

Empowering Educators through a Proactive Security Mindset; a Critical First Step in Enhancing School Safety

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Every educator in America knows the name Walt Whitman. He was one of our nation's greatest poets and has been referred to as America's first "poet of democracy."¹ The impact of Walt Whitman's works on the American educational system is undeniable.² The same is true, albeit in an entirely different context, of Charles Whitman, who on August 1, 1966, took control of the Observation Deck of the University of Texas Tower and went on an unimpeded, 96-minute shooting rampage that killed 14 people and wounded 32 others. Charles Whitman is America's first "school shooter." The incident at the University of Texas taught law enforcement that they needed a better response force, and the incident, at least in part, sparked formation of Special Weapons & Tactics ("SWAT") teams.

Although Charles Whitman is America's first school shooter, he was not America's first school mass murderer. That dubious distinction goes to Andrew Philip Kehoe, a Michigan farmer and treasurer of his township school board. On May 18, 1927, Mr. Kehoe killed his wife along with forty-four 2nd thru 6th grade students and teachers, and seriously injured fifty-eight others when he set off bombs in an incident that would come to be known as the Bath School Disaster.³ Law enforcement would later reveal that Mr. Kehoe spent almost a year planning, securing, and methodically placing more than a ton of explosives throughout the sub-floors and ceiling of the school building.⁴

Charles Whitman and Andrew Philip Kehoe's legacy of evil and terror lives on whenever we hear the names Columbine, Virginia Tech, and now unfortunately, Sandy Hook.

As security professionals, Abila Security & Investigations, Inc. ("ASI") has developed a program that is not just based on recent events but rather based on more than 85 years of "lessons learned" by experienced professionals with many more years of combined professional experience covering a range of applicable disciplines. Worldwide events continue to highlight that places once considered safe havens, such as schools, hospitals, and churches, no longer are the sanctuaries they once were. Almost daily new reports remind us that we all stand to benefit from exercising increased awareness in public areas, including our schools.

¹ John Seery. *A Political Companion to Walt Whitman*. Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2011.

² J.R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings, eds. *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia*. New York, NY: Garland Publishing, 1998; http://whitmanarchive.org/criticism/current/encyclopedia/entry_2.html.

³ Shallat, Todd. "Criminals are Born, Not Made." *The Blue Review*. Boise State University, 25 Dec. 2012. Web. 1 Feb. 2013; <http://thebluereview.org/criminals-are-made-not-born>.

⁴ Arnie Bernstein. *Bath Massacre: America's First School Bombing*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2009.

The safety and security of all those engaged in the educational process (i.e., students, staff, administrators, parents, etc.) remains an integral part of creating the best possible learning environment. The safety and security of these individuals must, therefore, be included as a critical part of a school's annual strategic planning. While administrative leaders seek to educate our nation's future leaders, and desire an open door policy, administrators are not specifically trained for safety and security details. Safety and security professionals can play an important role and serve as an invaluable resource in helping to create a balance between a positive and welcoming learning environment and one that also establishes a trusted, effective, and appropriate safety and security awareness program.

Since 2006, ASI has used a ***"Layered Approach"*** as a method for enacting security plans and making suggestions to clients. This approach is based on the concept of working from inside the perimeter of the school and continuing to the outside perimeters. This method empowers administrators and staff, designates roles and responsibilities, increases awareness in the school, reassures parents, builds relationships within the community, and most importantly, improves safety. The Layered Approach involves assessment of three major layers in securing facilities: (1) inside the school's walls, (2) around the perimeter, and (3) throughout the community and neighborhood. When a critical incident threatens the safety of staff, children, or visitors, a breakdown in one of the layers of security has most likely occurred.

Leveraging the principles of the Layered Approach, ASI has developed the S.A.F. Guard Program ("Program") that employs proactive thinking and security awareness standards to provide school administrators and school staff practical but meaningful steps to effectively confront the unique issues inherent in security breakdowns that occur in otherwise sacred environments. Though troubling events appear to be increasing in frequency as of late, ASI has been working with schools and churches around the country for more than seven years. In that time, we have successfully enabled our clients to move away from a reactive mode of safety toward a proactive approach. Our experience as security professionals leads us to conclude that this is a critical first step in enhancing school safety. In addition to in-person training sessions, ASI provides participants with a step-by-step guide entitled "A Strategic Approach to Safety and Security." With the knowledge gained, program participants can assume a proactive role in mitigating threats by working with first responders as part of their team, rather than simply hoping for them to quickly arrive and save the day. Program evaluations completed by teachers, staff, clergy, and administrators are overwhelmingly positive and provide powerful participant feedback that further enhances Program effectiveness. Indeed recent feedback received included comments like:

"Group Interaction with Real World Scenarios"

"Empowering the staff to be able to respond in any situation"

"Raising the level of awareness and challenging us to evaluate our practices"

"Puts people in situations to have to react to controlled stress"

"Information was relevant and important, for both work and personal"

Chief Todd Evans and Deputy Chief Bill Elder of the Fountain Police Department in Fountain, Colorado hail the proactive thinking and emphasis on awareness embedded in the Program and are now working with ASI executives to implement the Program city-wide. These forward-thinking, law-enforcement officials and city council members have reached out to their community for assistance from real-world professionals such as ASI for assistance.

The City of Fountain-Fort Carson School District Eight has elected not to wait for another incident to occur. Instead, School District Eight has decided to educate and train teachers and administrators on realistic options for working through a crisis with a proactive mindset. School District Eight has engaged ASI to provide critical knowledge and empower teachers to prepare multiple escape routes with contingency options, learning those plans, physically and mentally working through possible scenarios, and practicing safety drills and tabletop exercises in conjunction with first responders. If or when an incident occurs, whether relatively minor or worst-case scenario, those engaged in the educational process will have been adequately trained so that their response will be almost second nature – if necessary they will assume the role of the first responder and focus thoughtfully on getting the children and themselves to safety quickly and effectively.