How Wide is Your Net?

Questions to ask to determine whether you are prepared to stop school shootings and youth suicide

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A recent article in the Washington Post correctly called into question whether the billions of dollars schools have spend on security technologies will have any effectiveness in reducing school shootings or deaths therefrom. There is zero evidence these technologies, or increased law enforcement, will be effective.

Every indicator regarding the potential for increased bullying and harassment, school disruption, school violence, and youth suicide is flashing "neon red."

The following is research insight and some hard questions I suggest school leaders ask to pursue strategies that can better keep your students and staff safe.

The vast majority of students who engage in school shootings have experienced being bullied and excluded at school.

Look at your district's Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) or similar data. In the last decade, has there been a decline in the percentage of students reporting being bullied in your district? On the national YRBS data, there had not been a decline since the question on bullying was first asked in 2009. In states like New York, with its much lauded and apparently ineffective Dignity Act anti-bullying legislation, the rate at which students report being bullied on the YRBS has steadily increased. What schools are doing to reduce bullying is having zero positive impact. Are your approaches to reducing bullying and harassment and increasing inclusion achieving positive results?

A recent article in Pediatrics documented that students who experienced being bullied, did not come to school because they felt unsafe, and had gotten into a fight at school were significantly more likely to bring a weapon to school.

Look again your data. What is the data telling you about your level of risk? In addition to reports of being bullied, what percentage of your students have missed school because they did not feel safe? Given that experiencing being bullied appears to be clearly implicated in risks of school violence, if the rate at which your students reported being bullied has not declined nor has the rate at which they are skipping school because they do not feel safe, what needs to be done to better address these concerns?

Many school shooters have a long history of experiencing trauma and have recently experienced a significant disturbing event that has left them feeling hopeless and angry.

Look again at your data. How many students report persistent feelings of sadness and hopelessness? How many students reported they seriously considered suicide? How

many actually attempted suicide? Look at the data over the past years. Has this rate increased or decreased? What is your school doing to reduce the risks of youth suicide?

For students who have or are experienced trauma either in their families or while at school (being bullied is experiencing trauma), nothing is more important than having a solid and stable relationship with a caring adult.

The State of Oregon administers a Student Wellness Survey every other year. Students are asked to respond to this statement: "There is at least one teacher or other adult in my school that really cares about me." Over 30% of secondary students disagreed with this statement. This concerning level of staff-student relations has remained consistent since the question was first asked in 2010.

How effectively has your school implemented trauma informed practices? Have you placed a high priority on ensuring positive staff-student connections--for every student and especially for students who have experienced trauma and have greater challenges? Are your students engaged in daily practice of mindfulness, which is essential to reduce the potential of triggering? Do all students know how to self-regulate when they get upset? Does your staff know how to help students de-escalate? Are you teaching your students how to engage in effective problem solving to resolve concerns and are using collaborative problem solving strategies to help students improve their problem behavior? How many room clears have occurred this school year--where a student who has a history of trauma has triggered and the staff member had not been trained into how to help that student regulate?

Engaging in a school shooting is generally an act of attempted suicide.

This is why increased law enforcement will not be a deterrent to school shootings. These students want to die. The more law officers present, the more likely they will achieve their objective. Another recent Pediatrics article documents that youth suicide risk increases during the school year. This means that what students are experiencing at school is clearly impacting their feelings of emotional well-being.

The Secret Service has provided excellent guidance on the importance of effective threat assessment, Enhancing School Safety Using Threat Assessment. Receiving and assessing a report that a student is distressed and considering either school violence or suicide is the most effective approach to address these concerns.

Think of this metaphor: "At risk" students are falling into a river of distress, that goes into rapids and over the falls. What strategies do you have in place to stop them from falling into the river? What strategies do you have in place to get them out of the river as soon as possible? Do you have a net across the river before the water plunges down so that you can catch these students before tragedy strikes?

How wide is your net?

In the vast majority of school shootings, someone, frequently another student, had witnessed signs of significant concern, but had not reported.

The only way to get that net widely across the river is to increase the willingness of students to report potential concerns. The only way to do this is to increase student trust that if they do report, this will make things better.

Establishing or relying on an anonymous tip line is an admission that your students lack sufficient trust to walk into the front office or the counselor's office and say, "I am concerned about ..."

The totally ineffective, but expensive, social media reporting tools are even worse--a techie quick fix sham. You have hundreds of students walking around your school with smart phones in hand or pocket who are far more capable of detecting potential threats through public or private social media posts. Do your students have a sufficient level of trust in school staff that they will tell you of potential concerns and show you the posts?

The vast majority of students who are bullied do not report being bullied to the school. The reason they do not report is that they know from experience that the school's response will not make things better and has a good potential of making things worse.

Recent data from a local district in Oregon documented that close to 9% of their secondary students reported being bullied or harassed once a week or more. Two-thirds of these students said they would not ask for help from a school staff member. Given an analysis of other data from this district as compared to state level data, it is highly likely this data is representative of most districts.

Look again at your data on the percentage of students who report being bullied and consider what percentage of students are asking for help their principals or counselors to resolve these matters. This will provide an indication of the percentage of your students think that telling the school about a concern will yield an effective result.

What actions will you take to better ensure that all of your students feel safe and welcome, have a positive connection with at least one staff member who they trust really cares about them, know how to self-regulate if things get tough, and think that if they report concerns this will make things better?

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Nancy Willard, M.S., J.D. is director of Embrace Civility in the Digital Age and author of Engage Students to Embrace Civility and Be Positively Powerful: An Empowerment Plan for Teens Who Are Bullied or Harassed. A brief document is on the Embrace Civility web site that provides insight into strategies that can be put into place to help address these concerns.