



‘Our Schools Are Generally Safe’

A school violence expert talks about the recent shootings and what can be done to prevent more tragedies.

By Pat Wingert
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Oct. 3, 2006 - In the last week, three schools in different parts of the country have been terrorized by violence. In Cazenovia, Wis., a 15-year-old boy shot and killed the principal of the local high school. In Bailey, Colo., a drifter took six female students hostage in their high school, sexually assaulted them, and fatally shot one of them before turning the gun on himself. And on Monday, in Pennsylvania Amish country, a heavily armed truck driver burst into a one-room schoolhouse, lined up several girls and shot them, execution-style before killing himself (five of the girls died, five more remained hospitalized Tuesday). NEWSWEEK's Pat Wingert spoke with **William Pollack**, director of the Centers for Men and Young Men at **McLean Hospital** in Massachusetts and a former member of the U.S. Secret Service School Violence Task Force, about the recent tragedies and what can be done to make schools safer. Excerpts:

NEWSWEEK: During the last week, we’ve seen a rash of school violence—three incidents in five days—after a relatively quiet period since the 1999 Columbine massacre. What is going on?

William Pollack: Incidents have been occurring, but they have not been as extreme as what we’re seeing this week, or they’ve been prevented before they happened. I don’t like to talk about copy cats because it’s not like everyone who sees this kind of thing will do something similar and the floodgates will open, but for people who are on the edge, something like this can be enough to make another incident more likely. Only one of these incidents was the more typical type of school-based violence, the student attacking the principal. The other two, I’m not sure they had any connection to the schools, other than as a place where children were. I don’t know enough about these two cases, but I would hazard a guess that prior to these incidents, the shooters were acting in a way that gave some sign or signal of what they were planning to do. They may have talked about it with someone, or started collecting equipment, or whatever. The problem is that when that happens, those around the person typically become frozen bystanders who don’t know who to go to or what to do, so the person goes forward with their plan.

These incidents often have a pattern: they all seem to involve males—some younger than others—and the targets are often female. Can you explain the gender component to these shootings?

If you’re talking about targeted school violence, there are a few that involve girls as the perpetrator, but in 98 to 99 percent of the cases, it’s a male. We don’t have any authoritative data about men killing girl children particularly, but we do know that there is an immense amount of male hatred directed at females, especially young females. They often feel a lot of confusion about females. We also know that generally, males are more likely to commit homicide, and many of the victims are female. But, usually, it’s someone close to them, so these incidents are a slightly different situation. But I would hazard a guess that both of these men have been hurt by a female early on and thought they were getting retribution.

Is there a reason why these shootings are more likely to happen at the start or the end of the school year?

The typical school shootings often occur at the beginning of the school year because the kids are forced to go back to an environment they hate, or at the end, when everything seems to come to a head and they explode.

Didn't schools make a lot of changes after Columbine to try and reduce their vulnerability to these kinds of incidents?

Yes, absolutely, and I was very involved in a report written with the Secret Service and the U.S. Department of Education [available online at www.edpubs.org] that identified what kinds of things schools should look for: kids who are bullied or hurt and are not connected to any adult in the school. Many schools have put together a threat assessment plan and engage in activities to reduce violence, to their benefit. Not only do these programs reduce the chance of someone coming into the school from outside, but they get kids and adults to notice other kids in their school and they learn how to intervene if there are warning signs of trouble. I know of many cases where people did the right thing and violence was averted because a student came forward and adults were able to intervene, and got the troubled student some emotional help or placed them in a special environment where they would be safe and wouldn't be able to hurt anyone else. But there are still a lot of schools that believe that it can't happen there, or think that their metal detector will solve all their problems.

Are our schools generally safe?

Oh yes. As horrible as these incidents are, based on the pattern we're seen over the last 10 or 20 years, the chance that something like this will happen to any one student is one in a million. We lose about eight children a year to school violence. That's eight too many, but that's much lower odds than being hurt in a car accident. Children should feel safe at school, if they are attending a thoughtful school.

What changes still need to be made?

Many school climates need to change. Students have to show respect for their teachers and elders, but the adults also have to give the students respect in return. I'm not saying school should be a democracy or that the students should run wild, but there should be mutual respect and understanding, and every student should feel they have at least one adult they can go to and raise a problem they're having or discuss something they're worried about, without being seen as a snitch or getting some kind of punitive response. Our schools need to teach things like calculus, but the social and emotional component is the glue that holds a school together and prevents the worst tragedies from occurring.

After Columbine, many schools around the country were regularly doing drills to prepare for some kind of violent incident. Are many schools still doing that?

Some still do and some don't. A drill is a practical and reasonable part of a threat assessment policy that should be developed from the superintendent level on down. Schools need to develop plans of who to go to for these types of problems. They need to make connections to their mental health authorities, the police and the juvenile justice system.

It was clear after Columbine that we also need to give kids better access to mental health care. Has that situation improved?

Not enough. I'm not sure about the boy involved in the shooting in Wisconsin, but generally, these kids have emotional or behavioral problems. That's typical of kids who have hurtful and violent behavior. They tend not to get services or if they're told that they need them, they're not available or they can't afford them. We need more programs with a connection to the schools—not just to stop kids from killing people, but to deal with depression and other emotional problems and learning differences.

Two of these cases involved adults. What should someone do if they see this kind of troubling behavior in an adult?

They should call their local police department and talk to someone on their behavioral team, or call their local mental health center or a hospital with a good psychiatric program. You can ask them to intervene or ask for help in getting the person to go in for an evaluation.

Is there something we should learn from this latest round of incidents?

Yes, that we should not become complacent about school violence. It has not gone away. It exists in many forms. But there's no reason to be frozen in fright in our response to it.

School is one of the places children should feel safe. What should parents say to their children when things like this happen?

It depends on the age of the child, but parents should tell their children that it is very unlikely that something like this would ever happen at their school, and that their school is safe, especially if they believe that to be true. Parents should also talk to other parents, and their principal and superintendent, about their support for making the school safer. And they can help kids feel safer by encouraging them to tell a parent or a teacher if anything happens that concerns them, and that the adults will make sure it gets taken care of.