

My Notes on School Shootings by Joseph Lieberman

I recently read "School Shootings" by Joseph Lieberman with the interest of gleaning information to pass along to the executive team. The book is well written and speaks to all school shootings during the period of 1974-2008. Lieberman is an Oregonian that writes out of Eugene. As part of the role I play as a board member of OSSOA, I am going to contact him to see if there is a chance he has a condensed document that would help educate school district staff. I found the book extremely educational and feel compelled to share some bulleted information with you with the "findings" I came away with.

People don't just snap. There is nearly always someone that knows information that could have led to an aversion of a planned attack. Between April 1998 and April 2001 it is estimated that over four dozen school attacks were averted, some at the last moment, because of information passed on by alert students.

Criteria characteristic of "conduct disorder" include bullying or limiting others, shoplifting, initiating physical fights, conning others to get one's way, starting fires, using a weapon that can cause serious harm, or being physically cruel to people or animals. Kip Kinkel had displayed every one of these traits by the time he'd reached his fourteenth birthday.

The characteristics of an antisocial personality has a distorted sense of entitlement, intolerance of frustrations, being unremorseful, quick-tempered, apathetic to the needs of others, blameful, manipulative, affectively cold, disregarding of social obligations, nonconforming to social norms, and irresponsible; in short, prepared to use any amount of violence to attain their massively selfish ends.

Most school shooters seem to have some variation of these disorders, especially those that display a "pervasive pattern of disregard for and violations of the rights of others". Almost all of them casually joked to friends about violence and murder as if these were desirable goals. Many wrote menacing essays that dwelt heavily in blood and gore.

Experts assert that violent visual imagery is as addictive as alcohol or nicotine, and that this addiction is being knowingly marketed to youth. Recent estimates say children view, on average, twelve thousand acts of violence a year on TV alone, and over one thousand murders.

School shooters may also imagine that they can "wear evil", as if it is a mask or suit of camouflage, but eventually they become the role they play. By getting into a "face mask" and pretending to become the very thing they are afraid of, children feel powerful. Plus there is an added bonus being able to scare others. Primitive tribes, dancing in bear, wolf or lion skins, could overcome their fear of the creatures they hunted in much the same way.

We can't expect our schools to be islands of safety when our communities are a sea of violence.

While living in fear or living fearlessly is still largely a personal choice, to a psychotic paranoid, there is “no choice” – for them, the world is populated by only two kinds of people; those who fear others, and those who are feared. While it’s hard enough for a mentally unstable adult to maintain a sense of equilibrium, an unbalanced juvenile mind struggling with rejection and isolation might see the opportunity to be feared, rather than living in fear of others, as a step upward. The coward who’s been bullied is most often the one who will seize an opportunity to bully others. The abused child, left unprotected, also inevitably becomes an abuser.

The National School Safety Center’s Report on School Associated Violent Deaths detailed on 245 shooting deaths in or around schools during the ten-year period from 1992-2002. Although that is 245 too many, the number pales in comparison with shooting deaths in other non-school locations. During that same period, the only shooting deaths reported in Oregon schools were the two student victims of Kip Kinkel. In short, despite the huge number of guns that were and are smuggled on campuses across the nation, schools are still one of the safest places a child could be. More children are killed at home than in any other locations. In 2000, for example, there were sixteen school-associated violent deaths. By comparison, approximately sixteen children die at the hands of their parents or guardians every three days in America. From all sources, including family violence, around sixteen youths die specifically from gunfire each two days, mostly at the hands of adults. According to the National center for Education statistics, crime in schools declined in the past decade, though the number of juveniles in custody continued to grow annually. The reason?, Longer prison terms and more serious sentencing account for part of it.

Much is being done at schools today in terms of prevention, but more must be done. Anti-bullying programs have been set up across the nations, yet school counselors report it’s often the parents of the most at-risk adolescents who decline to be involved in meetings designed to prevent bullying and suicide, probably because, like the Kinkels and Klebolds before them, they are in at least partial denial that such problems exist within their own home. It’s not enough to get bullies to temporarily suspend their insensitive, arrogant attitudes and feign contriteness. Schools need to be tenacious in working through the issues with those who intimidate others to identify the genuine source of their behavior. Was there a recent divorce or abuse? Whatever the reason, kids need to realize that passing their inner pain on to others weaker than themselves is never right.

A question is often asked: “why is this happening now in smaller, rural schools? To answer simply, as urban and suburban schools step up their security programs, we’ll see more attacks upon rural schools, where such events are least expected. School security nationwide is spotty and inconsistent. If we know terrorists may hijack a plane, we don’t screen passengers at only the largest airports. It should be the same with schools. Living in a small and isolated location does not guarantee safety, but neither does being a student on an immense campus. Size is not the issue. Just like at airport security, every single threat must be taken seriously-even if the student making it is known to be a joker, “a nice kid”, a constant liar, or a big talker. Never assume they “wouldn’t really do something like that.” The notion that it can’t happen here must go the way of cheap gasoline- it belongs to another era. That doesn’t mean we should live with trepidation, just exercise caution.

Fostering a willingness among students to report legitimate threats in the interest of their self-preservation is a tried-and-true solution. It's already resulted in the prevention of dozens of potential school shootings. If a student sees or overhears anything that even resembles a gun or bomb threat, they should know that their school has provided a safe place to impart that information in confidence. At the start of each school year, and again at the beginning of spring semester, every student should be reminded of these facts again, via lectures, assemblies, or e-mail. Under current safeguards, anyone who hints to authorities that he's considered doing a school shooting may be arrested. If a desperate student is that close to the edge, but willing to share his feelings candidly, he needs to know there's a number he can call to get the help he needs without necessarily being locked away. School districts can set up something like this, modeled on suicide prevention lines.

Last year dozens of students died from school violence in America, and a quarter of a million kids suffered serious injuries. We have fire sprinklers, fire alarms, extinguishers and fire – retardant materials in the ceiling. We prepare for fire, but not a single kid's been killed by a school fire in half a century. We need to be as prepared for violence. Each administrator, teacher, office staffer, SRO and counselor should know exactly what to do in such an emergency and who they need to contact.

WARNING SIGNS of POTENTIAL SCHOOL SHOOTERS

A red flag should be raised whenever the student(s) in questions exhibits at least two of the following:

- Has been bullied or badly teased and feels their concerns are being ignored
- Has been depressed to the point of suicidal and / or homicidal ideation.
- Is a loner who seems locked into his (her) own world and rejects communication?
- Has been prescribed antipsychotic or antidepressant medications.
- Has access to weapons at home or with relatives, even if those are kept in a lockbox.
- Has a preference for violent media such as bloody action films and first – person shooter video games rated M or AO (targeting humans).
- Has a history of writing about disturbing, macabre subjects, or drawing excessively violent images.
- Downloads bomb-making recipes or detailed information on other school shootings from the internet.
- Seems obsessed about knives, guns and other weapons.
- Expresses admiration for other school shooters.
- Made a hit list of enemies or drew plans of the school.
- Has talked of plans for mayhem, but when questioned, says he (she) was only joking.

The back of the book has a full chronology of major school shootings from 1974-2008.