



Schools are Soft Targets; so what are you going to do about it?

For many decades we have been working to improve the general atmosphere and security of our schools. We have locked the doors, fenced the campuses and protected against fires. We continuously attempt to identify and to address the needs of all students and their parents. We have however overlooked, or at least act as if we have overlooked, the human driven catastrophic event: a coordinated terrorist attack designed to wrench our visceral emotions and attract world-wide media. Essentially, an attack aimed at our soft underbellies that will forever change our view of schools as safe havens for our children.

Schools are essentially places of assembly where 53 million children travel to and assemble every day at more than 119,000 public and private schools.^{1, 2} If you count the estimated 6 million teachers and staff more, then one-fifth of the U.S. population can be found in schools on any given weekday.³ School superintendents, principals and their staff are considered *loco parentis* who have the legal and moral responsibility for the safety of our children. In speaking with school principals and teachers it quickly and consistently becomes apparent that most, if not all, look upon their students as part of their own extended families. Remarkably and consistently they seldom mention a terrorist type attack as one of their primary perceived threats. When prompted, they usually shake their heads softly and explain that it could be a possibility but that it would not be very likely for that to happen at their school.

Violence on school campuses is a growing problem all over the world and the U.S. is no exception.⁴ Very few schools have participated in emergency response drills involving their local first responders. Most schools involvement with first responder agencies center primarily on managing situations involving parental custody, child kidnapping, one on one abuse and passing the routine fire inspection drill while ignoring the big gorilla in the room: the possible attack at their school by a well trained and determined group of people. How prepared we are to prevent and respond to these attacks will determine our success in managing them. One approach to better prepare ourselves is to take lessons from recent events at schools across the world:

- **2009 Afghanistan** – “Taliban gunmen attack schools and students in Pakistan and Afghanistan with a series of bombings // Militants have attacked more than 170 government schools in the past two years”⁵
- **2009 Pakistan** - “Bharati terrorists attack a Pakistani school and hold hordes of students hostage”⁶

¹ According to [School Transportation News](#), a trade publication, some 24 million children ride school buses daily and 450,000 school buses operate in the United States.

² U.S. Department of Education (2002 figures)

³ U.S. Department of Education (2002 figures)

⁴ In 2007, 18 percent of students in grades 9–12 reported they had carried a weapon anywhere in the past 30 days, while 6 percent reported they had carried a weapon on school property : [Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2008](#); U.S. Department of Education / U.S. Department of Justice Office of Justice Programs; April 2009.

⁵ South Asian News Agency - January 20th, 2009

- **2009 Israel** - “Beit Haggai Terrorist Planned to Attack School Children”⁷
- **2007 U.S.** - The Virginia Tech massacre consisting of two separate attacks approximately two hours apart on April 16, 2007, on the campus of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech) in Blacksburg, Virginia. The perpetrator, a disturbed student, killed 32 people and wounded many others before committing suicide. The massacre is the deadliest peacetime shooting incident by a single gunman in United States history, on or off a school campus.
- **2004 Russia** - The Beslan school hostage massacre where a group of terrorists took more than 1,100 people including some 777 children hostage on September 1, 2004, at School Number One in the town of Beslan, North Ossetia-Alania resulting in at least 334 hostages being killed, including 186 children, hundreds more were wounded or reported missing.⁸
- **2002 Israel** - A terror bomb blew up in a crowded cafeteria at Hebrew University in Jerusalem killing seven people including five Americans and wounding more than 80 – August 1, 2002
- **1999 U.S.** - The Columbine High School massacre occurred on Tuesday, April 20, 1999, at Columbine High School in Columbine, Jefferson County, Colorado. Two disturbed students embarked on a massacre, killing 12 students and a teacher, as well as wounding 23 others, before committing suicide.
- **1974 Israel** - The Ma'alot school massacre in which 21 Israeli children were murdered in a brutal terrorist act on a school.
- **1970 U.S.** - The Sterling Hall bombing at the University of Wisconsin (Madison Campus) on August 24, 1970 which resulted in the death of a university physics researcher and severe injuries to four other building occupants.⁹

Additionally there is credible intelligence that al-Qaeda is looking at children and schools as possible targets:

- **2004 U.S.** - Video tapes have been found in Afghanistan showing al-Qaeda terrorists training to take over schools.^{10, 11}
- **2004 U.S.** - “Federal law enforcement authorities notified school districts in six states that a computer disc found in Iraq contained photos, floor plans and other information about their schools”¹²

⁶ Rupee News by Moin Ansari: Posted March 29, 2009

⁷ The IDF investigation concluded that the terrorist who infiltrated the community of Beit Haggai in the Judean Mountains planning to attack children who were on their way to school: Israeli Defense Force by David Lev - April 21, 2009.

⁸ On the third day of the standoff, Russian security forces stormed the building using tanks and heavy weaponry.

⁹ The bombing was committed by four “students” in protest against the University’s research connections with the US military during the Vietnam War.

¹⁰ Soft Targets, Hard Lessons: Why terrorists value your school as a target and what you can do; U.S. Department of Justice - June 25, 2008

¹¹ It is worth mentioning that although these videos are widely circulated and even mentioned in at least one DOJ public announcement, there are some intelligence sources that claim that the origins of this video tape is questionable.

- **2001 U.S.** - An al-Qaeda spokesman declared al-Qaeda's 'right' to kill 2 million American children in retaliation for Muslim civilian deaths in the war on terror.¹³

Unlike military targets, terrorist targets are seldom selected as to their tactical military significance; rather they are selected as to their potential for psychological impact. In the scheme of things an attack against a single school or even a small group of schools will have relatively little strategic significance versus a key infrastructure component such as a port facility, a transportation hub or even a communications center. With that said; an attack against a school poses the most horrific psychological impact that we can imagine. The 2001 attacks focused our attention on the protection of our infrastructure. We have spent billions of dollars on hardening key infrastructure components while at the same time we have almost ignored our schools.

What the terrorist seeks is attention to their message and the provocative and graphic images generated by an attack against a school will provide them the vehicle for their message. Honestly, can you think of any other target that could be more horrific than a school full of children? Some people think that schools are off-limits, that terrorists would not want to anger us too much by attacking a school - which they would be afraid of the retribution we will seek. Well, if you are one of those, wake up. In the terrorist's eyes, there is no such thing as bad publicity. The psychological impact of an attack against one of our schools will surely outlast the actual recovery from the physical damage and they know it. So what are we going to do about this situation while we wait for the government to get rid of terrorists? We can prepare. A good place to start is to analyze the adversaries and their typical methodologies.

The terrorist attack methodology can typically be broken down into six basic components:

1. Target Selection
2. Planning
3. Deployment
4. Attack
5. Escape (not always a factor)
6. Exploitation

Most counterterrorism experts agree that terrorists are most vulnerable to detection during their attack planning process as it is during this phase that they may be exposed while they case the potential target. However, some school districts post staff pictures, school layouts and even emergency response plans on their school web sites. Consequently, terrorists can exploit these web sites to minimize their actual onsite surveillance activities, thereby making them harder to detect during the planning phase. Additionally, an attack against a school does not usually require the meticulous planning and preparation usually needed to attack hardened infrastructure targets. This has been evidenced by numerous school attacks over the last ten

¹² Associated Press: By Ben Feller; October 8, 2004

¹³ Ayman al-Zawahiri, Knights Under the Prophet's Banner, serialized in Al-Sharq al Awsat (London) 2-10 December 2001, trans. Foreign Broadcast Information Service, document FBIS-NES-2001-1202.

years orchestrated by actual students. Although these students do not meet the technical definition of “terrorists,” the end result is still the same. If “students” can orchestrate these types of events then certainly a small militarily disciplined and trained unit will accomplish much more.¹⁴ Because schools are soft targets, attacks against schools can be expected to generate a high number of casualties.

Protecting against these types of attacks, short of turning the school into a bunker, is virtually impossible to do. Consequently the target selection criteria used by terrorists to select their targets must be taken into consideration when developing your counter-terrorism strategies. To be pragmatic, the best effective defense is to make your school appear more prepared and harder to approach, which in turn makes your school less attractive for an attack. It also encourages terrorists, who may be sizing up your school, to move on to other softer schools offering fewer challenges.

You can discourage attacks at your school by assessing your school’s vulnerabilities, by minimizing its Internet exposure, by demonstrating reduced access to grounds and facilities, by maintaining active visible security, by developing and exercising your emergency response plan and by training your staff to respond quickly and proactively to any and all perceived threats. The overall concept is to appear as the most prepared and hardest to approach school in your area thereby making your school the least attractive to attack.

Most schools in the United States have never conducted a comprehensive vulnerability assessment of their facilities and although most have emergency management plans, often these plans are not:¹⁵

- Comprehensive
- Practiced regularly
- Coordinated with the community
- Always viewed as essential
- Always discussed with families, staff, and students
- Based upon sound factual data and circumstances
- Consistent with Federal guidelines

¹⁴ The 2008 Mumbai attacks were coordinated shooting and bombing attacks across Mumbai. The attacks began on 26 November 2008 and lasted until 29 November, killing at least 173 people and wounding at least 308. Ten gunmen took part in the attacks; witnesses reported that they looked young, in their early twenties, and wore T-shirts, black shirts, and jeans, and that they smiled and looked happy as they shot their victims. Blood tests on the attackers indicate that they had taken cocaine and LSD during the attacks, to sustain their energy and stay awake for 50 hours. Police say that they found syringes on the scenes of the attacks. There were also indications that they had been taking steroids. The gunman who survived said that the attackers had used Google Earth to familiarize themselves with the locations of buildings used in the attacks.

¹⁵ U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools (OSDFS) 2006 Annual Meeting – Training Session

The U. S. Department of Education recognizes that crisis management planning is essential in preparing our schools to deal with violence. In fact they have produced numerous publications and guidelines and specifically cite four general areas that schools should focus on:¹⁶

1. **Mitigation and Prevention** - Taking steps to reduce or eliminate risk to life and property
2. **Incident Response** - Taking steps to respond during a crisis
3. **Recovery** - Restoring the learning and teaching environment after a crisis
4. **Crisis Preparedness** – Planning for the worst case scenario

Additionally they analyze the nature of violence at schools and divide school violence-prevention methods into three separate classes:¹⁷

1. **Measures related to school management** (that is, related to discipline and punishment)
2. **Measures related to environmental modification** (for instance, video cameras, security guards, and uniforms),
3. **Educational and curriculum-based measures** (for instance, conflict-resolution and gang-prevention programs).

Further they identify and list some sound basic common sense recommendations that attempt to address significant large scale emergencies at our schools.¹⁸

- Reviewing and revising emergency management plans
- Training school staff
- Conducting building and facilities audits
- Communicating emergency response policies to parents and guardians,
- Implementing the National Incident Management System (NIMS)
- Developing an infectious disease plan
- Developing or revising food defense plans
- Conducting drills and tabletop simulation exercises;
- Preparing and distributing copies of emergency management plans.

These recommendations are great; they are a good start and, if followed, can be very effective in preparing us to manage most likely events. However, they still fail to recognize the gorilla in the room; a possible attack by a well trained and determined adversary. Rather, it almost seems as

¹⁶ Practical Information on Crisis Planning: A Guide for Schools and Communities; U.S. Department of Education – January 2007

¹⁷ Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2008; U.S. Department of Education / U.S. Department of Justice Office of Justice Programs; April 2009.

¹⁸ Schools and Terrorism: A Supplement to the National Advisory Committee on Children and Terrorism Recommendations to the Secretary; August 12, 2003



if the overriding but unstated opinion is that managing this type of event will be someone else's problem.

As an educator, developing an appropriate preparedness posture against these types of events may seem almost impossible, and certainly not easy to do. You may feel that some of the tasks involved may be beyond your skills set. However, there are plenty of people who do have the skills you may lack and you should not be afraid to reach out to them for advice. There are no simple one size fits all solutions and tailored solutions are sometimes expensive. However here is a list of some simple prudent recommendations that can go a long way toward making your school a less attractive target and protecting your students.

1. **Never Sit and Wait** – This is what I call the “*Like a Lamb to the Slaughter Syndrome.*” Initiate your preparedness and response strategies now; do not wait to receive an official law enforcement threat warning or funding. Posture your school as if an attack is always imminent.
2. **Vulnerability Assessments** – Put your school through a comprehensive vulnerability assessment using an assessment model that takes into consideration a terrorist attack scenario.
3. **Crisis Management Plan** – Develop an all-hazards crisis management plan that addresses all of the vulnerabilities identified during the vulnerability assessment and keep in mind that even under the best conditions, it will take at least ½ hour before the first SWAT team arrives from the time that an “alarm is pulled”.
4. **Organize and Train** – Adjust your organizational structure and chart to complement the National Incident Management System (NIMS) and then train the staff in their roles.
5. **Harness Parents and Students** – Include and consider parents and students as part of your first responder assets; help them help you develop your posture and response; enlighten and train them.
6. **Incorporate First Responder Community** – Meet, play and interact with all first responder agencies that are likely to respond to your school. Familiarize them with your school and staff. The time to exchange business cards is well before the event arrives; if you find yourself exchanging business cards with a first responder in the middle of the response, you are too late.
7. **Train, Drill & Practice** – Train your staff, parents and students. Incorporate first responders and the media. Exercise your plans, test them and revise them as needed and then train and drill some more.

How do you know if you have done enough, if you are on the right track, if you have done the right things, to the right degrees? This you will never really know until after an actual event but a good way to help determine in your own mind whether or not you have done enough to protect your school and students is to put yourself through an imaginary post event press conference. Ask yourself and your staff the tough questions that will be asked by the parents, the students, the district superintendent, the mayor, the media, the lawyers and the nation. Do you think that you will be able to answer all of their questions; are your responses appropriate; and are they



reasonable, defensible, and based on sound judgment? Were your preparedness actions based on a good assessment of identified vulnerabilities and were generally accepted methodologies used in dealing with the identified vulnerabilities?

If upon completing this exercise if you still feel that you have done enough, then you are on the right track. Keep going.

