

Protective Intelligence: The Key to Preventing Classroom Shootings

Once again, America was dealt a sickening gut-punch by [a mass murder](#) in a public high school. The classroom avenger phenomenon is racking up a death toll with no end in sight. In the most recent case, evident warning signs [were ignored](#) by the FBI. School districts should, of course, maximize the protective and enforcement services offered by cooperative local and federal agencies, but it will be best if they do so through a professional, in-house security department that knows the students in their schools and represents each district's own interests. Ideally, a well-rounded school-district security department will deliberately and thoughtfully incorporate protective intelligence and threat management functions founded upon first-hand knowledge of students.

Eighteen out of 20 active shooting incidents in middle and high schools between 2000 and 2013, cataloged by the FBI, were perpetrated by current or former students of those schools. These mass-killers are not strangers to the campuses where they commit murder. For this reason, the best thing that a school district security department can do to protect students is to invest heavily in cultivating a personal relationship with every single student. The day that Columbine high school was attacked by two of its own students, a student at my high school approached me and asked me what I was going to do at our school to respond to this new kind of threat. I told him, "I will be doing the same things tomorrow that I did today."

This might have sounded like a cop out. But let me tell you what I had done that day to keep him and our entire school safe.

On a typical school day, I would be walking the campus before the sun rose. I would stand at the bus line and greet students and observe everyone coming to school. I would walk the car drop off area where students were arriving. I would say good morning to them and make small talk. I'd walk around behind the baseball field and the football stadium where I might interrupt a few kids smoking cigarettes. We might exchange a little banter and I would confiscate their smoking materials and let them know that they would be getting a referral to the assistant principal.

While students were in class, I would walk the parking lot giving every student's car a visual inspection through the windows. This frequently led to the confiscation of drug paraphernalia, alcohol, and even weapons. Once I recovered several cell phones and car stereos that had been stolen from neighborhood cars. Often, I would visit classes. I might stop in to a physical education class and play basketball with the kids. Or I might stop in and chat with the French teacher or the Physics teacher and have conversations with some of the students there. At lunchtime, I would mingle with the students in the lunch room. There was a lot of high-fiving and light conversation. I'd hit the trails that led from the back of the school property out into the neighborhoods. There I might find a small group of kids lighting up a marijuana pipe. I patrolled on foot, by car, by bicycle.

I felt that I had to sweat the small things

Truancy, tardiness, smoking, inappropriate language, dress code violations, parking violations, moving violations in the parking lot. All of these things affect the overall climate of the school, similar to how structural decay [can affect criminal behavior](#) in cities. But more importantly, by spending so much energy on enforcing the school's "minor" rules and by being vigilant, I was developing an awareness of what was going on around the campus. I knew *who* was on my campus. I had a directory of every student's picture. I would study that

directory diligently during the first month of school. While kids were in classes, I was memorizing their faces.

When lunch would come around I would greet them by name and they would be amazed that I knew who they were. In time, I'd learn not only who every student was, but who his friends were. I would know the cars students drove. I would know where they parked, where they hung out between classes, what classes they attended, what activities they were engaged in. I couldn't keep all of this information in my head, so I developed a database in which I documented every contact including associated people and vehicles.

My vigilance around these aspects of campus order and safety enhanced our efforts to impact drug and alcohol use, theft, vandalism, violence. I could look at grainy video of an overnight burglary at the school and identify the perpetrators by the way he walked. Kids who knew things I needed to know would often volunteer important information.

On one occasion, several kids from a rival school came on the property overnight and vandalized a car belonging to one of our soccer players who was on an overnight trip. They destroyed all the windows with bats and rocks. A few weeks later, a different student was hanging out at the mall with kids from the rival campus. Some of them were bragging about having done the deed. My student conveyed that information to me. The kids eventually were arrested and later ordered to make restitution.

On another occasion, a burglary at the school went unsolved for six months until one day a student told me that months before, he had seen another student taking a keen interest in a newspaper article about the crime. I interviewed that kid's friends first and developed information that led to him confessing to the act. He ended up being charged.

After school, I ran open gym or worked out in the weight room

and got to know the athletes. I participated in the school play and got to know the drama kids. I was a junior statesman advisor and got to know "the nerds." They were my go-to guys for information about computers, email, the internet. My frequent visits to the trails and known smoking areas introduced me to the stoners. I worked every dance, every basketball game, every football game, every wrestling tournament.

Of course, just because I knew everyone, that didn't mean there were no problems. A kid set off a pipe bomb in a bathroom once. If others had been inside the bathroom at the time, I think they would have been killed. We caught the student and he was arrested. Once, a kid set fire to another bathroom. We caught him too and he was arrested. We received bomb threats. There were fights and alarming threats of physical violence.

One day, a community member found a notebook on the street, miles away from our campus. Inside she discovered a written (and illustrated) plan by a student to murder a teacher. It included a list of supplies for disposing of her body and a step-by-step outline of the killing. The community member brought the notebook to us. Naturally, we immediately engaged the police in the investigation. We researched our bus routes and identified the stop closest to where the notebook was found. We then looked at who boarded at that stop. When I saw that list of the ten or so kids who got on the bus at that location, I immediately identified the kid we needed to talk to. My certainty about him was not only based on my interactions with him. I knew the other kids as well and I could quickly rule them out.

In a high school or a middle school, relationships are the indispensable key to the information you will need to keep your kids safe. But the local police and the FBI don't always represent your school's interests. Sometimes their emphasis on criminal prosecutions isn't helpful. Sometimes constitutional

restrictions limit what they can do for school administrators. Sometimes, they drop the ball.

School Resource Officers are sometimes disinterested because it's not an assignment they chose nor one for which they have any real passion. Maybe they are on their department's disabled list. Maybe they got moved to school duty because of performance issues. Sometimes they're heavy-handed and harm relations with members of the student body.

Don't get me wrong, I've worked closely with very good police officers who took student safety very seriously. But few really get to know their students. Too often I see SROs sitting in their cars while the students arrive or depart school—missing a huge opportunity to interact with the students they are there to protect.

If policy makers and education leaders are serious about protecting students, they should see that a school district has its own professionally-led and staffed security department that can ensure threats are identified, assessed, and managed in a manner that ensures safety for their kids.