

# School Safety Monthly

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## School Terrorism: Revisited

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Photos: Rachel Wilson  
& Nathan Jones (center)

## Message from the Editor



In this Edition of School Safety Monthly we focus once again on the topic of School Terrorism.

Planning for terrorism is one of our most challenging tasks. It is a topic that pulls at our heartstrings while also demanding a clear-headed response. It does not make it any easier when we recall that the chances of being the target of a terrorist attack are very low.

When the media covers an act of terrorism on the news for a 24 hour cycle it is very easy to become overwhelmed by what might seem inevitable. So what can we do? The next few pages provide 16 different ways that you can prepare and protect against terrorism while also addressing the more likely risks that we always face.

By focusing on the fundamentals and empowering your staff and students we can create a culture of safety that pays great dividends in the long run. Every member of your staff and student body is a potential "capable guardian" for your school -



someone capable of spotting danger, calling a lockdown or pulling the fire alarm.

We have a daunting task ahead, but remember - schools are still among the safest places you can be!

*-Rachel Wilson*



Photo: Nathan Jones

## Six Steps to Help Prevent School Terrorist Attacks

by Michael S. Dorn

We have clear indications that schools should take the threat of school terrorism seriously while avoiding alarmist and emotionally based approaches. Unfortunately, the very nature of school terrorism makes this challenging. Just as we have seen many negative outcomes with emotive and fear – based responses to school active shooter incidents, similar reactions to the threat of school terrorism can result in degraded levels of school safety and increased fear. Both of these negative outcomes are desired by terrorists. This article is followed by a companion piece *10 Steps to Improve Preparedness for School Terrorist Attacks*.

Recent terrorist attacks and thwarted attempts by terrorists also indicate that schools should consider a variety of attack methodologies. Indeed, experience has demonstrated that it is unwise to focus intently on any one attack methodology, such as active shooter. While firearms assaults have been popular with terrorists for more than five decades, so have hostage-taking, arson, abduction and the use of explosives. Focusing intently on active shooter events is seriously out of balance, not only for the prevention of terrorism, but for the vast majority of incidents which do not involve active shooters. Less than 5% of fatal incidents on K-12 campuses were the result of an active shooter. An effective approach to the prevention of school terrorism must be comprehensive in nature.

The following are six steps that schools can take to help prevent terrorist attacks while also protecting against other hazards:

**1. Practical security training of staff in areas relating to school security is critical.** Israeli school security emphasizes this approach. Contrary to popular myth, there are no soldiers assigned to Israeli schools on a regular basis. Instead, dozens of attacks on Israeli schools have resulted in an emphasis on solid approaches to access control, visitor management and other basic security measures. Inexpensive web courses combined with training videos and live training make this easier than in years past.

**2. Creating a positive culture of security is a must.** Heavy investments in training and security technology can be rendered ineffective by staff or students propping open

doors, buzzing in anyone who rings the intercom system and otherwise not following proper protocols. An effective culture of security requires leadership from the top of the organization and buy in from line-level employees.

**3. Behavioral detection training can help regardless of attack methodology.** Pattern matching and recognition training and other behavioral approaches have been used to prevent and interrupt a number of planned acts of school violence. As opposed to profiling individuals, this technique allows us to recognize behaviors that may indicate danger. These approaches can help school staff detect terrorists attempting to conduct pre-attack surveillance or carry out an attack regardless of the type of weapons they intend to use. Training staff to spot behaviors that are incongruent for the setting is a simple yet powerful approach that can increase security while improving human connectivity and school climate. Since terrorists have used firearms, explosives, matches, edged weapons, chemicals and other weapons to carry out attacks on schools and school buses, approaches that provide protection for a variety of situations are important.

**4. Properly protect information.** Terrorists often gather information to determine which schools they will attack. Roadblocks to surveillance such as effective visitor management systems, fencing and effective use of security camera systems can create



Photo: Nathan Jones



Photo: Rachel Wilson

challenges for terrorists. Increasingly, terrorists use the internet to obtain access on potential targets.

Posting detailed campus maps, copies of crisis plans and details about protective systems can all aid terrorists in targeting schools. Statements about how safe a school is can also influence target selection as terrorists have often hit targets that are described as highly secure to obtain increased impact.

Finally, consider the threat of cyber surveillance. We have encountered situations where unauthorized individuals (including students) have been able to easily access and view school security cameras. Poor cyber security of these types of systems could make it easy to conduct pre-attack surveillance using a school's own security camera system or sensitive crisis plan information. Systems that can be accessed via portable phone are among the easiest to hack into if not properly protected.

**5. Empower students and staff to report situations of concern.**

Students and staff are often reluctant to report suspicious persons and activities. While training covers what to look for, it is important to have regular and reinforced communications emphasizing that people are not only authorized but expected to report suspicious situations.

**6. Consider evaluating your security approaches with a carefully conducted test.**

The United States Navy learned just how easily terrorists could defeat seemingly impenetrable security systems when they tasked special operators with attempting to breach their own security systems. While great care must be exercised when performing penetration tests (also known as "red team assessments"), we have found them to be an excellent tool to identify and correct school security gaps. In one instance, a client had installed airport style security at a high school only to have local gang members breach the elaborate

security, enter the building and attack a student in his classroom. Our analyst was able to breach the school's security three days in a row using simulated weapons to help the client figure out how the gaps in security could be fixed.

While it is impossible to cover every prevention approach in a short article, proper implementation of these concepts can have a significant and positive impact. Using a comprehensive all-hazards approach to prevent and prepare to respond to acts of school terrorism is critical.

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# Ten Steps to Improve Preparedness for School Terrorist Attacks

by Michael S. Dorn

In the previous article, we focused on ways to try to prevent terrorist targeting of schools. However, the very nature of modern terrorism involves a high degree of unpredictability. The sophistication of some terrorist groups has improved significantly in recent years, making the prevention of terrorist attacks even more difficult. This means that while our efforts to try to prevent terrorist attacks must increase as the risk increases, we must also improve our efforts to prepare to respond to terrorist attacks more effectively.

The following observations are based on my direct post-incident assistance in the wake of ten K12 active shooter and targeted school shooting incidents as well as our efforts to help schools in Kenya and Nigeria better prepare for acts of school terrorism.

## 1. Good Communications and Quick Decision-Making are Critical.

Regardless of the attack methodology employed, the ability of staff to take immediate protective action and to notify others of the situation is critical. This involves a combination of appropriate technologies and the ability of staff to use them rapidly while under stress.

## 2. Oversimplification of Plans can be Dangerous.

Attempts to boil down school crisis plans to a few pages of basic content have failed in a number of school crisis events. Short videos and training programs which attempt to break complex concepts into simple and unrealistically easy to apply formulas can result in degraded levels of emergency preparedness. Thousands of controlled crisis simulations have revealed significantly different reactions than expected when

these approaches are used. Actual situations in schools have also revealed problems with oversimplification of crisis planning. We have already worked one situation where multiple lockdown failures occurred during an active shooter incident. School officials attributed this to their use of an oversimplified planning approach. One other common pitfall is combining protocols that appear to be similar despite major distinctions. The importance of separating hazmat sheltering, severe weather sheltering and earthquake sheltering into distinct and separate protocols cannot be overstated. The same is true for protocols involving the report of a weapon, use of a weapon and a hostage situation.

## 3. Avoid Active Shooter Tunnel Vision

Every active shooter case I have worked has been unique. Even though the report released by the FBI last year demonstrates that active shooter deaths have not increased in the past decade, a common perception created by misinterpretation of the report data is that K12 active shooter events are occurring with far more

frequency and are the leading cause of death in K12 schools. While the FBI report does show an overall increase in active shooter events when a broader definition is used, the data they released clearly shows no increase for the sub category of K12 schools. In our experience, employees in schools where active shooter incidents are a primary focus do not perform well in all-hazards crisis simulations, even compared to employees with less training.

## 4. Use the Tried and True All Hazards Approach.

Instead of putting all of your eggs in one basket, make sure you plan for all types of hazards that can cause death at school. School crisis planning has been heavily influenced by dramatic and intensive media coverage of these rare but catastrophic events while safety incidents that kill far more people are typically ignored. As terrorists have used an array of attack methodologies to kill and injure students and school staff, school crisis plans, training and drills should reflect this reality.

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Photo: Rachel Wilson

## 5. Consider the potential for Combination Attacks.

There are two ways that terrorists sometimes try to increase casualties and fear. The first approach is important and has been garnering considerable attention. This involves multiple coordinated attacks, such as was seen with 9/11, the London subway bombings of 2007, and in an even more complex nature in the attacks that occurred in Paris, France just a few short weeks ago.

One concern with these types of attacks centers around the difficulty emergency responders face in handling multiple serious incidents in one region at the same time. This could result in school officials receiving limited and delayed assistance. In addition, the sheer numbers of injuries and casualties can overwhelm emergency medical care services. This has been seen in domestic active shooter events as well.

The second type of combination attack is easier for terrorists to carry out. These types of situations involve the use of multiple attack methodologies on one target at the same time. For example, there have been multiple school attacks using combinations of fire and firearms in Kenya. There have also been a series of attacks carried out by aggressors using a combination of fire and firearms in U.S. schools dating back to a 1974 incident in New York and as recently as an attack in a Colorado school two years ago. While U.S. fire codes make it harder to burn newer school buildings, it is important to remember that smoke kills more fire victims rather than burn injuries. It is quite possible to create a highly toxic fire in a modern school building with a sprinkler system.

## 6. Remember School Bus Targeting.

School buses afford terrorists with a vulnerable and soft target that is much more difficult to protect than a school. Unlike most other countries, the majority of American school buses are painted the same way, which could provide a powerful symbolic target. The fear that results

from a major attack would create significant challenges, including a drop in school bus ridership. Training, plans and drills for school bus drivers bear careful consideration.

## 7. Empower students and staff to report situations of concern.

There is a considerable difference between how staff perform emergency protective actions when they are directed by the sound of a fire alarm or a lockdown announcement and the way they will perform when they must recognize and react to danger with no warning or direction. Unlike law enforcement officers and military personnel, educators are often not properly prepared to make life and death decisions on their own. Plans, training and drills must emphasize that staff are not only empowered but expected to take immediate action and communicate to warn others on their own initiative.

## 8. Focus on Family Reunification Planning.

One significant challenge for many types of major school crisis events involves moving students and staff to a remote location quickly, safely and in an organized fashion. The logistics of off-site family reunification are much more challenging than most people realize. Thoughtful planning, staff development and a series of tabletop, functional and full-scale exercises focused

on off-site family reunification can pay big dividends. This important capability will likely be needed for most types of terrorist attack methodologies.

## 9. Don't Give Away the Farm to Reassure People That They are Safe.

One public school system was recently featured in the national news as having the "safest school in America". A vendor had installed an elaborate system that floods hallways with smoke and sets off loud sirens intended to disorient an active shooter. A number of school security experts immediately expressed several concerns about this. First, describing the school as the safest school in America could create significant liability exposure if the school is litigated for any type of school safety incident. Next, this type of descriptor creates an excellent opportunity for terrorists or even a more traditional type of aggressor. Terrorists have repeatedly carried out attacks on much more highly protected targets. Finally, the system depicted in the media could be easily utilized by skilled attackers to help plan a successful mass casualty attack while allowing potential attackers to see how part of the school's protective strategy is structured.

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Photo: Chris Dorn

## "Ten Steps", continued

### 10. Test Your Plans and Concepts Properly.

While many schools conduct drills, tabletop and even full-scale exercises, very few schools conduct any form of evaluation of individual decision-making by line level staff. There are a number of popular approaches to school emergency preparedness that do not work well when tested in this manner. The use of scenarios can help school officials get a clearer picture of how well individual staff have been prepared to perform when they are the first employee to become aware of a life-threatening event. Campus Safety Magazine provides more information on this approach with a video podcast and a series of free audio crisis scenarios.

These are just a few tips that you can use to prepare your campus as part of a larger emergency operations planning program. Remember - using a comprehensive all-hazards approach to prevent and prepare to respond to acts of school terrorism is critical.

*Michael S. Dorn is the Executive Director of Safe Havens International and the Author of 27 books on school safety including Innocent Targets – When Terrorism Comes to School. He has served as a university police officer Lieutenant, a School District Police Chief and as the State Antiterrorism Planner for the Terrorism Division of the Georgia Office of Homeland Security. Michael has received extensive formal training in antiterrorism in the United States and Israel and co-authored the IS 360 training program for the United States Department of Homeland Security as part of the 2013 White House School Safety Initiative. Michael welcomes reader feedback at [www.safehavensinternational.org](http://www.safehavensinternational.org).*

## Coming Soon: School Terrorism Web Courses

Safe Havens analysts have authored a number of school safety web courses for [Scenario Learning](#), including the six recently released active shooter web courses for K12 schools, colleges, and work places. We have also authored an active shooter course for students at institutions of higher learning. Over the past year we have been working on a series of terrorism prevention and preparedness courses as well.

### Comprehensive Topical Coverage

Scenario Learning now offers more than 100 courses for the K12 sector through their SafeSchools training portal and adds new course offerings each year. Scheduled for draft completion in January, 2016, the six new terrorism prevention and preparedness courses are based on the book *Innocent Targets – When Terrorism Comes to School* which is now in its eighth print run as well as our experience working with schools in terrorism prone regions such as Nigeria and Kenya. In light of the recent series of terrorist attacks and thwarted attacks globally, Safe Havens and Scenario Learning will be completing the courses well ahead of the original publication date.

### School Safety Course Authoring and Editing

Safe Havens is honored to be selected to author these courses which are sadly now very timely. Feedback from our clients and from insurance carriers about Scenario Learning's web training has been excellent. The short time format of the awareness level courses combined with excellent tracking capability, low cost, ability for school officials to create custom web courses and features that allow school officials to document the distribution of critical policies and crisis plan components have been very popular with dozens of our clients. Our authoring team has been working closely with the Scenario Learning editorial team to produce accurate, concise, actionable and informative courses on these relevant topics.

### Full Disclosure

Safe Havens does not receive any form of royalties; our analysts author courses for Scenario Learning for a one-time nominal fee for writing course content. We have found the approach utilized by Scenario Learning Incorporated to be highly practical for our clients. Safe Havens never accepts any form of monetary compensation for recommending any product or service.



## Caught doing something good: Safety Vests

These staff members wearing high-visibility safety vests while outdoors supervising students are more visible to students, are a more visible deterrent to potential child predators and are easier to supervise.

Photo: Chris Dorn

# The Safety Net

In addition to School Safety Monthly, Safe Havens International also publishes an annual electronic journal titled The Safety Net. This is a more in-depth publication that allows for a longer format of articles and a detailed look at topics related to school safety, school security, emergency preparedness for schools, safe school design, building climate, safe school culture and school law enforcement concepts. If you are on the mailing list for School Safety Monthly you will also receive new issues of The Safety Net. If you are not already a subscriber, click here to sign up: <http://www.safehavensinternational.org/newsletter>



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