

Chalkboard

By

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It would be every superintendent's nightmare. It would be every parent's nightmare. It would be every rationale person's nightmare. That nightmare would be having a tragedy like the one at Virginia Tech happen at your school.

Having a tornado rip through a school building while school is in session, having a fire breakout during a school day, or having a bus wreck all vie for a top billing on a short list of horrors. There are others that would compete for attention if imagination had its way. Any circumstance where the life of a young person is in jeopardy makes that billing.

"Every Fifteen Minutes", a dramatic production recently held at the high school, regarding the dangers of teenage drinking and driving was almost too real. Reading the "obituaries" posted in the auditorium lobby of the high school would wrench the heart of any reader. Our students are the promise of tomorrow and to lose a single one is a promise broken.

What steps can be taken to keep our students safe? Certainly schools have tornado drills. We practice fire drills and we perform bus evacuation drills. We have a crisis plan that is reviewed periodically with staff that addresses a multitude of different issues. (For obvious reasons, it is one of the few documents, that is not posted on our school website.) We also enlist the services of a School Resource Officer.

Yet there are few remedies against a gunman who intends a massacre and fears no consequences. In Gentry, our schools are in relative close physical proximity to both the fire and police departments. Response time to a call is brief. Bit even three minutes could be enough time to wreck havoc that would last a lifetime.

Could a Virginia Tech incident ever occur at Gentry? God forbid such ever happening again anywhere. But could it? Consider the following summaries taken from <http://www.svrc.net/ShootingsMap.htm> :

December 15, 1997: Stamps, Arkansas

An eighth grader is arrested and charged as an adult after he confessed to shooting and wounded two of his fellow students as he hid in the woods outside of a high school.

March 24, 1998: Jonesboro, Arkansas

Two boys ages 11 and 13 shoot fourteen students and one teacher. The teacher and four of the students die.

May 11, 2000: Prairie Grove, Arkansas

A 13 year old seventh-grade student who left the Prairie Grove Junior High school in an apparent fit of rage and a police officer were injured Thursday after shooting each other in an altercation in a hay field north of the student's school.

The answer is “yes” for Gentry and “yes” for any school in Arkansas, in the United States, in any school anywhere.

What steps can be taken to lower the risk? Organizational strategies have already been alluded to. At Gentry our mantra has become “vigilant and diligent”. Staff members are asked to “be aware” of happenings, of issues between and among students, of those who seem to be isolated or becoming isolated from the student body. They are asked not just to be aware but also to report their concerns to the administrative staff in confidence. A common thread of perpetrators seems to be alienation, not fitting in, a sense of not belonging anywhere.

Any teacher or any parent knows that most every child has that feeling momentarily at some time. It is an attribute of being a developing person. The danger seems to blossom when that feeling become a prevalent thought, day after day.

It behooves us all to make sure every child has a place to belong. Schools need a niche for ever child to feel wanted. Whether it is sports, or clubs, or academics, or activities, or maybe just an adult’s listening and caring ear, every student needs something and someone.

I end by saying it is not just a school concern. It is a family thing. It is a church affair. It is a community issue.

As adults we often become bogged down in the tyranny of the urgent- meeting day-to-day obligations of work and duty. As educators, as parents, as a member of society, may Jesus or whatever moral compass we follow give us the commitment not to ignore some hurting or disturbed child who has the potential to be tomorrow’s newspaper headline.