New York State
School Boards
Association

TENDING TO OUR YOUTH

Providing Effective Support for Sound Minds and Safe Hearts

Introduction

What began as a typical December day in the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut turned into a national tragedy after a 20-year-old man gunned down 20 first graders and six school personnel. While this was by no means the first school shooting, it captured national attention because of the ages of the young victims.

This tragedy has raised new awareness of school safety issues – from building safety to a greater police presence. New York quickly became the first state in the nation to pass tougher gun control laws as one solution.[1] Enacting gun control laws, limiting school access, installing thicker plexi-glass in school entryways and posting armed guards in the hallways may help keep students and staff safe in the short term. But will they address the root causes of violence and keep students from harming themselves and/or others? Accomplishing that goal requires a longer-term, multi-faceted approach to school safety, including providing mental health services in schools to promote healthy student development and support at-risk youth.

The Role that Mental Health Resources Plays

Days after the Sandy Hook tragedy, a group of school violence prevention researchers revised a nationally-recognized position on school shootings, which has become the Connecticut School Shooting Position Statement (http://curry.virginia.edu/articles/sandyhookshooting). Hundreds of individuals and groups, including the New York Association of School Psychologists, endorsed the document, which declared: "We cannot and should not turn our schools into fortresses."[2]

While the writers caution against drawing conclusions too soon about what caused Sandy Hook, they emphasize two main insights in the prevention of mass shootings of this type: "(1) the presence of severe mental illness and/or (2) an intense interpersonal conflict that the person could not resolve or tolerate."[3]

IDENTIFYING AT-RISK STUDENTS

School personnel should be alert to the following behaviors, which may be signs of at-risk students:

- ▲ Fighting
- ▲ Breaking rules and laws
- ▲ Declines in academic and cognitive performance
- ▲ School absences
- ▲ Sudden changes in behavior
- ▲ Angry outbursts in class
- ▲ Messages on social media sites
- ▲ Marked distancing from the school community

Greater access to mental health resources can help prevent such tragedies, according to Dr. Steven Schlozman, associate professor of psychiatry, Harvard Medical School, and associate director of training, child and adolescent psychiatry for Massachusetts General Hospital and McLean Hospital, although he told NYSSBA, "we haven't run the experiment. In other words, access remains so poor that we don't really know that greater access

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[1] Office of the Governor of New York State. Press Release. "Governor Cuomo Signs Groundbreaking Legislation that will give New York State the Toughest Protections Against Gun Violence in the Nation. January 15, 2013. http://www.governor.ny.gov/press/01152013-outline-of-nys-groundbreaking-gun-legislation.

[2] Interdisciplinary Group on Preventing School tend Community Violence. "December 2012 Connecticut School Shooting Position Statement." December 19, 2012.

[3] Ibid:1.

[4] Schlozman, Steven. Communication with G. Simidian, January 2013.

would make a difference. Intuitively, it feels like it would make a huge difference." [4]

Schlozman urges that schools take a more active stance by being able to recognize students who may be at risk before they do harm. In addition to external behavior – fighting, breaking rules and laws, for example – there are other signals students send to which school staff and others should be sensitive. These include declines in academic and cognitive perform-ance, school absences, sudden changes in behavior, angry outbursts in class, messages on social media sites, and a marked distancing from the school community. Schlozman also emphasizes that "the kinds of horrible events that we saw in Con-necticut are not necessarily and, in fact, usually not brought on by the externalizing kids"[5] – in other words, those who outwardly enact their emotions through aggressive behavior such as fighting.

> **Students who don't feel they belong to the school community – the outcasts – are at greater risk for self- or outwardly directed harm.**

Students who don't feel they belong to the school community – the outcasts – "are at greater risk for self- or outwardly directed harm," according to re-search cited by Schlozman. It's important that schools have procedures for dealing with these students. School staff members, such as counselors and psy-chologists, can at the very least be ready to listen and help these students. He cited screening protocols such as the Pediatric Symptom Checklist (www.massgen-eral.org/psychiatry/services/psc_home.aspx) as useful tools to identify children who may require further sup-port.[6] From there, school officials can, if necessary, refer a student to appropriately approved clinicians. The Holistic Student Assessment and Holistic Class-room Assessment, developed by "PEAR" – the Pro-gram in Education, Afterschool and Resiliency – at McLean Hospital directed by Dr. Gil Noam of Har-vard Medical School, are two other tools that can be

used to gauge students' socio-emotional and develop-mental strengths and challenges, assess school en-gagement and relationships, and help schools pinpoint needed services for students.[7,8]

Research supports the connection between stu-dent mental health and learning. PEAR focuses on students' relational con-nections and socio-emotional capabil-ities and has garnered widespread respect. PEAR's developmental and in-terdisciplinary approach with a focus on students' socio-emotional needs is a model school districts can emulate. "A lot of the work PEAR has done in the last 15 years has been absolutely essential to framing this new way of thinking about our students, their mental health and the strategies needed to ensure their success in learning and life," said Paul Reville, former Massachusetts secretary of education.

One offshoot of this research is currently being used by the Westside Academy at Blodgett, a grade 6-8 middle school in the Syracuse City School District. The program, actually founded by Noam, is called RALLY – Respon-sive Advocacy for Life and Learning in Youth. It bridges mental health and academic development, and uses the Holistic Student As-sessment, which seeks to identify students with mod-
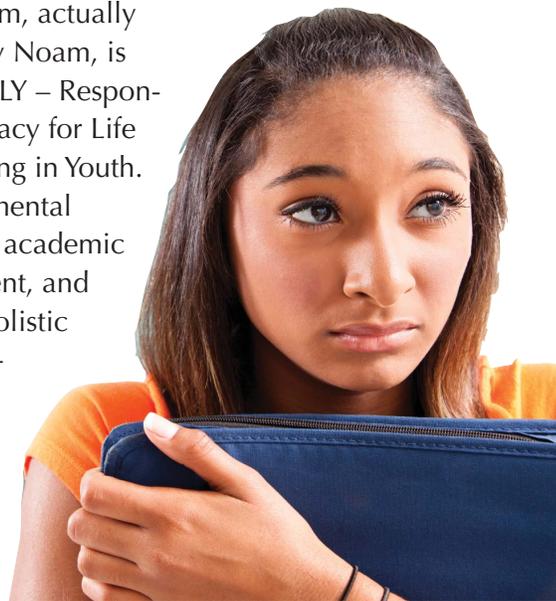
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid.
[7] For more information about these assessments, contact PEAR at pear@mclean.harvard.edu.
[8] The *International Journal of Conflict and Violence* published a study on the Holistic Student Assessment (HSA) and included findings which "are the first to lend empirical support to the HSA as a valid measure of childrens' and adolescents' resiliencies." The study's re-sults show that resiliencies, which the HSA gauges "can help tailor intervention strategies for the prevention of bullying, violence, and antisocial conduct." Vol.6 (2), 2012.

erate-level concerns. "We've been able to link students to counseling services earlier," said Diane Ogno, the program's coordinator.

Building and maintaining relationships within and around the school community can help keep school violence from happening while fostering academic success. For students, trusting relationships with adults are critical to learning, according to Noam. In fact, he told NYSSBA, "the brain is wired around relationships." Dr. Pedro Noguera, a professor at New York University, agrees. "Strong relationships keep schools safe," he said. Students who trust their teachers are more likely to confide in them when something is wrong. And, school engagement is essential. Students who are involved in extracurricular activities, for example, feel more "connected" to school.[9] And, according to the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP), since teachers have the most contact time with students, it makes sense for them to receive training in such areas as conflict resolution, and anger and crisis management.[10]

Noguera stresses that too often students must themselves initiate this contact. But since those students most alienated benefit the most from relationships, he says, school officials – the adults – should encourage their participation. He emphasizes that strong student-community connections are also beneficial.[11]
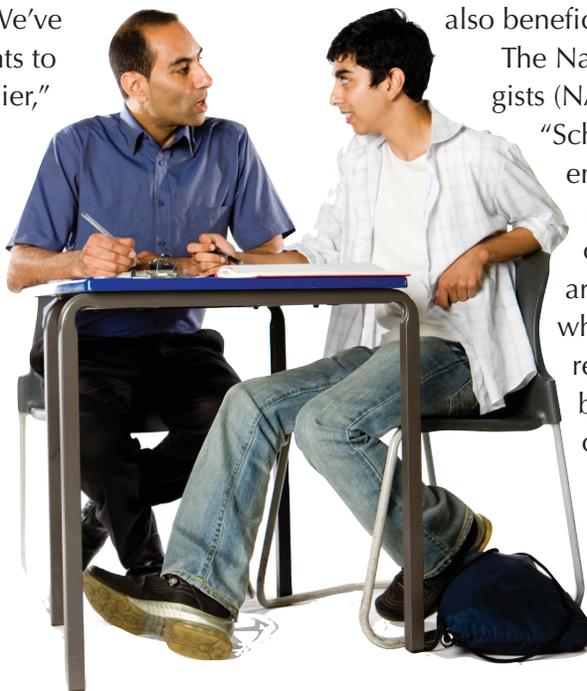
The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) echoes Noguera's sentiment. "School-based mental health supports that encompass social-emotional learning, mental wellness, resilience, and positive connections between students and adults are essential to creating a school culture in which students feel safe and empowered to report safety concerns." This is known to be an effective prevention strategy, according to NASP.[12]

While this might be easier with smaller populations in elementary schools, Noguera cites as effective the smaller learning communities in some larger middle and high schools that prevent disconnection and ensure students don't fall through the cracks. He named Hillcrest High School in Queens as one such example.[13,14]

Including Mental Health Resources in School Safety Plans for Safe School Environments

The Connecticut School Shooting Position Statement puts forth a list of recommendations. It suggests that schools:

▲ Have an integrated vision – one that considers a full range of children's needs, including physical, educational, and socio-emotional.
▲ Ramp up communication between school staff and students, parents, and community members.
▲ Look for ways to quell potential conflicts rather than profiling potentially violent students.
▲ Emphasize connections – encourage school staff – and community members – to demonstrate

9 Noguera, Pedro. Communication with G. Simidian, December 2012.
10 International Association of Chiefs of Police. "Guide for Preventing and Responding to School Violence." 2009.
   http://www.theiacp.org/Portals/0/pdfs/schoolviolence2.pdf.
11 Noguera, Pedro. Communication with G. Simidian, December 2012.
12 National Association of School Psychologists. "School-based Mental Health Services and School Psychologists: Supporting Mental Health Matters," 2013.
13 Noguera, Pedro. Communication with G. Simidian, December 2012.
14 According to the school's website (www.hillcrestweb.com), Hillcrest High School in Queens, New York has been a New York State Blue Ribbon School of Excellence and received a National School of Change Award.

they care about students' well-being by listening and being there. At-risk students are frequently those who feel alienated from their school community.

- ▲ Provide support – offer conflict resolution and violence prevention-related initiatives and programs. Gear them more intensively to those at-risk while supporting the healthy development of all children.

- ▲ Encourage community-based mental health groups, "local law enforcement, schools and other key community stakeholders to create a system of community-based mental health response and threat assessment" procedures.[15]

While creating safe schools is a shared responsibility, one size does not fit all. The International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) offers a number of school-based suggestions at the school, family, and community levels to reduce such violence, while noting that "…it's impossible to establish one plan that will work well in all schools." IACP recommends schools begin with a security assessment survey of school safety policies, procedures and protocols.[16]

New York schools are already required to do such an assessment. Project SAVE (Safe Schools Against Violence in Education), legislation passed on the heels of the Columbine school shooting in 1999, requires that school districts have in place a safety plan that is annually reviewed

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(http://www.p12.nysed.gov/ sss/ssae/schoolsafety/save/).

The IACP also recommends that schools provide staff guidance on procedures regarding "disturbed writing and threat making," communicate often with parents about student conduct, and make sure students have a clear understanding of what is and what is not acceptable school behavior.[17] For suspended students, schools may want to combine suspensions with community service and targeted counseling such as anger management or social competency training. Schools may also want to recognize students' pro-social behavior, and develop mentoring programs and school-community partnerships.[18]

Notwithstanding the economic reality of school budget cuts, schools may hire school resource officers or probation officers as added security personnel, revisit loitering, visitor, and drug policies, promote healthy school climates and provide ways to confidentially report school safety issues. Schools also should have "threat and crisis management plans." Threat management teams are comprised of diverse groups of stakeholders who determine if threats are valid and, if so, what actions to take, while crisis management teams

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[15] Interdisciplinary Group on Preventing School and Community Violence. "December 2012 Connecticut School Shooting Position Statement." December 19, 2012: 1-2.

[16] International Association of Chiefs of Police."Guide for Preventing and Responding to School Violence." 2009:1. http://www.theiacp.org/Portals/0/pdfs/schoolviolence2.pdf.

[17] Ibid:5.

[18] Ibid.

develop in advance action steps to take to prepare for a crisis and respond in the aftermath.[19]

At the curricular level, schools can foster conflict resolution, social competency and problem-solving skills in the curriculum. Diversity awareness training for staff and students along with bullying prevention programs are also key.[20] Of note, New York Education Law was revised to incorporate a new article 2 called The Dignity for All Students Act as well as an amended Section 801-a "regarding instruction in civility, citizenship, and character education by expanding the concepts of tolerance, respect for others and dignity to include: an awareness and sensitivity in the relations of people, including but not limited to, different races, weights, national origins, ethnic groups, religions, religious practices, mental or physical abilities, sexual orientations, gender identity, and sexes."[21] The addition of such instruction will help combat school violence.

Students should also be taught about drug and alcohol abuse, as well as cautioned against gang participation. Schools also should have an approach to suicide prevention – including identifying and referring students in need of counseling.[22]

District support services staff are key to these approaches. School guidance counselors, social workers and psychologists play important roles with regard to student mental health issues and anticipating potential issues before they become tragedies. Additionally, school resource officers can aid in healthy student development. Youth participation in "school resource officer program[s] can help the SRO to build rapport with students…provide opportunities for youth to be involved in the improvement of their school; and promote crime and delinquency prevention."[23] In fact, the National Association of School Psychologists emphasizes the importance of schools in the process of healthy development for all students while acknowledging that what's needed is "a continuum of services for children, within which schools play an integral part." For the smaller percentage of students with pronounced behav-

NEW YORK SCHOOL SUPPORT PERSONNEL ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

School guidance counselors provide vocational and educational guidance (http://www.schoolcounselor.org/content.asp?contentid=535). In New York public schools, these duties are broken down by grade:

Grades K-6: Groom students for educational opportunities; work with students on academic or attendance concerns, behavioral or adjustment issues; strengthen parent-school involvement; teach students to avoid abuse.[24]

Grades 7-12: Provide an annual assessment of students' academic record and career goals. Additional duties such as educational, career, and behavioral advisement and counseling, career instruction and promotion of parent-school involvement can be done by other school personnel under the supervision of a school counselor.[25]

School social workers provide services that include counseling, conflict mediation and resiliency building, youth suicide prevention and intervention and crisis intervention (New York State School Social Workers Association http://www.nyssswa.org/index.shtml).

School psychologists help create safe, healthy, and supportive student learning environments that strengthen connections between home and school (New York Association of School Psychologists http://www.nyasp.org/); assess learning disabilities, serve on the district's committee on special education (CSE).

[19,20] Ibid.
[21] "The Dignity Act," 1.http://www.p12.nysed.gov/dignityact/.
[22] International Association of Chiefs of Police."Guide for Preventing and Responding to School Violence." 2009:1. http://www.theiacp.org/Portals/0/pdfs/schoolviolence2.pdf.
[23] University of Colorado at Boulder. Center for the Study of Prevention of Violence. "Safe Communities – Safe Schools Fact Sheet: Implementing an Effective School Resource Officer Program," 2001, 2009. http://www.colorado.edu/cspv/publications/factsheets/safeschools/FS-SC11.pdf
[24] 8 NYCCR § 170.2(j)
[25] Ibid.

ioral issues, "collaboration with community services providers and families is critical…."[26]

School budget cuts in recent years have weighed heavily on student support service positions. For example, the Yonkers City School District has "…lost 75 percent of their basic support services…."[27] *Newsday* reported in February that New York has 3,379 psychologists for approximately 2.7 million students, which translates to roughly one school psychologist per 800 students. But Newtown has prompted districts, including Yonkers, to find ways such as through new collective bargaining agreements, within already tight budgets, to restore support staff for mental health services ("Educators: After Newtown, lawmakers must help strengthen mental health in schools," Meghan E. Murphy, *Newsday*, 2/10/13).

Parents also play a key role. IACP emphasizes that, for parents, showing "an in-

> **Parents showing an interest in their children's lives is essential to deterring youth violence.**

terest in their children's lives…" is essential to deterring youth violence.[28] Communication takes precedence. Parents can contribute to the development of school safety procedures, be a school volunteer, talk with their children about school safety policies, model positive communication and relational skills, be aware of their children's friends, and watch their children's Internet habits.[29]

Schools should work collaboratively with community organizations, local businesses, and law enforcement agencies to ensure healthy youth development. For example, members of the community can volunteer for afterschool and mentoring programs. Community organizations, in turn, can offer community service opportunities for youth. Additionally, police officers can work with schools to create School Resource Officer (SRO) programs and participate on "school threat and disciplinary action assessment teams,"[30] though, again, this may be limited because of scarce funding. The New York State School Boards Association advocates a restoration of funding for these positions.

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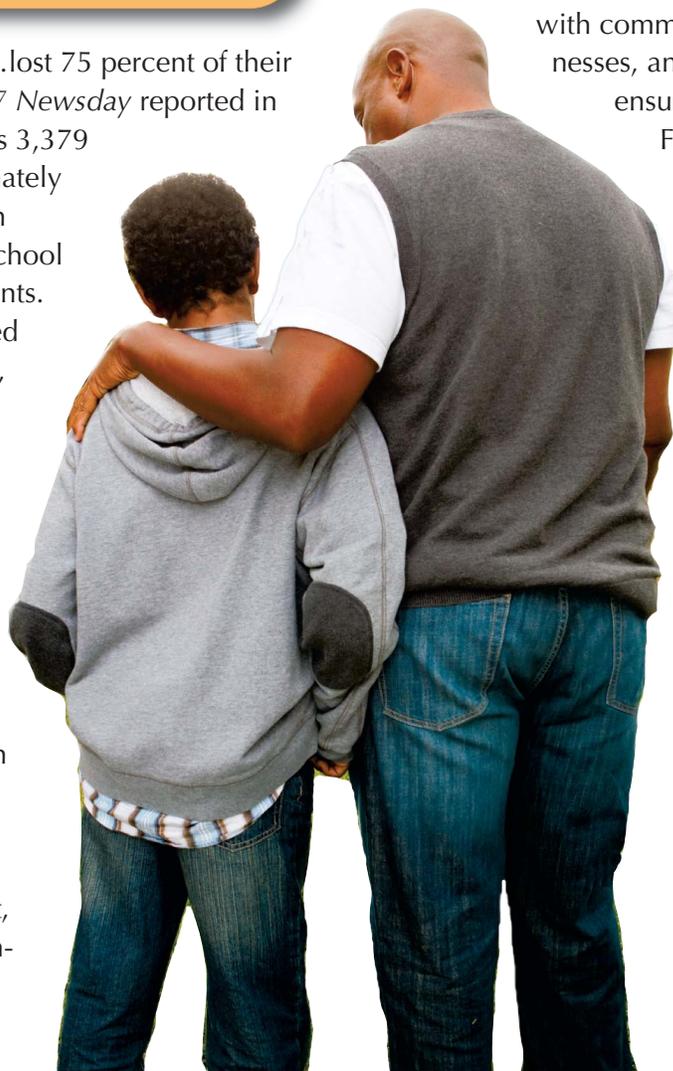
[26] National Association of School Psychologists. "School-based Mental Health Services and School Psychologists: Supporting Mental Health Matters," 2013.
[27] Saunders, Sylvia, "When budgets are cut, the ones we serve suffer," *NYSUT United*. November 20, 2012.
[28] International Association of Chiefs of Police. "Guide for Preventing and Responding to School Violence." 2009:13. http://www.theiacp.org/Portals/0/pdfs/schoolviolence2.pdf.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid:16.

What School Boards Can Do

A school district's role in the promotion of healthy student development – including sound mental health – is essential to student safety, well being and success. While New York school districts are struggling in an environment of limited economic capital, they still have the capacity to focus on social capital and relationships which can help prevent school violence such as what happened, for example, in Sandy Hook. School boards can promote safe learning environments and healthy student development by:

▲ Having policies in place that enable staff to initiate programs that build connections between students, students and school staff, and the school district and the community, and implement socio-emotional programming

▲ Monitoring program initiatives and periodically reviewing data (such as attendance, suspension rates, caseloads, etc.) to assess progress

▲ Ensuring these initiatives are funded in the school budget

▲ Demonstrating to their communities that ensuring student safety is a top priority through regular communication

Despite the tragedy at Sandy Hook, school boards can take comfort in knowing that "schools are still the safest place for kids to be," according to Schlozman.[31] The leadership school boards provide will continue to ensure that students have a safe and healthy community in which to succeed.

THE SCHOOL BOARD'S ROLE

Here is how school boards can promote healthy student development:

▲ Adopt policies and programs that build connections between students, school staff and the community

▲ Monitor programs and data (including attendance, suspensions and caseloads) periodically

▲ Fund initiatives at the proper level

▲ Communicate regularly on school safety to the community

[31] Schlozman, Steven. Communication with G. Simidian. January 2013.

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