

IV. COMMUNICATIONS

*Research clearly indicates that these attacks are rarely sudden impulsive acts. In most cases, others knew of the attacks or ideas prior to them occurring. Most of the attackers engaged in some behavior prior to the incident that caused concern to others.*¹⁷⁹

– Brian J. Klimakowski
Chief of Police, Manchester Township
Member, Governor’s School Security Task Force

Trust, Timeliness, Technology

Effective communication is vital to a safe and secure school and requires trust, openness, timely notification of community members, and the use of multiple methods, the NJSBA task force found.

Section II of this report, “School Climate,” cites the importance of building trusting relationships among students, faculty, other school staff and parents. In addition, it stresses the need for an atmosphere in which students, friends, acquaintances or relatives feel comfortable to discuss potential threats.

Section IV of this report, “Policy and Planning,” addresses the importance of involving the community at-large in school security planning. As the NJSBA task force found, two-way communication is essential for boards of education to achieve the following objectives:

- Build support for school security plans;
- Clarify the responsibilities of students, parents, teachers, administrators and community members;
- Implement and update the plans as needed, and
- Keep various constituent groups informed in the case of an emergency.

The experts from higher education, law enforcement and the security field who spoke to the NJSBA task force not only emphasized the importance of school security procedures, but also stressed the need for *timely notification* of any changes in those practices. Such communication should ensure that school staff, parents and the public are aware of visitor access protocols, student drop-off procedures, and after-hours use of, and access to, schools. Community members should also know about their responsibility to report unusual behavior around school grounds or bus stops to the appropriate school or law enforcement authority.

The NJSBA School Security Task Force collected information on communications programs that would facilitate notification of the community in emergencies and, critically important, the reporting of suspicious behavior to authorities. Two concepts stood out: anonymous tip lines, and wide-platform emergency notification systems.

¹⁷⁹ Brian J. Klimakowski, “School Security: 2013 and Beyond” (presentation to the NJSBA School Security Task Force, Trenton, N.J., August 12, 2013).

Anonymous Tip Lines

In the majority of school shootings, members of the school community, usually students, were aware of the plan prior to the incident, according to Brian Klimakowski, Manchester Township chief of police and the New Jersey State Association of Chiefs of Police representative to the Governor’s School Security Task Force.¹⁸⁰

A 2004 report by the U.S. Secret Service and U.S. Department of Education analyzes school shootings and provides relevant statistics about prior knowledge of the events:

In most cases, other people knew about the attack before it took place. In over three-quarters of the incidents, at least one person had information that the attacker was thinking about or planning the school attack... In nearly two-thirds of the incidents, more than one person had information about the attack before it occurred... In nearly all of these cases, the person who knew was a peer—a friend, schoolmate, or sibling... Some peers knew exactly what the attacker planned to do; others knew something "big" or "bad" was going to happen, and in several cases knew the time and date it was to occur. *An adult had information about the idea or plan in only two cases.*¹⁸¹ (Emphasis added.)

“We must find ways to solicit information that may indicate a potential threat or impending attack,” Mr. Klimakowski told the NJSBA task force. He recommends the use of an anonymous tip line that can receive phone, email and text messages and relay the information in real time to school administration and law enforcement personnel.

Citing the position of the police chiefs’ association on the matter, Mr. Klimakowski said that such a tip line should be established on a statewide basis, be well-marketed, and be “funneled through a 24/7 manned fusion center...”

The Report of the NJ SAFE Task Force, the select study group appointed by the governor after the Newtown tragedy, also endorses a statewide anonymous tip line.

New Jersey should have a toll-free reporting system that allows students to *anonymously* call or text message tips to law enforcement about incidents of bullying, violence, assaults, suicide threats and other issues that may pose a risk to the health, safety or security of students, families or their communities.¹⁸²

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁸¹ U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, Safe and Drug-Free Schools Program, and U.S. Secret Service, National Threat Assessment Center, *Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the Prevention of School Attacks in the United States*, by Bryan Vossekuil, Robert A. Fein, Ph.D., Marisa Reddy, Ph.D., Randy Borum, Psy.D., and William Modzeleski (Washington, D.C: Education Public Center, U.S. Department of Education, 2004), 25. (<http://www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/preventingattacksreport.pdf>, accessed Sept. 10, 2014)

¹⁸² New Jersey Office of the Attorney General, *The New Jersey SAFE Task Force on Gun Protection, Addiction, Mental Health and Families, and Education Safety*, by Peter G. Verniero, John J. Degnan, Manuel Guantez, James Romer, Evelyn Sullivan, Brian Zychowski, Lee Vartan, Ron Susswein, Paul Salvatoriello, and Joseph Fanaroff. (Trenton, N.J., April 10, 2013), 79. (<http://nj.gov/oag/newsreleases13/NJSafe-REPORT-04.10.13-WEB.pdf>, accessed Sept. 10, 2014)

Local school districts currently have available a number of anonymous tip line services. Two systems were brought to the NJSBA task force’s attention. The 400 school district and charter school members of the New Jersey Schools Insurance Group have access to a free anonymous service, called “We Tip.” In addition, at the task force’s May 23, 2013 meeting, Mark B. Miller, vice president for educational technology for Nixle, described an anonymous tip line component of the company’s emergency notification service. He indicated that it provides information that can be reviewed, investigated and acted upon and, therefore, prevent incidents of violence.

In its April 2013 report, the NJ SAFE Task Force references a tip line service established in Colorado in the wake of the 1999 Columbine shootings. Since 2004, the service, called Safe2Tell®, has received nearly 10,000 calls and messages, opened 415 formal investigations, provided 359 counseling referrals, had 324 potential suicide interventions, resulted in 74 arrests, and prevented 28 school attacks.¹⁸³

Emergency Notification Systems

Forty-six days before the Newtown tragedy, New Jersey was struck by Superstorm Sandy, which placed a severe strain on community infrastructure, including schools, law enforcement, and first responders throughout the state. The lessons learned from the weather event point to the value of coordinated emergency notification systems for school districts and their corresponding law enforcement/first-response agencies and municipal governments.

At a March 22, 2013 NJSBA-sponsored forum, “School Leadership during a Crisis: Lessons Learned from Sandy,” superintendents and other officials from severely impacted school districts stressed the importance of using multiple communication methods to reach the community in emergencies.¹⁸⁴ These mechanisms may include district websites, reverse 911 or all-call systems, social media, and wide-platform notification systems. Relying on only one form of communication is not a recommended best practice. As experienced by many Sandy-impacted school districts, some communication platforms will not operate during an emergency and community members may not have access to a particular system, they cautioned.

The New Jersey State Police and several local law enforcement agencies use the multi-platform mass notification system. Such products are currently available to school districts.

A June 2013 report by six federal agencies, including the U.S. Departments of Education and Homeland Security, cites communication strategy as a critical element of school security plans.

The planning team should consider the following when developing its goals, objectives, and courses of action:

- How the school’s communications system integrates into the local disaster and response law enforcement communication networks (e.g., fire department and law enforcement staff).

¹⁸³ *Ibid*, 79.

¹⁸⁴ “School Leadership during a Crisis: Lessons Learned from Hurricane Sandy” (video), New Jersey School Boards Association, created March 22, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w3-CO8ahNxQ>.

- How to ensure that relevant staff members can operate communications equipment.
- How the school will communicate with students, families, and the broader community before, during, and after an emergency.
- How to account for technology barriers faced by students, staff, parents, and guardians.
- How to effectively address language access barriers faced by students, staff, parents, and guardians.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸⁵ U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, Office of Safe and Healthy Students, *Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans*. (Washington, DC, 2013), 30. (http://rems.ed.gov/docs/REMS_K-12_Guide_508.pdf, accessed Sept. 10, 2014)

COMMUNICATIONS: RECOMMENDATIONS

The NJSBA School Security Task Force makes the following recommendations in the area of communications:

Local School District/Community

26. As part of their school security plans, local boards of education should (a) ensure that staff, students, parents and members of the community are informed of changes in school security procedures in a timely manner and (b) convey the importance of reporting to school or law enforcement authorities unusual incidents or behavior in or around school facilities.
27. To ensure communication with all members of the school community, law enforcement and emergency responders, school districts should implement multi-platform emergency notification systems that use telephone, email, text messaging, website and other methods of communication.
28. Because of the proven effectiveness of anonymous tip lines in preventing incidents of violence and promoting the health and safety of students, school districts should explore the use of such networks and take advantage of the systems that are currently available.

State

29. The NJ SAFE Task Force recommendation to establish a statewide anonymous tip line should be pursued by the state Departments of Education, Community Affairs, and Law and Public Safety, as well as the Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness and other agencies.