maintenance, and grounds
personnel on identifying and handling suspicious packages and items found on campus. Establish routine inspections of the building and grounds by trained facility personnel. Secure roof hatches and eliminate structural items that facilitate easy access to school roofs. Make sure that classroom windows are secured at the end of the school day. Utilize security technology and devices for monitoring and controlling exterior facilities as defined by professional security assessments.

- Review staffing and supervision plans. Stress the importance of adult supervision before, during, and after school, both inside school buildings and on campus, and in common areas such as hallways, stairwells, restrooms, cafeterias, bus areas, and other high-traffic areas. Encourage staff to maintain a heightened awareness during recess, physical education classes, drop-off and dismissal, and other outside activities. Examine staffing levels and procedures for security personnel, school resource officers and other police personnel, and associated protection personnel.

- Maintain a proactive effort of visitor access and control. Reduce the number of doors accessible from the outside to one designated entrance. Stress the importance of staff greeting and challenging strangers, and reporting suspicious individuals. Review security procedures for after-school and evening activities and building use. Utilize security technology and devices for monitoring and controlling interior facility access as defined by professional security assessments.

- Verify the identity of service personnel and vendors visiting the school, including those seeking access to utilities, alarm systems, communications systems, maintenance areas, and related locations. Do not permit access and report suspicious individuals representing themselves as service or delivery personnel who cannot be verified. Maintain detailed and accurate records of service and delivery personnel including a log (signed in by school personnel) of the full names, organization name, vehicle information (as appropriate), and other identification information.

- Evaluate security measures at school transportation facilities. Assess emergency plans involving buses and other transportation issues.

- Secure access to utilities, boiler rooms, and other maintenance/facilities operations locations. Examine and enhance physical security measures related to outside access to heating, ventilation, and air-conditioning systems (HVAC), utility controls (electrical, gas, water, phone), and related facility operations mechanisms. Secure chemical and cleaning product storage areas, and maintain appropriate records of such items according to local, state, and federal guidelines.
• Evaluate food and beverage service stock, storage, and protection procedures. Determine if schools have adequate water, food, and related supplies in the event that students and staff would have to be detained at the school for an extended period of time beyond normal school hours. Examine measures for securing access to food and beverage products and food service areas during normal food service periods and after hours.

• Assess school health and medical preparedness. Evaluate school nurse staffing levels. Make sure that schools maintain an adequate number and level of emergency kits and medical supplies. Maintain a stock of at least three days worth of medications for students required to have medications at school. Consider offering first-aid/first-responder training to faculty members who are interested in volunteering for such training so as to increase the number of trained individuals available to assist in the event of medical emergencies.

• Conduct a status check of emergency communications mechanisms. Be sure two-way radio units and cell phones are functioning and have back-up batteries charged. Make sure that the public address system is fully functioning. Test the fire alarm system. Review procedures for emergency communications with parents, notify parents in advance how school officials will communicate with them in an emergency (media, district website), discuss importance of parents not flocking to the school if directed during an active crisis, review family reunification procedures, and communicate other relevant information to ease parent concerns.

• Review procedures for mobilizing mental health services for students and staff in the event of a crisis. Plan in advance how adults will communicate with children in a time of crisis. Discuss approaches for age and developmentally appropriate communications with students about violence and threatening issues. Be familiar with community mental health resources for families and have plans for securing supplemental mental health services from outside of the school/district in a major crisis.

• Evaluate and enforce employee screening procedures. Review guidelines for subcontractors and identify all individuals working on school property.

• Implement information security programs. Evaluate the storage, access, and security of sensitive information. Create guidelines and conduct periodic assessments of school and district websites to avoid posting of security-sensitive information.
• Identify higher risk facilities, organizations, and potential terrorist targets in the community surrounding schools. Such entities might include military facilities, government offices and facilities, nuclear power plants, airports and airport flight paths, railroads, chemical companies, and so on. Develop appropriate security countermeasures and crisis preparedness planning guidelines accordingly.

• Continue local field trips unless specific threat assessments suggest otherwise, using safety plans that include adequate supervision, communications capabilities, and so on. Evaluate national travel decisions based upon ongoing threat assessments and common sense. International travel during wartime and terrorist acts is discouraged.

• Develop, review, refine, and test emergency preparedness guidelines. Be sure to have guidelines for both natural disasters and acts of violence. Particular procedures for handling bombs, bomb threats, hostage situations, kidnappings, chemical and biological terrorism, and related information should be reviewed. Review with staff their specific roles and responsibilities consistent with your crisis guidelines. Identify back-up crisis team leaders in case normally assigned leaders are not at the building or are unable to lead.

• Provide K–12 school-specific security, crime prevention, and emergency preparedness training to all staff, including support personnel such as office, food services, custodial and facilities, and transportation support staff (Trump, 2010e).

A number of these examples such as training staff are best practices at all times, not just in times of heightened security. And many of these steps could be taken not only in heightening security in connection with a terrorist threat, but also in response to other threats and needs to beef up awareness and security measures.

**BIOLOGICAL AND CHEMICAL THREATS**

Following the 9/11 terror attacks in the United States, a number of anthrax scares took place, including at schools. Discussions were held, and continue to be held, on potential biological and chemical terror threats to America. Some considerations in this area for schools include the following:

• Establish procedures for detecting and reporting unusual absence patterns, in particular sudden mass absences caused by reported illnesses. Schools may be in one of the best positions to recognize early signs of such a terrorist attack via major increases in student illness rates. School and
community officials should consider having a protocol for school officials to notify public health and/or other appropriate public safety personnel as soon as they detect an unusual occurrence.

- Do not allow students to open school mail. Limit the opening of mail to one individual staff member. Have this person open school mail in a room separate from open, main office areas. Staff who wish to open mail with protective (latex-type) gloves should be allowed to do so if they desire. Educate school staff, especially the person who opens school mail, so that he or she is familiar with issues related to suspicious packages. See U.S. Postal Service poster on suspicious mail and related updates at its site on anthrax-related mail concerns.

- Work with custodial and maintenance personnel to establish procedures for quickly shutting down HVAC systems if needed.

- Review procedures for handling suspicious items such as envelopes with power substances that may be found in hallways, stairwells, restrooms, and other areas of the school. Anticipate that, unfortunately, some hoax incidents may occur. However, all threats should be treated seriously. Firm, fair, and consistent consequences, both administratively and criminally, should be sought, including for hoax scares, and students should be informed of the seriousness of such offenses.

- Review lockdown and evacuation procedures. Note that you may have to have a simultaneous lockdown of one section of the building while evacuating other parts of the school, so both lockdowns and evacuations may need to occur at the same time.

- Create Shelter-in-Place plans to supplement lockdown and evacuation plans. Identify safe areas, preferably with no windows, in the building where students can be relocated if need be. Confer with local fire, HAZMAT (hazardous materials), emergency management, and police officials for specific advice.

- Create plans for bringing in students outside and where to locate them if contaminated (away from others), including discussing if/how you would have contaminated individuals shower and put on second set of stored clothes. Remember to have a procedure to shut down HVAC system as soon as possible, and discuss backup heating for winter and related other concerns. Custodial and maintenance staff should be a part of the school’s emergency planning and response team.

- A significant amount of discussion took place around the nation after 9/11 about having duct tape and plastic to seal windows, vents, doorways, and related areas. A number of officials recommended having duct tape
and plastic to cover windows and to seal off Shelter-in-Place areas. Those discussions subsided a great deal, and in fact became somewhat of a point of jokes and humor as time moved on. In the worst possible scenario and under the proper conditions, this is an extra resource which may help schools serve some purpose. But a number of school and safety officials appropriately expressed concern about an overemphasis placed on this strategy. In particular, several school officials stated that reviews of air circulation needs suggested that individuals sheltered in areas designated for Shelter in Place in their schools would have a limited amount of air over a number of hours to survive under conditions where HVAC was shut down, areas sealed off, and so on. Schools should consider this issue, evaluate their own unique environment, and plan accordingly. Schools may wish to prepare Shelter-in-Place kit materials in advance. This might include battery-operated AM/FM radios; flashlights with fresh batteries; bottled water and adequate food supply; towels; candles; matches; first-aid kit; medicines for students who normally have them at school; charged batteries for cell phones for school’s crisis team; personal cleaning supplies and hand sanitizers. Again, schools wishing to include duct tape and plastic for extreme situations may wish to do so if it is viewed in context and as a part of a broader preparedness plan.

- Confer with HAZMAT officials, fire, emergency medical, law enforcement, emergency management, and other local, county, or state officials to establish specific response and prevention protocols, and to educate your school faculty, staff, crisis teams, and community on biological and chemical terrorism issues.

Schools should work particularly close with their first-responders to develop relationships and specific emergency guidelines for these and other situations. Fire departments and emergency management agencies are particularly good resources for conversations and planning on issues related to HAZMAT incidents, sheltering, community-wide disasters, and related issues.

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS IN TIMES OF TERRORISM AND WAR

Today’s world is one of uncertainty. Considerations in times of terrorism and war might include the following:

- Determine which schools in a district are designated community shelters. Be sure all principals know this, especially as new principals
move into schools as a result of retirements and personnel changes. What exactly would be expected of the school district and individual school in a community disaster where schools are used as shelters? Create, maintain, and update written agreements with community emergency management agencies, the Red Cross, and others that include the expectations of school officials when schools are used as community shelters.

- Identify school and community mental health support services available to students and their families, and communicate the availability of these services to members of the school community.

- Communicate openly and honestly with students. Attempt to maintain a sense of normalcy in school operations as best possible while still providing adequate and appropriate opportunities for students to share their feelings, concerns, thoughts, and so on. When communicating with students, mental health professionals typically suggest that adults:
  1. Keep discussions age and developmentally appropriate;
  2. let students know when they are having normal reactions to abnormal situations;
  3. include facts and be honest;
  4. reaffirm existing adult support of students; and
  5. reassure students of measures taken to keep them safe.

- Maintain a balanced, commonsense approach to school safety and security. School and safety officials should maintain a heightened awareness for potential spin-off incidents. In light of the nature of the national incidents, particular awareness and preparation for possible spin-off incidents involving bomb threats, suspicious devices, and hate crimes may be worthy of consideration. It would also be prudent for school officials to develop, refine, or review with staff their policies and procedures related to school threat assessment and threat management.

- School officials may wish to review security issues related to access control, perimeter visibility and security, and other crime prevention measures. The importance of adult supervision before, during, and after school, both inside school buildings and on campus, should also be reviewed and reinforced. Involve all school staff, including support personnel such as secretaries, custodians, and bus drivers, in your school safety review.

- Communicate hotline numbers and other methods that students, parents, staff, and members of the school community can use to report safety and related concerns.

- Use school district call-in lines, websites, and other information sources that can be accessed by the school community to provide ongoing information to the school community (Trump 2010e).
As is the case in our broader society, there is no perfect security or preparedness program that can eliminate the threat of terrorism. But we can take steps to reduce the risks, to make our schools less soft of a target, and to improve preparedness measures for responding to incidents that cannot be prevented. The first step is acknowledging the risk, and the next challenging step is making awareness, balanced security measures, and a mindset of preparedness a part of our school and community culture.