



**Bill Bond**  
**Former Principal, Heath High School, Paducah, KY**  
**Specialist for School Safety, National Association of Secondary School Principals**

Chairman Kline, Ranking Member Miller, and members of the committee, thank you for inviting me here today to discuss school safety and how we can better protect our students, teachers, and staff. My name is Bill Bond, and I am the former principal of Heath High School in Paducah, KY. In December 1997, one of my own students brought 5 guns and 1,000 rounds of ammunition into the school and shot 8 students; 3 girls were killed. That event marked a profound transformation for everyone involved. And that experience prompted me to reach out to other schools that were going through the same situation. After the students who were freshman at the time of the incident graduated, I retired from the principalship. For the past 12 years, I have served as the specialist for school safety at the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP).

The shooting at my school was the first of the high-profile mass school shootings. It was followed rapidly by several others. In working with NASSP, I've assisted at 12 other schools where kids have died. My role is to focus the principal on the decisions they'll need to make to get the school back up and functioning—to be a resource and reassure them that they're on the right path. And to help with the flood of media that respond immediately to word of a tragedy. I often tell audiences: what's the definition of a bad day for a principal? More than 12 microphones.

To be effective, schools must be operated *and* perceived as safe havens. When parents send their kids to school, they believe the school has thought of and planned for every possible situation—and that's a reasonable expectation, but one that's very hard to meet.

So to be prepared, the principal must meet with local responders—police, firemen, ambulance drivers—and the district transportation to look at facilities, define people's roles and examine how the traffic flows around the school. They need to create lockdown procedures, and evacuation and reunification procedures. Now, the good news is that most everyone has a good crisis plan that includes these things. But that plan must be a living document—it must be adjustable. One huge area where most plans have not adjusted is in the area of crisis communications.

Communicating with teachers, staff, and parents is the hardest part of a crisis, but it is extremely important and it's the key to recovery. Angry, uninformed parents will break any crisis plan. But most plans were written in the months following the Columbine shooting in April 1999, when expectations for communication were different. Most schools have not gone back to update that part of the plan. To give just one example, when a high school student was shot a few months ago on the first day of school in Maryland, parents got word from their kids so fast they actually showed up before the police. That's not a situation you want, but it shows that parents expect instant communication today. When they hear nothing from the school, they get anxious and they fill that gap with other information—from the news, texts from their kids, the rumor mill, and social media. That information may not be correct. Parents want to know two things. Is my child

ok? And when can I get him? And the more parents can hear from the school that at least makes progress toward those answers, the more it relieves their emotions.

### **Security Procedures and Equipment**

I'm often asked if school shootings can be prevented with more security—cameras and metal detectors, and the like. While they may deter some intruders and prevent more weapons from entering our schools, that equipment can only go so far. If they really want to, kids will find a way around all your security equipment. It's based on the notion that: "We can deter you because our force is greater than your force and we will ultimately imprison you or we will kill you." But that was not a deterrent in most of the school shootings that have occurred since Paducah. Those kids already made the decision to die on that day, so rational deterrents had no effect on them. Your best protection is a trusting relationship between adults and students that encourages kids to share responsibility for their safety and share information. Kids very often know what's going on in the school and what might cause a crisis. So information from students is more valuable than any camera or locked door. And kids will give that information to an adult they know well and trust. If they don't trust you and someone is planning something destructive, it's difficult to avoid the tragedy. It's a matter of how many will be killed before he stops or kills himself.

### **School Resource Officers**

The presence of a school resource officer (SRO) can be beneficial to the school. An SRO is a law enforcement officer who is also specially trained in working with students in a school environment. Yes, the SRO is armed, but the benefit of the SRO has little to do with the gun on his hip. The SRO is an active member of the school community and serves as part of the school leadership team. In many cases, the SRO assists the school in crisis planning and personalizing the district's emergency management plan to that school. They assist in training staff and conducting walkthroughs of the emergency management plan and lockdown drills. Some teach classes on the law and drug and alcohol prevention. But the most important SRO function is to build trusting relationships with the students. The school resource officer can (and should) be another adult in the building who will be an advocate for the students and help to personalize the learning experience for those students. Again, students are much more inclined to come forward with information about potential threats if that relationship is in place.

### **Mental Health**

Most educators, particularly principals and teachers, are able to recognize in troubled students the signs and symptoms that are known to lead to violent behavior, and pinpoint interventions working with their colleagues in mental health. More and more, principals are identifying students who may need intervention in the earliest grades, often with an overwhelming number of cases as early as kindergarten.

Unfortunately, principals and other school personnel find themselves hampered by inefficient systems that prevent them from helping students and families access appropriate mental health and well-being services. Principals need to be able to maintain relationships that are essential to keeping students safe, and they must be able to hire appropriate mental health personnel in the school, such as guidance counselors, psychologists, and social workers.

Sadly, there is no simple solution to this complex problem of violence directed at schools, regardless of whether the perpetrator is a student or an outsider. But we know that there is something schools and communities can do. It has been identified time and again by the Secret Service, the FBI, and numerous researchers: The most effective way to prevent acts of violence targeted at schools is by building trusting relationships with students and others in the community so that threats come to light and can be investigated as appropriate. The solution is a matter of school culture. It's a matter of community engagement. It's a matter of public health. The real solution is multifaceted and complex, but as each act of violence on a school reminds us, it is work we must undertake.