Fight, Flight or Lockdown - Teaching Students and Staff to Attack Active Shooters could Result in Decreased Casualties or Needless Deaths

By Michael S. Dorn and Stephen Satterly, Jr., Safe Havens International.

Since the Virginia Tech shooting in 2007, there has been considerable interest in an alternative approach to the traditional lockdown for campus shooting situations. These efforts have focused on incidents defined by the United States Department of Education and the United States Secret Service as targeted acts of violence which are also commonly referred to as active shooter situations. This interest has been driven by a variety of factors including:

- Incidents where victims were trapped by an active shooter
- A lack of lockable doors for many classrooms in institutions of higher learning.
- The successful use of distraction techniques by law enforcement and military tactical personnel.
- A desire to see if improvements can be made on established approaches.
- Learning spaces in many campus buildings that do not offer suitable lockable areas for the number of students and staff normally in the area.

We think that the discussion of this topic and these challenges is generally a healthy one. New approaches that involve students and staff being trained to attack active shooters have been developed and have been taught in grades ranging from kindergarten to post secondary level. There are however, concerns about these approaches that have not, thus far, been satisfactorily addressed resulting in a hot debate about these concepts. We feel that caution and further development of these concepts is prudent.

Developing trend in active shooter response training

The relatively new trend in the area of planning and training for active shooter response for K-20 schools has been implemented in schools. (Crane, 2000) To oversimplify the concept, students and staff are sometimes being taught that they should be prepared to try to escape or, as a last resort, attack an active shooter by first throwing objects such as books at them and then “swarming” them as a coordinated group effort.

There are a number of experienced public safety officials, most of whom have primary backgrounds in law enforcement or military experience, who advocate this approach. There are also a number of subject matter experts who typically have decades of experience as full time school safety center personnel or school safety consultants, as well as field experience as law enforcement officers, emergency managers, antiterrorism experts or some other relevant discipline who have concerns about this approach. We will try to provide a short overview of the potential positive aspects of this type of active shooter response followed by a more detailed outline of the concerns of our center relating to these concepts.

We should start by pointing out that active contacts with armed students have resulted in clearly preventable death in multiple situations. An illustrative case is the Weston High School shooting in...
Cazenovia, Wisconsin on September 29, 2006. 15-year old Eric Hainstock, who brought a shotgun and a .22 cal revolver to school, shot the principal, John Klang. A custodian pulled the shotgun from him, but when confronted by the principal, Eric drew the revolver and shot Klang three times. Klang died in the hospital. (Associated Press, 2006)

At the same time, active contact with armed students has already clearly averted a number of deaths in schools. Kip Kinkel brought a .22 rifle, a .22 cal handgun, and a Glock 9mm semi-automatic pistol to his high school in Thurston, Oregon in 1998. He walked into the school cafeteria and opened fire, killing one student and wounding 23 others. When he stopped to reload, several students subdued him. (CNN, 1998) We anticipate that both types of outcomes will be repeated in the future regardless of the type of training provided to students and staff, but improvements in current approaches could change the outcomes in some of these situations.

**Potential benefits of teaching active response to armed aggressors**

Proponents of active resistance to active shooters express frustration with the predominant current trend in school preparedness measures, which they feel leaves students and staff helpless if and when an active shooter enters a room and opens fire. This trend is to enact a lockdown protocol, and have the teacher and students lock the door, turn out the lights, close the blinds, and wait until help arrives. Proponents of active resistance often feel it is wrong to allow staff and students to passively accept their fate.

They correctly point out that there have been some injuries and deaths in these incidents. They also note that there are well-validated distraction techniques that have been in use by law enforcement tactical teams for years that can often momentarily distract a person with a gun. These techniques range from throwing something at an opponent's eyes (Anderson, 2012) to the use of 'flash-bang' stun grenades. (Pike, 2012) They advocate giving permission to students and staff to flee an active shooter if a lockdown cannot protect them from gunfire and, as a last resort, to throw objects such as books at the shooter’s head to distract them before rushing the aggressor as a group and subduing them, or fleeing. (Crane) While oversimplified, this description provides a fairly good overview of the concepts being taught. It should be pointed out that many school lockdown procedures have included the option for students and staff to evacuate a room anytime it appears safer to do so during a lockdown, though this option is not always included in school crisis plans.

As we shall see, there have already been a number of instances where direct contact with an armed aggressor has brought an active shooter situation to an end. These have ranged from students and school employees who have tackled active shooters to instances where civilians have used firearms to stop an attack at schools and school events.

An example of this was the Pearl High School shooting in October of 1997. Luke Woodham killed his mother, and then went to Pearl High School with a .30 caliber rifle. He shot and killed two girls and wounded seven others before heading to his car to continue his shooting at nearby Pearl Junior High
School. Assistant Principal Joel Myrick retrieved a .45 caliber pistol from his car, and used it to subdue Woodham until the police arrived. (The Associated Press, 1997).

At Deer Creek Middle School in Jefferson County, Colorado, Bruco Strong Eagle Eastwood used a rifle to shoot two students before being tackled by David Benke, a math teacher. When Eastwood stopped to reload, the 57-year-old teacher charged the gunman. An assistant principal grabbed the rifle, and Benke and another teacher kept the shooter pinned until police arrived. (Los Angeles Times, 2010)

Reasons some are concerned about this approach for K12 schools

School officials and leading experts in the field of school safety who have expressed reservations about this approach have done so because of views ranging from the practicality of students retaining the information under the stress of an actual shooting to the possibility that misapplications of the techniques could cause deaths instead of preventing them (Dorn, 2011) As we shall see, there have been instances where direct confrontation of armed aggressors has resulted in clearly preventable death.

Another concern that has been expressed is that some schools are spending more time addressing active shooter response than they are on other deadly hazards such as medical emergencies, fires, hazardous materials incidents, tornadoes, earthquakes and aggressors with other types of weapons such as knives. (Dorn, 2010). As active shooter situations and even violence overall are not a leading cause of death in American K12 schools, (Cornell, 2006) the concern is that we are still losing more student and staff lives to these causes each year than we do to active shooter situations. Still, many schools do not have staff trained in CPR and first aid, or conduct tornado, earthquake, reverse evacuation, room clear and shelter in place drills in regions of the country where the correct application of these skills can be a life and death matter.

Six different basic scenarios

One reason we are concerned about an over-emphasis on active shooter situations is the relative rarity of these events in relation to other types of school weapons incidents. The Secret Service, in their landmark “The Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the Prevention of School Attacks in the United States” notes the rarity of targeted school violence:

To put the problem of targeted school-based attacks in context, from 1993 to 1997 the odds that a child in grades 9-12 would be threatened or injured with a weapon in school were 7 to 8 percent, or 1 in 13 or 14; the odds of getting into a physical fight at school were 15 percent, or 1 in 7. In contrast, the odds that a child would die in school—by homicide or suicide—are, fortunately, no greater than 1 in 1 million. In 1998, students in grades 9-12 were the victims of 1.6 million thefts and 1.2 million nonfatal violent crimes, while in this same period 60 school-associated violent deaths were reported for this student population. The findings of the Safe School Initiative’s extensive search for recorded incidents of targeted school-based attacks underscore the rarity of lethal attacks in school settings. The Department of Education reports that nearly 60 million children attend the nation’s 119,000+ schools. The combined efforts of the Secret Service and the Department of Education identified 37 incidents of targeted
school-based attacks, committed by 41 individuals over a 25-year period. (Secret Service, 2002)

Based on more than thirty years of full time work in the field, Michael Dorn categorizes the types of weapons situations most commonly faced in schools in the following six categories. We would like the reader to consider that misapplication of emergency procedures between categories is a very real concern and death can result when this happens. Though data collection approaches in the United States often make it difficult to tabulate incidents by type, they are listed in what his experience indicates are the approximate order of frequency of occurrence, rather than severity.

Report of someone with a weapon

By far the most common weapons incident in school are situations where a student is reported to have a weapon, or found to be armed by some detection capability, such as student tips, pattern matching and recognition, visual weapons screening, or detection by metal detection/X-ray equipment. A number of deaths have occurred when these types of situations were not handled properly. For example, three school administrators were shot and killed in Tennessee while trying to search a student for a handgun (Jacobs & Alapo, 2005). In another, an administrator was shot and killed and a second administrator wounded while trying to search a Florida student without police assistance. (Winchester, 2008) An administrator was taken hostage in Tennessee while trying to recover a gun (Dare, 2005), and administrators in Pennsylvania and Maryland have likewise been shot and wounded while trying to search students for weapons. In still another situation, a first grade student was shot and killed in Michigan after a teacher recovered a knife from another first grader and police were not called in. (Rosenblatt, 2000)

Report of someone threatening people with or brandishing a weapon

The next most common weapons incident in schools involves a person who is brandishing a weapon but has not begun firing and has not taken hostages. This is a relatively common type of situation in contrast to school shootings of any category and these events can turn deadly if they are not handled properly. (Nelson, 2010) This is a specific concern for training of students and staff since people have been shot while attempting to subdue these types of offenders. For example, a principal was shot and killed in Wisconsin when he attempted to subdue and disarm a student who had not yet fired his weapon and was still talking with the administrator. (Associated Press, 2006) In another case, a former headmaster related how a student hall monitor in a suburban Connecticut Independent school was shot and wounded when he tried to disarm another student who was brandishing a handgun. Students and staff throwing objects at this type of offender could easily trigger a shooting that would not otherwise take place. As a recent example, an incident occurred in Hastings, Minnesota where a student brandished a loaded gun in class and the teacher was able to successfully talk the student into putting down the gun. (Nelson, 2010) No one was injured as a result of the manner in which the teacher handled the situation. Several other incidents of students being caught with guns on campus were also reported that week in the news due to the high interest in the media in the topic so soon after the tragedy in Chardon, Ohio earlier in the same week.
Use of a weapon for a limited scope attack

The next most common type of school weapons incident involves an actual attack on staff or students with a weapon that is not a targeted act of violence. Most of these attacks involve knives, box cutters, hammers, baseball bats and a variety of weapons other than firearms. By far, the majority of school attacks in the United States fit in this category, rather than in the active shooter category. Most typically, these attacks involve edged weapons. One example of this was the murder of student Amanda Collette who was shot and killed at Dillard High School in Broward County, Florida in November, 2008 (Fitzpatrick, 2008). Unlike active shooter situations, the typical events in this category are not covered in the national news. Most of these situations involve a single victim edged weapons assault or a single victim assault using a firearm. The majority of these situations do not result in fatalities but do have major consequences for students, staff and parents.

Another concern with the approach to training staff to attack active shooters as a last resort is that this type of training often focuses solely on firearms attacks. There are other types of multiple victim weapons attacks that involve other types of weapons, most notably edged weapons. There have been a number of these types of attacks in schools in the United States, the People’s Republic of China and Japan. For example, in 2009, a teen entered Hillsdale High School in San Mateo, California, with ten pipe bombs, a sword, and a chainsaw. He set off two pipe bombs in an empty hallway, and was eventually chased down and restrained by teachers. Over 1,200 students were evacuated, and fortunately no one was hurt. (KTVU, 2009). In another incident in 2004, a student with a machete and a large, serrated hunting knife slashed seven of his classmates before being tackled by school administrators, putting 2,000 students into lockdown for several hours. (Brody, 2004)

Suicide with a weapon

Over the past several decades there have been a number of incidents where a student has used a firearm to threaten, or actually commit suicide on school property, such as the student who shot himself with an AK-47 in the hallway of his high school in 2009. (CBS News, 2009) These have involved students armed with handguns, rifles and shotguns. This is another situation that if misread under the high stress of an event, could become even more dangerous. If any staff member or student in a room were to use active resistance techniques in this type of situation, someone who is contemplating suicide might go through with the act or open fire on others.

Active shooter incidents

Many people mistakenly think most school shootings involve active shooters. In fact, other than hostage situations, active shooter attacks are the least common type of school violence over the last thirty years. Targeted acts of school violence are usually horrific and often catastrophic events and dominate the media coverage relating to school safety. In some cases, there are concerns that the intensive media coverage may be a contributing factor in further incidents. (Grenny, 2012) A recent example of this involved the arrest of a Maine Man who was arrested after he told police that he was headed to New Hampshire to shoot and kill his former supervisor when he was pulled over for driving in excess of 100 miles per hour. After police found a number of firearms and newspaper clippings about
the deadly shooting at a movie theater in Aurora, Colorado the week before, the suspect admitted his intent to travel to another state to carry out an attack. \cite{Richardson_2012} Though active shooter incidents are deadly, truly tragic, and are often mass casualty incidents, they are extremely atypical and should not dominate our prevention and preparedness efforts to the exclusion of other weapons incidents that happen on a daily basis and are also often deadly events.

**Hostage situations**

Less common than active shooter situations, school and school bus hostage situations also occur. \cite{Baskin_2012} If staff react to these situations with force, they can also prompt an aggressor to fire. This occurred in a Forsyth County, Georgia high school when a teacher tried to disarm and subdue a student who came to school with a detailed plan to take hostages \cite{AssociatedPress_1999} When the teacher tried to disarm him, the student fired a number of rounds at the teacher and into the ceiling. The student had more than 90 pounds of weapons including an improvised explosive device. As with several of the other categories, students and staff who react to this type of incident using active resistance techniques could cause another situation like the one in Georgia where fortunately, no one was hit with the rounds fired. The standoff ended peacefully later in the day.

**Successful interventions have occurred**

As mentioned earlier, there have been a number of situations where students, staff and other people have initiated physical contact, or otherwise directly stopped someone armed with a firearm in a school. To list just a few, these include:

- A student who attacked and successfully subdued Kip Kinkel after he had shot more than twenty victims at a high school in Thurston, Oregon. Kinkel was reloading the rifle and had more than 600 rounds of ammunition and a second gun at the time. \cite{Clark_1998}
- Students who subdued a student armed with multiple handguns in Princeton, West Virginia after he stated that he was going to shoot them.
- An administrator at Pearl High School in Mississippi who retrieved a .45 caliber semi-automatic pistol from his personal vehicle and took Luke Woodham into custody after he killed two victims and wounded seven students. \cite{Zewe_1997}
- A bartender in Edinboro, Pennsylvania who stopped an active shooter at a school dance. When he heard the shots being fired, he retrieved a shotgun and held the suspect at gunpoint until police arrived. \cite{DeJong_2003}
- A teacher at Fort Gibson Middle school who subdued a student who had fired his father’s 9mm semi-automatic handgun 15 times until he ran out of ammunition shooting and wounding four students. \cite{AssociatedPress_1999}
- A teacher in Jefferson County Colorado who rushed a gunman while he was reloading his rifle after he opened fire at the end of the school day. \cite{Riccardi_2010}

These incidents demonstrate that there are times when an active shooter can and should be immobilized through direct action by staff and students who feel capable and comfortable in doing so.
We agree with the assertion by those who advocate a physical response as one option to an active shooter who has trapped victims, that victims should generally not stay passive in these situations.

Deaths, injuries and hostage situations have already occurred

As previously mentioned, there have been a number of incidents where direct physical actions against an armed suspect who is not an active shooter has resulted in shots being fired and even preventable death. We have already provided examples of these types of situations to illustrate a predominant concern that if staff and/or students misread a situation under stress, additional deaths may occur as a direct result of this type of training.

In a more recent incident, several victims were stabbed after they attempted to disarm a man who was using a knife to attack victims near a community college in Ohio. Though they were initially able to subdue the aggressor and disarm him, he produced a second edged weapon and continued his attack. Though we do not have adequate information as to what other options were available at the time of this writing, this incident shows the types of complications that can arise when unarmed personnel attempt to disarm and subdue an attacker. (Welsh-Huggins, 2012)

Concerns about the developmental ability for kindergarten, elementary, special needs and high school student populations to understand and retain the information

A number of experts in the field have expressed deep concerns that these techniques have been presented to children of all grade levels. In at least some instances, children at the kindergarten level have been trained in these techniques. Those with considerable experience in helping prepare students for fire drills, lockdown drills, tornado sheltering drills etc. have expressed concerns that elementary and many special needs students may be even more likely to misapply this type of approach than adults who, as previously stated, have already done so in actual school crisis situations.

Concerns that this type of training may not be delivered in balance with other risks

We have already seen examples of chronic plan failure in schools that overemphasized lockdown and active shooter training when actual shootings occurred. Some research in crisis decision making indicates that one reason that these types of failures have occurred is that training and drills for students and employees have been too narrowly focused to provide them with a wide enough base of knowledge to handle even slight variances in crisis situations.

For example, co-author Michael Dorn recently served as an expert witness in a school homicide case. Even though considerable training and an active shooter exercise had been conducted at the school where the shooting took place, the school’s principal waited an estimated eight minutes before calling an ambulance for a student who had been shot by another student. Even though the student was unconscious and a number of students witnessed the shooting, the administrator who was acting under the stress of an actual crisis initially failed to realize that the student had been shot.

Most students and staff who die in American schools, die from causes besides violence. Many schools today still do not conduct lockdown, tornado, earthquake, reverse evacuation, room clear or shelter in
place drills for hazardous materials incidents, etc. Any school that does not conduct reverse evacuation
drills is not prepared as well as it could be to implement any of the above life saving emergency
functions. This means that additional mass casualty losses could easily occur and there have been many
near misses. Though there has not been a school fire fatality in the United States to our knowledge
since 1958, a number of schools are destroyed by fire in this country every year. A few years ago, 8
students were killed when a tornado struck an Alabama high school. FEMA officials stated that many
more students could have died had the school staff not been so prompt in properly sheltering students.
As we have seen in other countries and in earlier times in the United States, one hazardous materials
incident, fire or tornado strike could kill more students in one day than are killed in several years, or
even a decade, by acts of violence.

None of the four most lethal K12 school safety incidents in the United States have involved an active
shooter situation. Two of these events were attacks on schools – one with fire (Morgan, 2012) and the
other with explosives. (Gado, 2011). The other two incidents involved school fires that were not
intentionally set (Frickes, 2008). These four incidents resulted in nearly six hundred deaths. Though
some would argue that these events took place long ago and that school design and other changes make
these incidents irrelevant, we should point out that in most school years between six and twelve schools
are destroyed by fire alone making mass casualty losses an ongoing possibility that must be considered.
We should also point out that a great deal of attention has been paid to fire safety, resulting in safer
conditions.

Overemphasizing any one type of threat in training and drills can be a dangerous practice for schools. A
review of research in the field of crisis decision making reveals that affording people with a relatively
broad base of knowledge for a variety of types of crisis situations can help them better respond to
almost any situation they may face. (Klein, 1998)

**Conclusion**

We feel that both schools of thought have some very solid points, as demonstrated by the fact that
deaths in schools have resulted from staff and students taking action to confront armed aggressors, as
well as some situations where they were not confronted. We would like people from both of these
viewpoints to carefully consider how the concerns outlined here can be best harmonized to develop
approaches to the pressing problems that are superior to those that we have seen thus far.

Overall, we feel that while advancements are being made, many of the points described here have not
been adequately addressed in the majority of American schools. We feel that an All-Hazards approach is
the best way to address all these concerns, and that focusing too much on a single hazard will not
adequately prepare a school for the numerous types of crisis situations they could face on any school
day in today’s world.

Thankfully, many bright, innovative, talented and dedicated people are continually working towards
better approaches and strategies than those that are available to us today. We feel confident that a
continual, respectful and open-minded dialogue will help move this body of knowledge forward.
Base of experience for these observations

We base these concerns on a variety of factors including:

- Our research into how people function under life and death stress
- Our research into school shootings and edged weapons attacks
- The experience of Steve Satterly when he experienced a tornado strike during school hours on a school campus where he was an administrator
- Participation in active shooter response trainings in the United States and in Israel
- More than 1,700 structured and scored one-on-one simulations of life and death school crisis situations with more than 500 school employees from fifteen small, medium, large school districts in the United States utilizing video and scripted school crisis simulations.
- Participation as planners, coordinators, controllers or evaluators for numerous active shooter full-scale exercises and hundreds of drills, table top and functional exercises at K-12 schools.
- School safety, security, climate, culture and emergency preparedness assessment projects for more than 2,000 public, private, charter, independent and parochial schools in the past several years.
- Michael Dorn’s experience surviving one incident where he was shot at six times on a college campus, an attack where he was slashed with a box cutter while he was a high school student, as well as a series of incidents where people tried to assault him with firearms and edged weapons while he was a campus law enforcement officer.
- Michael Dorn’s experience being brought in as a subject matter expert during and/or after seven actual active shooter situations in U.S. and Canadian schools, as well as hundreds of school shootings, edged weapons incidents, hostage situations, weapons recoveries and situations where someone has brandished a firearm at a school, on a school bus or at a school special event. Dorn has been involved with these cases as a school district police chief, as the lead expert for the nation’s largest state government school safety center, as an expert witness or as a consultant to provide training or help school officials develop corrective measures in the wake of these incidents.

About the co-authors

Michael Dorn serves as the Executive Director of Safe Havens International Inc. a non-profit school safety center. A full-time campus safety practitioner at the K-20 levels for more than 30 years, Michael has authored and co-authored 26 books on school safety and his work has taken him to Mexico, Central America, Canada, Europe, South Africa, Asia and the Middle East. A graduate of the 181st Session of the FBI National Academy, Michael also participated in an intensive 14-day fellowship to study antiterrorism and community policing in the State of Israel through a fellowship from Georgia State University. Michael can be reached at www.safehavensinternational.org
Stephen Satterly, Jr., serves as the Director of School Safety for the Community School Corporation of Southern Hancock County. He is a certified Indiana School Safety Officer, and has Active Shooter certification from the Indiana Law Enforcement Academy. He served in the US Army for 12 years as an Infantry Drill Sergeant and Officer, and has numerous FEMA certifications. He is a 2007 Alumnus of the FBI Citizen’s Academy, and was recently a REMS Project Director. Stephen can be reached at satterly.steve@att.net

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


BIBLIOGRAPHY (cont.)


**BIBLIOGRAPHY (cont.)**


