School leaders and security experts weigh in on safety and positive school culture.

The disturbing violence this past year at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, stunned principals across the nation. This roundtable of school leaders and security experts weigh in on the issues that challenge principals most—protecting students while maintaining a safe and secure culture.
Meet the panelists:

MICHAEL DORN has worked in the field of school safety for 33 years and has published 26 books on school safety.

NANCY FLATT MEADOR is president of NAESP, and most recently served as principal of Madison Middle School in Nashville, Tennessee.

MELISSA REEVES is a school psychologist and co-author of the PREPaRE School Crisis Prevention and Intervention curriculum and chair of the PREPaRE Workgroup.

GREGORY THOMAS is former director of security of New York City Schools.

Principal magazine: Statistically, schools are safe. But the truth is that a committed assailant is virtually unstoppable. How do we reconcile these two realities for parents?

GREGORY THOMAS: We have to let parents know that educators are doing all they can to address issues that come their way, and that schools are built for teaching and learning. Schools are not like the Pentagon. They are not military installations where you would want to have an armed guard at the front door, or for that matter, in the parking lot where people arrive on campus.

The goal is to have a school that is prepared to do two things if a disaster or emergency happens: The school needs to have a plan in place for students to either stay in or to get out. And then the school can build from there on specific threats.

MELISSA REEVES: Schools need to inform parents about what they are doing to ensure the safety of their children. This includes school climate initiatives, prevention and academic programming to meet the needs of all students, the formulation of safety and crisis teams and plans, staff training in how to implement the plans, and the crisis intervention and supports that can be offered in the aftermath of a crisis.

Educating parents about the time and effort that goes into safety planning can help alleviate their concerns.

How can principals separate reasonable measures they should consider from those that are extreme and impractical?

MICHAEL DORN: There must be some form of assessment process. You don’t necessarily have to bring in consultants. A thoughtful assessment process is extremely important because every security measure or mental health measure is only as strong as your weakest link.

You want to make sure not to focus only on the rarest type of event, which is a shooting at school. Most deaths at school are related to medical emergencies and accidents, so we want to have a plan and a thoughtful reaction when things like that occur. Be sure your assessment process focuses on evidence-based and research-based approaches.

NANCY FLATT MEADOR: One thing that principals in our system are doing is working closely with our district officials. We’re a large urban system, and our district is requiring all principals and assistant principals to look at the National Incident Management Modules provided by FEMA. The training is approximately four hours.

The modules equip us to make sure that we have thought about anything else that wasn’t addressed in our crisis management plan, which will better equip us to react.

MELISSA REEVES: Administrators also have to consider the cost-benefit ratio and what circumstances are the most likely. Is $25,000 better spent on bullet-proof whiteboards that may never get used because school shootings are so rare? Or is that money better spent on prevention and intervention programming that can help hundreds of students become better adjusted and mentally healthy so that they never resort to violence? We need to stop making decisions based on a good sales job that pulls on our emotional strings, and instead make decisions based on logical thinking.

What is the psychological impact—on students, teachers, and parents—of implementing measures that create a fortress-like environment in elementary schools?

MELISSA REEVES: What happens is we get these knee-jerk reactions and everyone tends to focus on the physical safety aspect. By looking at schools with a lockdown mentality or a fortress mentality, what we end up doing is unduly increasing anxiety when it’s not necessary. In our field, we talk a lot about a balance between physical safety and psychological safety.

That is making sure that we are creating a safe and caring school climate by implementing positive behavior support initiatives and good prevention programming, and schools building quality connections between students and staff. While these initiatives cannot always prevent an armed intruder from getting through the perimeter, if the threat comes from another student and/or a situation is unsafe, students are more willing to report concerns to staff.

In the unfortunate event of something bad happening, those positive
connections and school climate have helped build protective measures and resiliency factors. So, when students are exposed to trauma they are better able to deal with the traumatic event and to be able to get back to learning quickly.

MICHAEL DORN: I was a police chief in the first school district in the nation with its own gun detection dog and random surprise metal detection. However, our students would not describe our schools as fortresses. Survey data demonstrated that they found our schools to be safe, pleasant places. Sometimes, how you do it is just as important as what you do. Twenty years later, that district is still the largest in Georgia that has never had a school shooting. The prison-like effect is a valid concern, but only occurs when security measures are not implemented thoughtfully. There are a lot of evidence-based approaches to security that can harmonize what all of us have been talking about. This same district recently stopped another planned school shooting. That represents the seventh planned school shooting they have directly averted.

What’s your take on the buzz across the country about the more ambitious safety measures?

GREGORY THOMAS: I like the idea of having more people involved in security. But it should be the staff that’s already in the school engaging in the process as stakeholders. I had a chance to visit some schools in inner city, urban areas where the custodians themselves are so involved they have done things to let students know they shouldn’t be in the hallways. The entire school is committed to security because they understand that safety is best for everybody in the school.

I would like less discussion of increasing uniformed officers in schools, in favor of more discussion of training staff and empowering them in their role to keep schools safe.

School Safety Check Up

Addressing common oversights in school safety protocol can dramatically decrease both the occurrence—and impact—of dangerous situations. Answer the following questions to assess your school’s readiness to address safety hazards and violent threats.

IDENTIFICATION

- Is there a name badge system in place for all staff, visitors, and volunteers? If so, is it in practice 100 percent of the time?
- Do school employees check photo identification for all visitors, even those known to staff? Is there a way to determine the time of visit?
- Do school employees allow visitors and volunteers to sign themselves in?
- Are names and photographs for teachers and students displayed on artwork or posted on classroom doors? (Attackers have used these identifiers to locate and harm students and staff.)

TO DO: Review your school’s policies for identifying students, staff, and visitors. Make sure that your policy addresses field trips, diverse family structures, and the scenarios that are common in your particular school community.

SAFETY TRAINING

- Are all staff trained in specific techniques to improve student supervision?
- Can you document that each volunteer and staff person—both full and part-time—has been issued the school or district crisis plan?
- Have all staff members been specifically trained to take immediate, life-saving action and to notify the office once this has been done?

TO DO: At the beginning of the year, schedule times to review and practice safety drills.

EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS

- Are staff members comfortable making decisions to initiate emergency actions? In many schools, staff members have been conditioned to wait for someone else to direct them to take action, such as to initiate a fire evacuation, lockdown, or severe weather sheltering.
- Does your school have and practice procedures for the most important and life-saving protocols? These include:
  - Fire evacuation;
  - Reverse evacuation (to return staff and students rapidly back inside the school when danger is present outside);
  - Room clear (a two-word command and process to rapidly move staff and students to safety from any interior area such as a classroom, gymnasium, main office, cafeteria, or library);
  - Preventive or “soft” lockdown (locking all classrooms, offices, and interior main doors while work and teaching continue). Schools that lack this protocol have high “fail rates” when tested with the most common scenarios, such as unarmed intruders.
  - Emergency or “hard” lockdown (important for the extremely rare instances where an armed aggressor is outside or inside a school).
  - External hazardous materials sheltering protocol (critical to prevent mass casualty loss of life for a hazardous materials incident in the community).

TO DO: Empower your staff to make decisions in the face of life-threatening events so that precious minutes are not lost during dangerous situations.

While no single measure can guarantee that your school will not face danger, many harmful situations can be avoided if every school addresses these common gaps.

Michael Dorn is executive director of Safe Havens International.