

SSI TRAINING COMMENTARY

Our Unfortunate Reality

*The Importance of Safety and Security Awareness and Readiness
In Today's Education Environment*

A Commentary By
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I live in Denver. I moved here in October 2000, just a little over a year after the Columbine High School massacre in Littleton, Colorado, a suburb of Denver. Since Columbine, the FBI has identified 220 active shooting incidents between 2000 and 2016—48 occurring in educational settings like Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, West Nickel Mines Amish Schoolhouse in Pennsylvania, and a playground at Townville Elementary School in South Carolina.

Almost half of the assailants in active shooting incidents have killed themselves after wounding and taking the lives of over fourteen hundred innocent victims. These disheartening statistics reflect the unfortunate reality in which we work and live but do not entirely capture the extent of the pain and risk that students face every day. Suicides among children and teens are occurring at an alarming rate across the country, and most are unconnected to active shooting incidents.

I'm reminded of the young man who later died after setting himself on fire at a Denver area high school in front of 60 of his peers in the school's cafeteria. I can only imagine the horror his friends and classmates experienced as they saw his body ablaze. It makes me wonder how many lives could be saved—and traumatized survivors and bystanders spared—if we got better at suicide prevention and intervention. While most school personnel get certified in CPR, an educator is more likely to encounter someone having a mental health crisis than a heart attack, yet, few are trained to see the signs of a student in distress. Safety and security professionals can help us to better prepare for and respond to active shooting incidents and other acts of violence, and mental health professionals can help us to enhance student wellbeing and prevent and cope with tragedies like suicide.

A promising approach being employed by an increasing number of schools that has a far-reaching impact on student wellbeing is *Social Emotional Learning (SEL)*. SEL enhances a student's ability to effectively deal with daily tasks and challenges by promoting five core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and decision making. When a student is able to recognize and regulate his or her own emotions and impulses, empathize with others, resolve interpersonal conflict, and make good decisions about his or her own behavior and social interactions, that contributes to a safe and supportive learning environment for all, and, in turn, a better, more productive learning experience and better student outcomes.

The reality is that violence, suicide, and other tragedies are all too common, and students face distressing events like bullying, sexual assault, and mental health crises that negatively impact their wellbeing. Many students live in trauma-inducing environments and situations occurring in their homes and in their communities. Just in the past couple of weeks in Denver, four people have been murdered, one young lady has been paralyzed, and several hospitalized as a result of violence. I've seen the sad and confused faces of the children and youth grieving these losses. Far too many students come to school already feeling unsafe, and if school also feels unsafe, some choose not to come to school at all.

Traumatic experiences impact brain development and behavior inside and outside of the classroom. Make no mistake; safety—social, emotional, mental, and physical—is a prerequisite for learning. Students must feel safe at school, including in classrooms, hallways, bathrooms, playgrounds, and bus stops, and they must feel safe emotionally and socially. Schools and educators have a vital role to play in providing stability and a safe space for children to interact and learn. In taking a *trauma-informed approach* to teaching and learning, educators serve as a link to supportive services, and can adapt curricula and behavioral interventions to better meet the educational needs of students who have experienced trauma.

We all understand the budget constraints that many districts operate under. Nonetheless, where there are funds (and opportunities to raise funds), it's imperative that schools and districts make safety and security their highest priority. Students cannot learn if they don't feel safe and supported. Schools must resist the tendency to be reactive when it comes to allocating funds for training and security systems, thinking, "It could never happen here." Our unfortunate reality strongly suggests that it's not a matter of if, but when. In fact, the Colorado General Assembly found that it is "now foreseeable that violence in schools can occur," and that schools have a responsibility to keep their students, faculty, staff, and others safe within school facilities and during school sponsored events from reasonably foreseeable acts of actual or attempted violence.

Colorado public and charter schools must be able to demonstrate that they took reasonable care to prevent acts of school violence and are now liable for up to \$350,000 if one person is seriously injured or killed in any one occurrence of school violence and up to \$900,000 if multiple people are seriously injured or killed in any one occurrence. Known as the *Claire Davis School Safety Act*, Senate Bill 15-213 was named after Claire Davis, a student who was shot during an active shooting incident at Arapahoe High School in Centennial, Colorado, and then later died.

Creating a safe learning environment meets students' needs for social, emotional, mental, and physical safety and wellbeing. It requires a *whole school, whole child, whole community (WSCC)* approach that consists of not just safe school facilities, but also includes communication with parents and community members, and is supported by evidence based educational models, materials, and curricula, proven solutions and technology, and high quality professional development and training.

When it comes to the safety and security of students, staff, and visitors, it's not enough to have training. We have to have the right training. Effective safety training should not be a "train-the-trainer" model nor training based solely on opinion, assumptions, or emotion. Effective safety training should be based on empirical research and conducted by security professionals with appropriate credentials and real world experience.

About Dr. Peggy Mitchell Clarke

Dr. Peggy Mitchell Clarke is a clinical psychologist and consultant with almost three decades of combined experience in mental health, higher education, publishing, and media. Earning her Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology from Brown University, and her Master's and Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology from the University of Virginia, Dr. Clarke is a certified executive instructor and curriculum author for SSI Guardian. Dr. Clarke currently serves on Community College of Aurora's Behavioral Intervention Team, bringing her experience as a faculty member, administrator and mental health professional.

About School Specialty and the 21st Century Safe Schools Initiative

[School Specialty, Inc.](#) (OTCQB:SCOO), a leading distributor of supplies, furniture as well as instruction and intervention resources to the education, healthcare and other marketplaces, supports efforts to integrate the development and implementation of methods, tools and systems that provide environments that afford physical, emotional, mental and social safety and security to produce better student outcomes. The aim of the 21st Century Safe Schools initiative is to heighten understanding of and support for a holistic approach to designing and equipping and managing school environments in order to ensure safe, successful and forward-thinking learning experiences.

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