



# STAYING SAFE:

## SCHOOL EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS

GARY L. SIGRIST, JR.

**A**S I TRAVEL THE COUNTRY SPEAKING AT conferences and working with school districts all over the United States, I am frequently asked, “Are schools a safe place for our children?” Overwhelmingly, the answer is, “Yes!” But I also hear from many school administrators who believe that an act of violence could never happen at their schools. While I am not an alarmist, there is much that goes into making a school a safe and secure environment for all.

Schools are what the U.S. Department of Homeland Security calls *soft targets*. There is a name for facilities that implement the strictest practices and protocols to keep everyone inside the facility safe from outside harm and to make the facility a *hard target*: prisons. As we work to keep our students and staff members safe, we must create more of a castle than a prison. In medieval days, everyone wanted the safety of the castle, yet it was a place where everyone felt comfortable and invited.

Catholic schools provide a unique learning environment. There are eight siblings in my family and all of us attended Our Lady of Perpetual Help School in Grove City, OH. My three children and most of my nieces and nephews also attend OLPH. I have seen firsthand the importance of an education centered on our faith and our church. The culture and atmosphere at my school were much different from the public schools where I taught for 30 years. Are Catholic schools safer than public schools in terms of target school violence? Based on my own experience, Catholic schools are at less of a risk from the typical act of school violence because of the positive relationships between the students and staff and the amount of parental involvement with the school. But all schools have risks and so must engage in practices that significantly reduce the possibility of violence. Catholic schools are similar to public schools in that both are challenged by funding issues. It is important to balance costs of security measures with the likelihood of an event putting a school at risk.

Gary L. Sigrist, Jr. retired after 30 years in education. In his retirement he started his own risk management company and continues to work with schools, colleges, and faith-based organizations around the country. He is a nationally recognized expert in school safety and continues to present at conferences throughout the U.S.



School security is not just one thing but is made up of different layers. The first layer is the culture of the school. Are students engaged in the curriculum, and do they have a positive relationship with at least one adult in the building? As a retired teacher, I know students do not look forward to coming to school to go through the motions. They want to see the relevance of their learning and how it relates to them. No easy task for teachers, but important if we want them to stay tuned in to students. The older the students, the more they want to see their teacher as something other than the “sage on the stage.” As much as they may not want to admit it, they want to

know their teacher has a life outside of school, and they want to be able to relate to us as people, not just teachers.

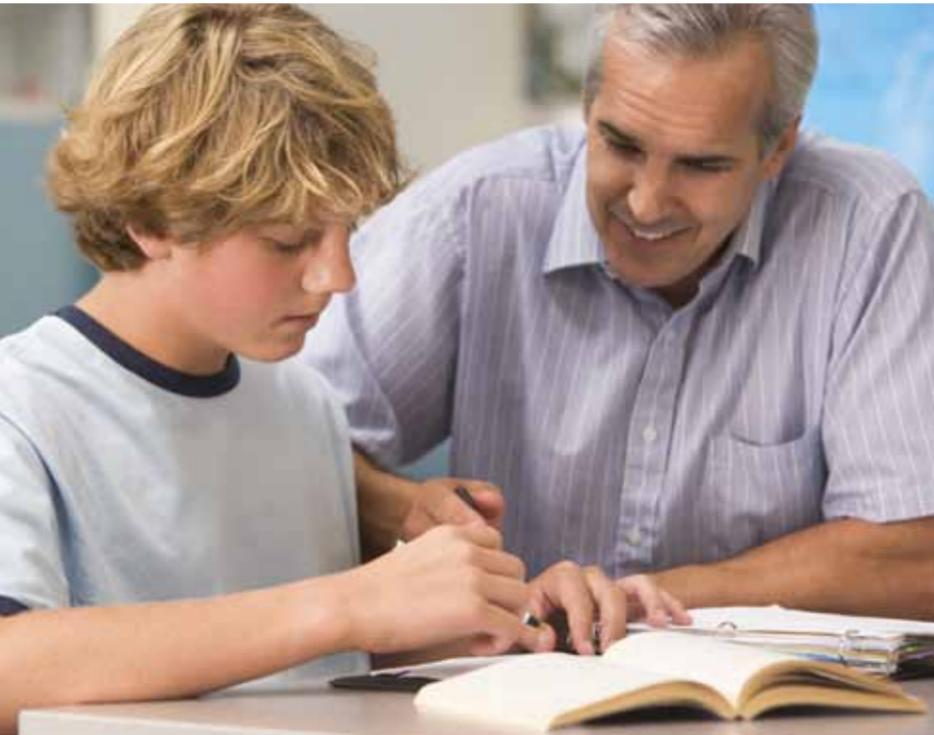
The majority of targeted acts of school violence are perpetrated by a member of the school. Although some want to paint these students as victims of school bullying, this is not usually the case. In fact, some of the shooters were described as bullies themselves before the incident. However, if you have a school culture in which bullying is allowed to occur and there is no method for dealing with bullying, then your school is at risk. Not only because of the toxic culture caused by bullying but also because it will be one more reason for students not to be engaged with the school.

Creating a positive school climate is almost free. Some schools do incur cost for activities to reward positive behavior and hotlines for reporting

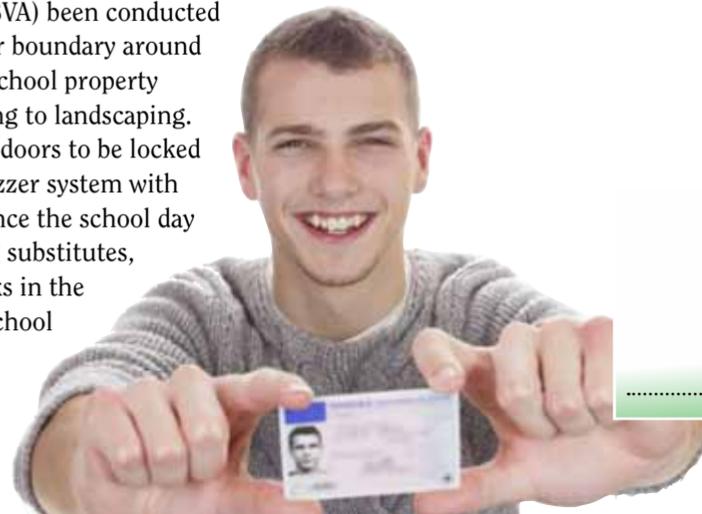
bullying or reporting a student who might be at risk for harming self or others. But building positive relationships does not cost anything.

Another layer for school security is the physical features of the school and surrounding area. Has a

Security and Vulnerability Assessment (SVA) been conducted within the past five years? Is there a clear boundary around the school that lets people know where school property begins? This can be anything from fencing to landscaping. Is there a system that allows for exterior doors to be locked after the start of the school day and a buzzer system with cameras to screen parents and visitors once the school day has started? Do staff members, including substitutes, wear ID cards to easily identify who works in the school and who is a visitor? Do middle-school and high-school students wear ID cards? Are exterior doors and classrooms



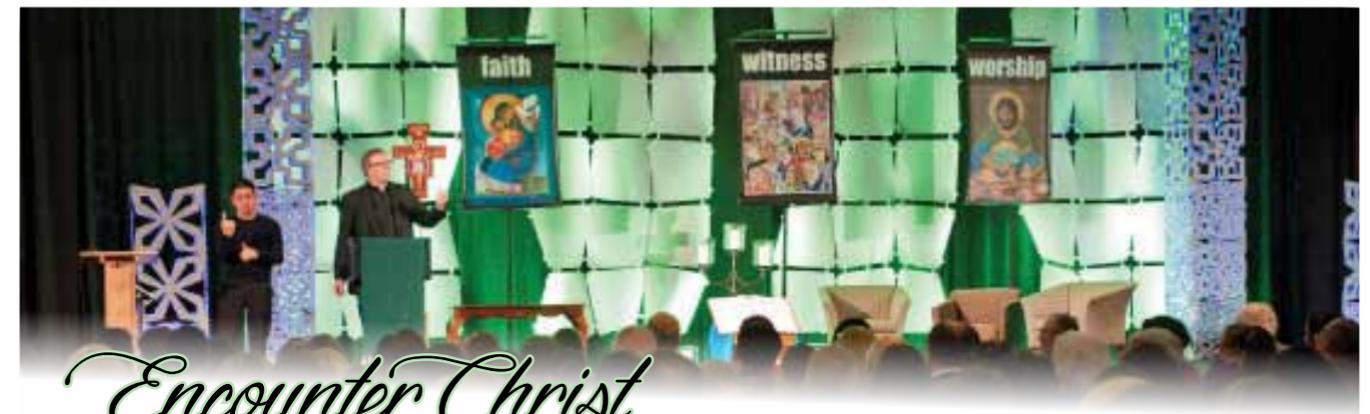
**CREATING A POSITIVE SCHOOL CLIMATE IS ALMOST FREE ... BUILDING POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS DOES NOT COST ANYTHING.**



identified by numbers so first responders can identify entrances and classrooms from the outside of the building?

Depending on the size of the school, an SVA can cost between \$1,000 and \$1,500. The report generated will show both best practices and areas of concern. The areas of concern can be addressed over time, with critical issues being addressed as soon as possible. A buzzer system can cost between \$3,500 and \$4,000. Currently, many states are providing grant funding for these systems. ID cards may be negotiated as a free item by the company holding the school picture contract. Window and door numbers will cost just a few dollars per classroom.

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security and the U.S. Department of Education recommend schools have an All-Hazards Emergency Response Plan. These plans will help school personnel respond to an event from the onset until first responders arrive. The plans should be based on the National Incident Management System (NIMS) and use the Incident Command System. The three goals when responding to an event are to preserve life, to reduce the exposure to the risk, and to protect assets and property. The school administrator or designee will be the incident commander in charge



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**NOT ONLY DO WE NEED TO TRAIN OUR TEACHERS, BUT WE NEED TO EMPOWER THEM TO MAKE DECISIONS BASED ON THEIR TRAINING AND THE SITUATION IN FRONT OF THEM.**

until first responders arrive. Once first responders arrive, they will establish unified command. Police or fire officials will be in charge of the incident, and the school will be in charge of the students. Classroom teachers and staff should also have plans for dealing with emergencies limited to their classrooms, such as a fire or a hazardous spill.

Training on NIMS and the Incident Command System is free through FEMA's Emergency Management Institute online. FEMA also offers free training for schools at their facility in Maryland. The only cost to the school is for meals. The bulk of the cost of Emergency Response Plans and plans for the staff is printing. Handling the printing in house or using local resources can reduce the cost. The key is not buying something off the shelf, but designing a plan that is customized to your school.

The most important layer of school security is training for the staff and exercising the plans. Training does not have to be time-consuming or complicated. This past April I spoke at the National Catholic Educational Association Conference in Pittsburgh. In one hour educators learned the Three Outs: Lock Out, Get Out, and Take Out. Teachers need choices when faced with an emergency situation and need to be empowered to make those choices. I remember early training for teachers during an active shooter event gave staff only one option. They were told to lock their doors, cover the window, turn out the lights, and hide everyone in the corner away from the door. At the conference we demonstrated effective ways to enhance a lockdown by barricading classroom entrances using things already in the classroom or with inexpensive items like dog leashes and zip ties. We let them know that a lockdown might not be the safest action if the shooter is in close proximity or has the ability to gain entry to the classroom. If the teachers and students are in an unsafe area they must get out, even if that means breaking a classroom window and jumping outside. And teachers need to know they are allowed to do whatever it takes to stop the shooter if that is what they choose. It is their choice to defend themselves and their students. Again, not only do we need to train our teachers, but we need

to empower them to make decisions based on their training and the situation in front of them. Training should not be limited to the active shooter. A staff member is more likely to respond to an irate parent or a child injured on the playground. By training staff to respond to those events which are more likely to occur, they will be better prepared to respond to any event.

The best plans in the world are useless if you never

practice the plans. Tabletop exercises and full-scale exercises allow schools to test their plans to make sure the plans work as designed and that staff members are properly trained. Just as with lesson plans, exercises are designed to test specific objectives. An after-action report is used to identify both areas of strength and weaknesses and to develop an improvement plan to correct deficiencies in the plan or the training.

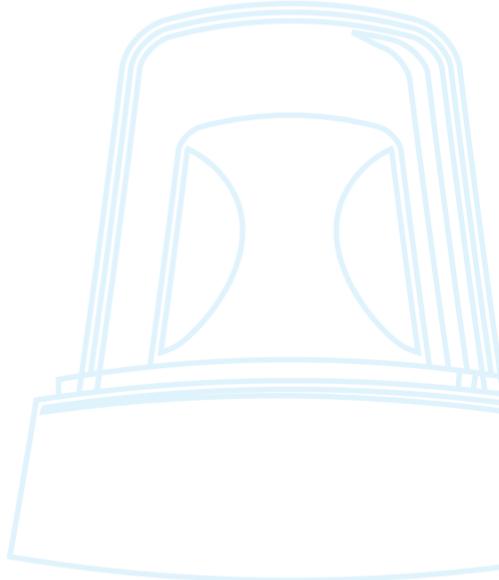
Training and exercises are labor intensive and can cost about \$1,000/day. However, in terms of effectiveness and sustainability, they deliver the most value. All the plans and hardware are useless if staff has not been trained or had the opportunity to test their training.

The good news is schools are safe places for staff to work and students to learn. If we build on that concept while developing methods for preparing for critical events, we will combat the negative perceptions after a national incident and build confidence for our staff and students. 🍀

**Resources**

FEMA Emergency Management Institute  
[training.fema.gov/emi](http://training.fema.gov/emi)

Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans.  
[rems.ed.gov/docs/REMS\\_K-12\\_Guide\\_508.pdf](http://rems.ed.gov/docs/REMS_K-12_Guide_508.pdf)



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