President Hosts School Security Conference

President Bush hosted a recent conference in Chevy Chase, MD to solicit suggestions from school security experts. He said, "All of us . . . want our schools to be gentle places of learning." The President suggested that administrators consider leading discussions about security and enhancing security awareness among teachers.

He emphasized the need to "prevent these [incidents] from happening in the first place." The White House offers further details at: www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2006/10/images/20061010-8_p101006kh-0240-515h.html. ■

Inside This Issue

Access Control: Your First Line of Defense

Three recent incidents of school violence underscore the importance of access control:

◆ Sept. 26 – In Bailey, CO, a gunman took six female high school students hostage and killed one of them before committing suicide.

◆ Sept. 29 – In Cazenovia, WI, a 15-year old student walked into his K-12 school with a shotgun and a pistol; struggled with a custodian, teachers and students; and shot and killed the principal.

◆ Oct. 2 – Near Lancaster, PA, a gunman entered a one-room Amish schoolhouse and shot ten female students, killing five.
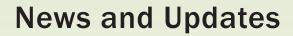
In each of the incidents cited above, a gunman freely walked into a school through unlocked doors. DoDEA Regulation 4700.1: *Internal Physical Security,* enclosure 4, para E4.1., states "A positive personnel identification and control system must be established and maintained in order to prevent unauthorized entry to offices or schools." The purpose of access control procedures is to identify, deter, or prevent unauthorized or unwanted adults or students from gaining access to school facilities or activities. The regulation is available at: www.dodea.edu/regs/regs_num.htm.

As discussed in the January 2005 DoDEA Safe Schools Newsletter, school administrators often contend that many of their security problems and incidents are the result of an unauthorized person entering their school. If administrators can control who enters the campus or school buildings, security incidents should drop significantly.

never had anything like this happen here and never thought it would." History has shown repeatedly that violence occurs in schools when it is not expected. Mr. Hindle added, "Please, take a look at your visitor control and lockdown procedures. Encourage all staff members to assist in the enforcement of the visitor control program and review the lockdown checklist. Preventive action is so much better than after-action." ∎

Access Control (Continued)

It is easy to be lured into a false sense of security in DoDEA schools because they are often insulated by virtue of their location on military bases. According to Area Safety and Security Officer Gene Hindle, "The perimeter fences and the entry control points significantly enhance your security, but obviously they are not fool-proof."

In these three recent school shootings, an access control system may not have prevented a forced entry by a determined perpetrator. However, locked doors could have delayed entry long enough to allow staff to implement lockdown and call police/security forces.

Some other actions administrators can take to improve their access control include:

✔ Prominently display signs directing visitors to check-in at the school office.

✔ Enforce visitor sign-in procedures (i.e., visitor log, visitor badges).

✔ Adopt a policy of locking all outside doors at all hours.

As Gene Hindle stated recently, "Comments from the staff are the same as they were from Columbine; we

"Mix It Up At Lunch Day" Promotes Diversity

What would it be like if, for one lunch period, students would leave the "comfort zones" of their cliques and mingle with new people? This year, Tuesday, November 14 is national "Mix It Up at Lunch Day." During "Mix It Up at Lunch" students break down social boundaries by interacting outside their normal circle of friends. The Southern Poverty Law Center's Teaching Tolerance Program sponsors this initiative to encourage students of different genders, race, and socio-economic backgrounds to share their hobbies and life experiences.

Students and faculty can request a free "info-pack" that includes a planner, brochure, and samples of program materials. The brochure describes activities that promote diversity and cultural awareness among students and adults. "Mix It Up at Lunch Day" is a way for DoDEA administrators to involve students in a manner that will allow them to take the initiative to enhance their school's social climate. To obtain your information kit or download posters and promotional materials, visit Teaching Tolerance at www.tolerance.org/teens/order.jsp?ttnewsletter=ttnewsgen-09062006. ∎

Communicating with Parents During and Following a Crisis

Effectively communicatining with parents, during and after a crisis, is critical. Earlier this year, at a Department of Education conference in Atlanta, Virginia Beach Public School officials briefed educators on what they learned from an incident involving gunfire near a middle school. Richard Ponti, Chief of School Security, described the incident at the January 2006 meeting, sponsored by the Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools.

Mr. Ponti described the incident as an important success story for two reasons. First, the school administrators protected all of their students; no one was injured. Second, the candid assessment by school officials and law enforcement provided unique insight from a well-prepared school system. DoDEA administrators can use the Virginia Beach findings to improve their plan for communicating with parents during a crisis. The case study below describes how the events unfolded that day.

A Case Study Of the Incident Involving Reports of Gunfire Near a Middle School
(As related by Virginia Beach School Officials)

Incident Background

◆ 2:50 p.m. -- during elementary school bus runs, two drivers reported their buses had been hit by an "object."

◆ A third bus driver, transporting high school students, reported having a window shot out.

◆ Simultaneously, the police received reports that numerous gunshots were heard in a neighborhood near a middle school.

◆ The school went into lockdown and phoned the police. The police and SWAT team responded immediately.

◆ Police determined that the school should remain in lockdown until a wooded area west of the school was searched.

◆ Normal dismissal time at the middle school was 3:40 p.m.

Crisis Management Communications

▶ 4:00 p.m. -- emergency hotline activated.

▶ School district issued a press release to the media that a middle school was in lockdown. Buses would not be transporting students home. However, students could be released to their parents.

▶ Approximately 200 parents came to school to pick up their children.

▶ 4:00 to 7:00 p.m. -- emergency hotline handled 400 calls.

▶ 5:45 p.m. -- police began releasing one bus at a time with a police escort.

▶ 6:30 p.m. -- last bus was released.

▶ 7:30 p.m. -- last student left the school.

▶ Crisis management communication continued for several days.

Communicating with Parents During and Following a Crisis (Continued)

The biggest challenge involved communicating with parents during and after the incident. Virginia Beach officials shared the assessment of their response.

Aspects of the Crisis Management Plan that worked effectively:

✔ Provided parents an emergency number (hotline) they could phone for information. This relieved pressure on the school staff.

✔ Distributed a follow-up letter to parents that corrected inaccurate information reported by the media, highlighted actions taken by school administrators, identified additional safety precautions put in place, and stressed the importance of student safety.

✔ Ensured that staff members received the same information as parents.

✔ Publicized the following: signs of post-traumatic stress; services the schools could provide to students and parents; and other resources available in the community.

Areas for improvement:

◆ Reduce confusion about the facts of the incident. Use the school web site to post the same information released to the media.

◆ Provide information about the incident. Activate the school's answering service with a message directing callers to the hotline.

◆ Improve implementation of the parent-child reunification center. Identify a pre-arranged staging area, and provide signs directing parents to the location.

◆ Recognize that an event at one school impacts others.

The most important lesson the school administrators learned was that they could not control how the media reported the incident. For example, television stations reported a "shooter," and erroneously encouraged parents to pick up students from school. They also learned that they could limit exaggeration and misinformation by providing accurate information about the incident through communication channels they could control: their school Web site; information the Public Affairs Officer (PAO) released to the media; and, e-mail messages sent directly to parents through a pre-established emergency contact group list.

Although some aspects of the incident are not relevant to DoDEA, administrators can use this case study as a basis for discussion when their crisis management teams meet to review existing plans. Fortunately, DoDEA school officials have a PAO to handle communication with the media and cooperative security forces to insulate the school from an onslaught of unauthorized visitors.

Have you discussed with the PAO what to expect from each other during an incident? Consider which communication channels you use to ensure parents receive accurate information and directions (i.e., e-mail group list, school Web site, phone tree). What tools and resources do you have to communicate effectively with parents and staff after a crisis incident? For additional ideas on crisis response procedures consult your Area/District Safety and Security Officer, the Safe Schools Handbook, or contact safeschools@csc.com. ▪
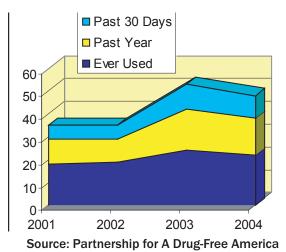
Inhalants Can Cause Deaths

"To prevent inhalant abuse, warn students that chemicals are harmful," recommends former American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) President, Dr. Joel J. Alpert. He advocates explaining how "inhalants can lead to both short and long-term health problems, further drug abuse, and even death."

Attraction and Significance

Inhalants are the fourth most abused drug among pre-adolescent and adolescent students, behind alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana. According to the 2005 Monitoring the Future Study (MTF), sponsored by the National Institute for Drug Abuse (NIDA), students experiment with inhalants at ages as young as eight or nine. Inhalant abuse peaks around eighth grade. Lloyd Johnston, the MTF principal investigator, said that eighth graders were less aware of the dangers of inhalant abuse, and less likely to disapprove of peer-use than older students. Johnston advocated, ". . . greater attention to this class of drugs in media messages and in-school programming." Characteristics that make inhalants attractive to students include:

Increase in Inhalant Abuse

Source: Partnership for A Drug-Free America

▶ **Free and Accessible** – Inhalants include common household products such as correction fluid, spray paint, hair spray, nail polish, shoe polish, spray deodorants, felt tip markers, and cleaners – especially "Dust Off."

▶ **Legal** – Inhalants lack the stigma and risk attached to the use of illegal drugs.

▶ **Easily Excused** – Students can easily explain their behavior if they are "caught" possessing cleaners, chemicals, or ordinary household products.

Harm

Inhalants can kill. "Sudden sniffing death" can kill even first-time users according to NIDA. First-time users run a significant risk because they do not know how much to inhale. The Sheriff's Department in Dekalb County, Georgia reported that 22 percent of those who died from inhalant abuse were first-time users. Inhalants can kill users by causing suffocation or heart failure. Prolonged use of inhalants can also cause irreversible brain damage or damage the central nervous system, kidney or lungs.

Warning Signs

Administrators and faculty can use the acronym **BADSPN** to remember AAP's inhalant abuse warning signs:

Breath – or clothing smells like chemicals.
Anxiety – or irritability.
Dazed – or glassy look.
Spots/Sores – around the mouth.
Paint stains – on body or clothing (from spray paint or solvents).
Nausea – or loss of appetite.

Three Names for Inhalant Abuse

"Inhaling" – sniffing vapors directly from a can, bottle or container.

"Bagging" – vapors are sprayed into a bag or pop can and then breathed in.

"Huffing" – vapors are poured onto a cloth and the cloth is placed in the mouth or on the nose so the user can inhale the vapors.

Solution

The MTF study concluded that "increasing adolescent's perception of risk was key to reducing inhalant abuse." Additional information on inhalant abuse is available from several organizations including: The National Inhalant Prevention Coalition at www.inhalants.org; The Partnership for A Drug Free America at www.drugfree.org; and AAP at www.aap.org. ■

School Violence – What Can Be Done Right Now

Paul Hersey is a former middle and high school principal, assistant superintendent, and Director of the National Assessment Center for the National Association of Secondary School Principals.

October 2, 2006 marked another horrendous day for schools in America. An armed truck driver with three guns, two knives and 600 rounds of ammunition burst into an Amish school in Bart Township, Pennsylvania and shot 10 female students "execution style," killing five. This terrible act follows two other horrible school shootings in the past week involving schools located near Green Bay, Wisconsin and Denver, Colorado. Last night, I received a communication from an official with Homeland Security asking the questions, "What is happening in our schools? And, what can be done about this deadly violence?"

Everyone would like to think there are simple answers to these questions. "Put more law enforcement personnel in schools and you will stop the killings" is an example. But, after working for more than 11 years on school security issues, I can attest to the fact that it is not that simple. However, after reviewing many of the school violence cases that have occurred during the past decade, I believe **there are at least three things that need to be done immediately in all schools to reduce the possibility that additional major violent acts will occur in the months and years ahead.** (This is not to suggest that there are only three steps that need to be taken – every experienced person working with school security knows that there are many important factors to consider in making schools safe). However, when pressed for what immediate steps can be taken to make schools safer, I believe the following actions should be taken:

1. Limit access to each school. No person should have access to any school without going through a screening process at the front door. During the school day, all outside doors to a school should be locked, so that no one (student or adult) can enter without going through an appropriate screening. Some technique should be used by school officials for carefully observing who wants access to the school and then screening their entrance into the school. Many schools have already adopted this approach without adverse reaction from students, parents, or the community. Most individuals involved with the school are committed to protecting everyone in the school from an intruder with hostile intent. Inexpensive ways to improve access control immediately include: securing exterior doors, enforcing visitor sign-in procedures, or issuing visitor badges.

2. Teach all school personnel (and security officials working in schools) what to observe in student behavior that signals a potential security problem. Provide special training for school and law enforcement personnel to be able to identify student behavior that signals something out of the norm that may relate to a potential security incident (e.g. bullying, depression, gang activities, fighting, sudden drop in grades, isolation, etc.). Most serious incidents in schools during the past decade that have involved insiders (students and adults) are related to serious and long-term problems the individuals have or are encountering at school or at home. The "observables" need to be identified and principals, assistant principals, counselors, teachers, and other staff working with students and adults in the school should learn how to identify the potential problems before they intensify into a major security incident.

3. Encourage students to have a major role in school security. Work with students to understand their important role in developing a strong school security program. Student leadership organizations should be adopting school security as one of their major themes for the year. Many students know more about where security problems exist than the adults associated with administering or teaching in the school. Students need to see the advantages of lending assistance to developing a strong security plan for the school. A number of incentives can be used to solicit student cooperation and leadership. However, most students simply want to attend a safe and secure school and will assist in developing such an environment if given a chance to have a meaningful role. ◼