

How do we Safeguard our Kids?

Tribune Opinion

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During the era of the Cold War, school drills involved students crouching under desks in the event of a nuclear attack. We've come a long way since the 1950s and early '60s, but not necessarily for the better.

Today, kids are facing different more realistic drills. Students, teachers, administrators and law officers now practice for invasion by an individual -- youngster or adult -- armed with a weapon who is bent on causing harm to those in the school.

Lockdown drills. It makes us shudder. There has been renewed conversation about school safety ever since Sept. 27 when a man entered the Bailey high school southwest of Denver and held several teenage girls hostage, ultimately killing one of them as a SWAT team stormed the classroom.

This incredible story immediately recalled for Coloradans the horrific carnage at Columbine High School in Littleton more than seven years ago. But in the past two weeks, our nation, which collectively promotes itself as putting children first, has witnessed the murder of a high school principal in Wisconsin, the execution of five Amish girls in Pennsylvania and a seventh-grader storming a Joplin, Mo., school, armed with an assault rifle.

Can we be any more frustrated? Can we be any more fearful about sending our children to school? How do we ease the minds of our youngsters who ask the question, "Will I be safe?" For that matter, how do we reassure ourselves?

Suggestions about improving school safety are worthy of consideration, such as all school personnel and visitors wearing ID badges, allowing only one access to the school building with a security guard at the door, and installing surveillance cameras.

But we also believe that each and every school district must decide what is best for its own community, for its particular student population.

There are some common starting points, however, we can all observe to do what is necessary to make schools safe, whether in the big city, the suburbs or the rural reaches (as most of Weld County's schools are).

First, is awareness. Ever since the 1999 Columbine massacre, schools have encouraged students to report anything or anyone that appears out of the ordinary.

To that end, "Safe 2 Tell" was launched through the partnership of several Colorado entities. According to its Web site, Safe 2 Tell is "designed to help you anonymously report anything that is scaring or endangering you, your friends or your family. ... There is a trained call taker waiting to help you around the clock. This person will listen to you and get help for your problem."

It is imperative that parents and school officials impress on children and teens the importance of reporting suspicious people or activities.

Several students said they saw a strange man in the parking lot of Bailey's high school but thought he was a parent. He wasn't. He was Duane Morrison, the hostage taker who ultimately shot and killed Emily Keyes, 16, before turning a gun on himself.

Next, we must not become complacent. Evil is like mold: It can find any spot to grow and thrive. It is time to mourn the days of rural life where everyone felt safe. The reality is the school culture has dramatically changed in the past decade. Drugs have infiltrated the smallest of high schools. So too has the violence. If you don't want to believe this fact just think: Bailey, Cazenovia, Wis., and Nickel Mines, Pa.

But we also must not cower in the corner and keep our children from ever venturing outside. Instead, we must forge ahead. To hide allows evil to win.

Thankfully, in typical Weld "take the bull by the horns" attitude, several Weld schools are already making changes to their security plans.

Glenn McClain, superintendent of Platte Valley Re-7 School District in Kersey, said that parent volunteers who previously had more casual access to schools there, are now required to sign in "just to make sure we know who's moving in and out of the buildings."

Later this month, staff at Highland Re-9 School District will meet with local police officers to review crisis procedures.

Finally, we all need to heed the tender advice offered by Columbine survivor Craig Scott, who spoke at Bush's forum on Tuesday. Scott says he advocates encouraging students to choose compassion over violence. "If we can carry messages that have value and that have substance, ... I believe that we'll have impact."

We think so, too.

TO CONTACT "SAFE 2 TELL"

«Telephone: (877) 542-SAFE (7233).

«Web site: www.safe2tell.org.