

School districts, look inward to making campuses safe

In the aftermath of the incomprehensible slaughter of 10 innocent people in Santa Fe, Texas, last year, Houston Police Chief Art Acevedo expressed his outrage and his sorrow with words that should resonate in every community in this country. Telling reporters and others who gathered at the school that he had “hit rock bottom,” he called out public officials who “ran to the cameras today, acted in a solemn manner, called for prayers, and will once again do absolutely nothing.”

Like many contemporary matters, the overwhelming media response to school shootings often engenders a debate about alternative policies, which in turn evolves into a political debate in which winning and losing take center stage. As the politicians and the media become engaged, the devastation associated with the repeated massacre our children — and the priority to definitively address it — seems to fade, leaving too many of our schools vulnerable.

It has now been 20 years since the Columbine tragedy was seared into our national consciousness, adding to a list of intractable problems that seems to grow bigger and more complex each year. Recognizing this difficult anniversary causes many to share their vivid remembrances and continuing pain. Little did anyone expect this heart-rending moment would usher in an era of similarly catastrophic incidents that has caused schoolchildren everywhere to wonder (and fear) that they might be the next victims.

This has irreversibly altered the worldview of our children.

Funding alone is definitely NOT the answer. Wellresearched reports have emerged in recent months from the Washington Post, the Los Angeles Times, and The Wall Street Journal suggesting that the billions that have recently been appropriated for school safety have been spent on all manner of new technology. Yet, as the L.A. Times noted in its review of the Parkland, Florida, shooting last year, “His (the shooter’s) threats were ignored, the campus was wide open, the school doors were unlocked and students had nowhere to hide.”

Fortunately, as is the case with most quandaries, there is a third way — if we are wise enough to see it and courageous enough to pull it off.

The role of school officials in both preventing and responding to violence has become their single most important responsibility. As is the case with any matter of high personal value, it is not sufficient to totally rely on consultants, experts, or any third party to inform you that your interests are safeguarded; you must make that judgment for yourself.

Most school districts have security strategies, many have strategies for crisis intervention and counseling, others have strategies to educate and engage students and teachers. But few have a strategy that integrates all the components of school safety within a facilitated self-assessment — a clear statement of vulnerabilities that reflects a deep understanding of the threat, the identification of critical prevention activities and a rigorous monitoring and oversight process that ensures maximum feasible readiness.

We call on school districts to accept this challenge, the first step of which is to accept full responsibility for the safety of our children and for putting in place a candid process of self-assessments that will be at least as effective as the systems for preventing terrorism and coal mine disasters.

This is a big step, but an essential one. Without a person ultimately responsible for school security — and it is not the local sheriff — things will continue to fall through the cracks. The key factor that differentiates the approach we are proposing and the approaches put forth in those glossy documents that sit on coffee tables in school districts throughout the country is that the facilitated self-assessment provides a real plan with real

priorities that drive changes in behavior that transform organizations.

Without such engagement, security strategy is the product of faceless nameless committees and reflective of well-meaning intent, but are generally not useful in preventing the unthinkable from occurring.

School districts: This is your time to rise to the challenge.

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Your Turn

Mark P. Harrington and Thomas G. McWeeney Guest columnists



Moments of silence were held for each student killed at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla. during the Palm Springs March for Our Lives on March 24, 2018. RICHARD LUI/THE DESERT SUN