

Safety and Security at Nevada County Schools

2017-2018 Nevada County Grand Jury

Safety and Security at Nevada County Schools

Summary

In the wake of several tragic and highly publicized school violence incidents, school safety and violence prevention are major national concerns. Since the year 2000 there have been nearly 190 school shootings in 43 of the 50 states. The shootings have taken place at a rate of about one per month and left more than 250 students and teachers dead.

With a countywide safety assessment of our local schools as an objective, the Nevada County Grand Jury (Jury) interviewed selected officials from schools and school districts as well as the Nevada County Superintendent of Schools (NCSOS). The Jury was interested in determining the extent of deployment of the California legislature's mandated comprehensive school safety plan, Education Code 32280-32289.

Our questions and observations were specific to regulations but general enough to reflect the unique characteristics of the schools which were visited.

The Jury visited 16 of the 42 schools in Nevada County (38%) to see if there were safety programs in place, what they included, and what their feelings were about safety policies already in place.

The Jury contacted the NCSOS office to find out what part it played in overseeing implementation of safety policies.

During the school surveys, the Jury compiled observations from various individual school sites, several of which raised safety concerns within the Jury. A sample of the observations follows.

- All schools had a comprehensive school safety plan in accordance with California Education Code, Section 32280-32289.
- All schools showed a realistic and forthright effort at deploying and executing their safety plan.
- Teacher training on safety and security did not appear to provide enough opportunity to thoroughly instruct the teachers on responsibilities, alternatives, and appropriate methods for dealing with an extreme emergency.
- Evacuation procedures included assembling students and teachers in largely open areas outside. Recent active shooter experience indicates that this procedure should be changed.
- All schools we visited were able to secure their perimeters.

- In most schools, emergency *secure* communication was somewhat lacking or did not exist between front office and teacher.
- Not all classrooms had inside locks or window coverings to prevent observation from the outside. Camera systems were not always present and were inconsistent.
- Notification to parents and guardians appeared to be consistent across those we interviewed. All schools used a telephone-centered message system and some sort of group email. However, the emergence of social media has completely changed the communication dynamics and, instead of fostering communications, has increased the sense of panic in many students, teachers, and parents and guardians.
- There was no comprehensive written statement providing parents and guardians, teachers, and appropriate students with simple instructions of what to do and what not to do in the event of an emergency.
- One consistent issue emerged: *there is a need to establish a presence at each school of some form of Resource Officer.*
- When questioned about possibly arming teachers, an immediate consensus emerged from those interviewed which discarded the idea as unsuitable.

We all want to see our children succeed. We all want the youth of our community to have an educational experience that is mutually positive and respectful. We all want our community to share the mutual responsibilities and the beneficial results of a renowned school system. Toward that end, the Jury asks the entire community to extend themselves, just a bit, toward things that are positive and respectful. We are all neighbors wanting to be neighborly. Some things are impossible to solve at a local level. We should act together toward solving those things that are solvable and refuse to allow a national perspective to pull us apart.

Glossary

ALICE	Alert, Lockdown, Inform, Counter, Evacuate (in response to an active shooter)
County	Nevada County
Jury	Nevada County Grand Jury
NCSOS	Nevada County Superintendent of Schools

Background

With the recent school shootings at Parkland, Florida, it was apparent that parents and guardians, students, school administration, law enforcement, and virtually all of the general public were shocked to their core. Additionally, with 24/7 news and unlimited social media accounts, the extent of the volume became overwhelming and the need simply to “do something ... anything”

was felt throughout the nation. The people of Nevada County (County) have been no less affected.

The Jury determined that an assessment of the situation as it applies to our County could be of extreme value. Accordingly, this report is an attempt to assess, inform, and advise to the extent possible the current status of “Safety and Security at Nevada County Schools.”

Approach

The Jury visited 16 of the 42 schools in Western Nevada County to see if there were safety programs in place, what they included, and what the school administration felt in reference to the effectiveness of safety policies.

The Jury reviewed the comprehensive school safety plan in the California Education Code Sections 32280-32289. These sections define the California Legislature’s instructions to school districts, law enforcement, community leaders, and the school community as a whole regarding the need for a comprehensive school safety plan. Further, the legislature defined the elements of a safety plan to include prevention strategies and education of crime and violence on the school campus.

The Jury also reviewed Assembly Bill 424, passed in October 2017, which deleted the authority of local school officials to grant permission for a person to possess a firearm within a school zone.

Additionally, the Jury contacted the offices of the NCSOS to determine what role it played in overseeing implementation of safety policies.

During this investigation the Jury asked questions of a cross-section of school administration officials regarding:

- communications on site;
- parent notification and communications;
- law enforcement and emergency notification;
- conduct and scheduling of fire and emergency drills;
- evacuation procedures and concerns;
- active shooter drills;
- communications among teacher, staff, counselor, psychologist, and principal;
- accessibility and visibility to classrooms;
- cameras and video equipment;
- easy access to schools and lack of perimeter fences surrounding schools;
- training and goal setting;
- funding;
- arming teachers; and
- additional Resource Officers.

Discussion

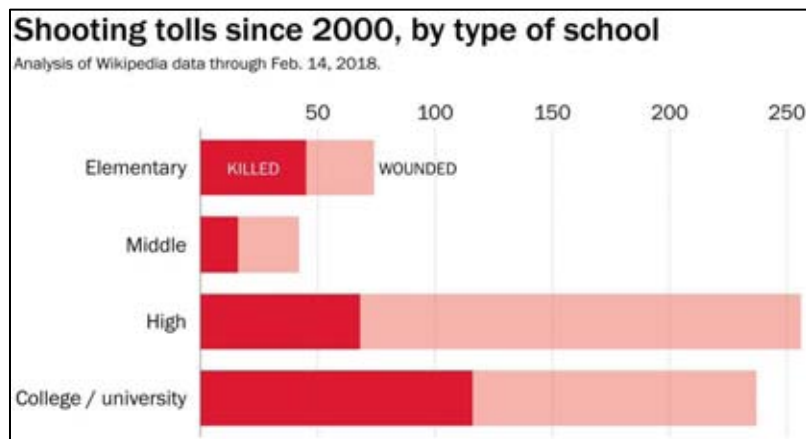
A recent article in *The Washington Post* (March 9, 2018) titled [Eighteen Years of Gun Violence, Mapped](#) defined a school shooting as “... the targeting of students and/or teachers at a school.” Using Wikipedia, they went on to identify the numbers of school shootings since 2000 (debunking an initial claim made by other sources that there had been 18 school shootings in the United States already in 2018). Using their definition, as of March 9, 2018 seven school shootings had thus far occurred in 2018. Moreover, since 2000, there have been nearly 190 shootings at elementary, middle, and high schools and at colleges and universities.

We can all agree that one shooting is one too many. Any act of violence at a school inflicted on student or staff is such an overwhelming violation of our sense of reasonable security that it is almost beyond our capacity to comprehend. It is absolutely essential that we understand and ensure that our systems of security have the capability to effectively respond should the unthinkable become a reality. Further, the Jury feels compelled to address the phenomenon that causes outrage in our community and our nation that is as intense as it is short-lived. Our national conversation about school shootings has historically vacillated from absolute outrage to political soundbites and has thus far created less than optimal results.

This report looks back to the year 2000 and begs the question: *why are we merely talking at each other and not gathering our strength and insisting and seeing to it that something is done to protect our children?*

The following is provided as a means to document the problem and acquaint the citizens of the County with objective information and collective opinion of the Jury that we hope may be useful in determining our safety posture, our vulnerability, and the steps that our local agencies, districts, and activities are taking and perhaps should take to protect our children, teachers, and school staff.

To understand our situation locally, we need to assess the scope of the problem nationally. The chart below illustrates the toll school shootings have taken.



[Eighteen Years of Gun Violence, Mapped](#) - *The Washington Post* – March 9, 2018

Between 2000 and Feb 14, 2018, there have been 188 school shootings in 43 of the 50 states.

Since 2000, school shootings have taken place at a rate of about one a month and left more than 250 students or teachers dead. The quantity of shootings predominately involves schools with older students.

While it is mandatory to assess the preparedness of our schools, recent studies referenced by National Public Radio¹ reveal a serious lack of consensus on possible solutions. Furthermore, the intensity of one-sided opinions seems to have stifled broad discussion and searches for mutual consensus. These studies did point out that to simply prepare for shootings is reactive and insufficient. A coalition of law enforcement, mental health, and educational agencies is necessary to begin to shift the focus onto prevention and not just reaction. However, this report is not focused entirely on that larger coalition; it is mainly intended to address the present state of preparedness of our schools to react to an active shooter or other criminal activity.

With a countywide safety assessment of our local schools as an objective, the Jury interviewed selected officials from schools and school districts in the County as well as the NCSOS. The Jury was interested in determining the extent of deployment of the California's mandated comprehensive school safety plan, Education Code 32280-32289. Additionally, the Jury sought out the attitudes and reactions toward school safety of a broad spectrum of local individuals within the system who are charged with educating and protecting our youth.

We questioned the existence of school safety plans and the extent to which they were actually in use as part of the schools' operations. We asked whether safety was practiced or was merely a plan on the shelf. Of the 42 schools within the jurisdiction of the County, the Jury elected to interview 16 schools ... a 38% sample size. The sample contained a cross-section of small and large schools, charter schools, private schools, and the community college. The Jury did not interview any of the East County schools because they are under the jurisdiction of Placer County.

Observations

Our questions and observations were specific as to regulations, but general enough to reflect the unique characteristics of the individual schools. Our collective observations are:

- All schools had an annually updated comprehensive school safety plan in accordance with California Education Code, Section 32280-32289.
- All schools showed a realistic and forthright effort to deploy and execute their safety plan. This observation was clearly stimulated by the recent tragedy in Florida.
- Teacher training on safety and security was observed to be mostly confined to "scheduled collaboration" sessions as part of imparting weekly notices, alerts, and business topics. This did not appear to provide enough opportunity to thoroughly instruct the teachers on responsibilities, alternatives, and appropriate methods of dealing with an extreme emergency.

¹ www.npr.org/sections/ed/2018/03/07/590877717/expert

- Notifications to parents and guardians were consistent among the schools. All schools use a telephone-centered message system and some sort of group email. However, the emergence of social media has completely changed the communication dynamics and, instead of fostering communication, has increased the sense of panic and confusion in students, teachers, and parents and guardians. Some noted concerns were:
 - a. There were reports of Facebook posts regarding a lockdown at a school which preceded the actual lockdown. There was virtually no information regarding what had prompted the lockdown in the Facebook post and this caused an enormous digital outcry among the students from inside the school as well as from parents and guardians outside the school.
 - b. Messages between the parents and guardians, others, and the students in a recent lockdown drill caused flashing of cellphone screens to be observed in darkened corridors and immediately disclosed to the person portraying a shooter the location of hidden students in lockdown.
 - c. Social media chatter among students was continuous.
 - d. During recent lockdowns, rumors on social media to and from students exponentially increased while teachers and others school administrators were cut off from legitimate ongoing information or silent because of efforts by the school to prevent incomplete information from being released prematurely. Complete information always lagged behind rumors.
 - e. Student attention is critically diffused.
- Safety training of teachers and administrators was an ongoing activity, some more seriously conducted than others, and was not consistent throughout all schools.
- While most had conducted recent active shooter or civilian response drills, some schools, especially those of earlier grades, chose to minimize potential trauma and emphasized response through discussion and simple examples as opposed to a lockdown and active shooter drills. Younger children were therefore protected from excessing and unnecessary trauma. This was an enhancement of state regulations and not in conflict with the Education Code or state law.
- Most schools were aware of the “ALICE” standard (Alert, Lockdown, Inform, Counter, Evacuate)². However, the exercise was inconsistently practiced.

²<https://www.alicetraining.com/>

- Some programs, like “Run. Hide. Fight.”³ have been taught by the Grass Valley Police Department.
- As a result of the shootings in Las Vegas, Nevada, and the fire alarm activation by the shooter in Florida, there was a growing concern about the manner in which students and staff members were instructed to evacuate school facilities. Assembling in large groups outside could have unintended consequences and provide a potential target of opportunity. The Jury could not find evidence of a collective effort within the County to attempt to develop a means to overcome this concern. This item is one where urgent attention is demanded.
- Questions concerning signs of mental instability garnered a significant response. Teachers knew their students. They saw their students daily and if negative changes were observed, they were in the most advantageous position to take action and address the issue with the help of site staff or County Behavioral Health. In most serious or emergency cases, school representatives were very complementary of the services of County Behavioral Health.
- In addition, the “Handle with Care” program⁴ allows law enforcement and Health officials to alert schools of traumatic events offsite involving students. This provides the insight and the methods to the school staff to intercede and prevent possible behavioral escalation.
- The schools visited by the Jury had no effective means to physically secure the outside perimeter of their school grounds but research indicates that most schools would not become safer merely because of perimeter fences, extensive camera systems, or walls. Research has also shown that excessive “hardening” of schools jeopardizes the learning environment and undermines the trust between students and faculty. Having multiple means of evacuation reduces the bottleneck of forcing students through known fixed gateways and structures. For more information on concerns of “hardening” schools, the Jury suggests a recent interview on National Public Radio⁵. This interview points out that “... safety is a product of relationships.” This is especially true among young adults where the preponderance of occurrence of violence happens. In our quest for safety, we should not turn our schools into prisons.
- The University of Virginia in February, 2018 engaged an “Interdisciplinary Group on Preventing School and Community Violence” (also called the “Youth Violence Project”)⁶. Consisting of 22 noted academicians from universities throughout the United States, the group crafted a series of recommendations aimed at “... changing the national mindset and policy from reaction to prevention.” The results of this engagement have been endorsed by over 75 national organizations, including medical, law enforcement, legal, and social services organizations.

³ <https://www.ready.gov/active-shooter>

⁴ handlewithcare.com

⁵ <http://wbaa.org/post/after-parkland-dont-turn-our-schools-prisons-says-education-activist#stream/0>

⁶ <https://curry.virginia.edu/prevent-gun-violence>

- Throughout all interview sessions, one consistent issue emerged: a need to establish a presence at each school of some form of Resource Officer. Only a few of our 42 schools have assigned representatives of law enforcement. The teachers were sensitive to the presence of erratic behavior and responded accordingly. There was instruction given to these teachers on what constitutes erratic behavior with the singular direction of reporting it to the front office. While teachers were clearly the figure of authority in each classroom as it relates to education, as a body they were not trained in depth to recognize evolving mental conditions or to know the appropriate response necessary to defuse erratic behavior.
- When questioned about possibly arming teachers, an immediate consensus emerged that the proposal is inappropriate. Concerns were voiced that arming teachers may become more of the problem than the solution. As it stands, any effort to allow an armed civilian on campus must be preceded by legislative changes from the California Legislature.

Conclusion

There is no absolute means to prevent a crisis from happening within our County.

As citizens and residents and students we can only trust that those who are charged with the primary responsibilities of protecting and caring for us are properly trained and motivated to do their very best. This trust, however, comes with an obligation on the part of all citizens to periodically review the safeguards that exist for our benefit.

Toward this end, the Jury researched the wide range of laws, policies, procedures, and protocols that are in place to protect us. Further, the Jury considered a significant cross-section of leaders, agencies, and individuals who are entrusted with our children's safety. Additionally, we inspected and observed a cross-section of school facilities within our County which we rely upon to shelter and protect our students.

To document our conclusions from this effort, the Jury compiled observations that span a wide range of topics in support of the following Findings and Recommendations. They are meant to alert the citizens of the County to situations that need to be pursued. It is up to each of us to do our part and to see to it that the responsible individuals and agencies review and enact the changes.

We cannot absolutely prevent a crisis! However, we can improve upon our chances to avoid the unthinkable. Our schools are in relatively good shape. They could be better!

In a recent article from a local newspaper⁷, an official of the NCSOS responsible for ensuring a safe climate within County schools declared, "The number one deterrent to school violence is *relationship*." We ask that we all work together to become an ever-increasing part of that relationship.

⁷ <https://www.theunion.com/news/local-news/in-wake-of-shootings-schools-evolve-to-keep-students-safe/>

Findings

- F1.** With the recent school shootings, it is apparent that parents and guardians, school administrators and staff, law enforcement, and virtually all of the general public are shocked, angry, and dismayed. However, the attention and focus here and across the nation has waned following each and every tragedy and we have made little progress.
- F2.** Effective communication between schools and parents, guardians, and students appears to vary widely among schools. There is limited communication about emergency procedures that involves and informs the parents or guardians and includes older students.
- F3.** During a recent *actual* lockdown response activity several reports indicated substantial confusion between all parties involved, thus creating overreaction, rumors, and some degree of panic that tied up the school phone systems. The difficulty in controlling social media was cited as the chief reason this occurred.
- F4.** The schools visited by the Jury have safety and security plans, emergency response modes, and some level of perimeter surveillance. They exercise their plans on a regular schedule but some are not always fully engaged.
- F5.** In most schools, emergency *secure* communication is somewhat lacking or does not exist between front office and teacher.
- F6.** Some very good efforts have been made to secure classrooms. However, not all classrooms have inside locks or window coverings to prevent observation from the outside. Camera systems are not always present or are inconsistent.
- F7.** Resource Officers are minimal, part time, or non-existent in our schools. Emphasis is placed on the two principal high schools where sworn officers are present.
- F8.** Teacher training on safety and security is mostly confined to “scheduled collaboration” sessions as part of imparting weekly notices, alerts, and business topics. This does not provide enough opportunity to thoroughly instruct the teachers on responsibilities, alternatives, and appropriate methods of dealing with an extreme emergency.
- F9.** Evacuation alarms result in teachers assembling the students outside of the school building in locations that are potentially exposed to possible danger.

Recommendations

- R1** The Nevada County Superintendent of Schools should coordinate with school districts, law enforcement, parents and guardians, and students in the development of a highly summarized parents’ guide on what to do and not do when a lockdown or other emergency happens. This guide should contain uniform instructions that are generic to

all schools. Additionally, each school should add instructions that are site specific to their school location and circumstances and distribute to teachers, parents and guardians, and high school students at the beginning of the year and each semester thereafter.

- R2** The Nevada County Superintendent of Schools should coordinate with school districts, law enforcement, parents and guardians, and students to develop a uniform, workable plan that responds to the appropriate use of social media during actual emergencies and drill exercises.
- R3** The Nevada County Superintendent of Schools should develop the means to train teachers in uniform safety and security protocols and include the exercise and use of the “ALICE” standard in each of the schools. Additionally, each school district’s board should direct and fund the deployment of this training and exercise.
- R4** The Nevada County Superintendent of Schools should coordinate with districts and schools to establish a standard means of *secure* communication between the front office and the teachers, regardless of their location.
- R5** Each district and school should conduct a thorough physical evaluation of classroom security and visibility including inside door locks, appropriate shading, and camera systems. Each school should be required to be in conformance with the physical demands and characteristics of a comprehensive school safety plan.
- R6** The Nevada County Superintendent of Schools, school districts, and local law enforcement should collaborate on the use and deployment of Resource Officers that encompass all of our schools.
- R7** A working group of the Nevada County Superintendent of Schools, the Nevada County Sheriff’s Office, the Grass Valley Police Department, the Nevada City Police Department, Nevada County Behavioral Health (especially concerning behavior of the assailant), and school administration and staff should be created to develop a model program for all schools to utilize when examining and creating their own outside assembly and accounting program.
- R8** Following the creation of a model program for outside assembly and accounting, each school district should direct their schools to exercise this model and, in conjunction with local law enforcement, develop and incorporate the site-specific procedures necessary to conduct a safe and secure school evacuation.

Request for Responses

Pursuant to Penal Code section 933.05, the Nevada County Grand Jury requests responses from the following:

- Nevada County Superintendent of Schools for Recommendations R1, R 2, R 3, R4, R6, and R7 by 6 July 2018.
- Chicago Park School District for Recommendations R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6, and R8 by 5 August 2018.
- Clear Creek School District for Recommendations R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6, and R8 by 5 August 2018.
- Grass Valley School District for Recommendations R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6, and R8 by 5 August 2018.
- Nevada City School District for Recommendations R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6, and R8 by 5 August 2018.
- Nevada Joint Union High School District for Recommendations R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6, and R8 by 5 August 2018.
- Penn Valley Union Elementary School District for Recommendations R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6, and R8 by 5 August 2018.
- Pleasant Ridge Union School District for Recommendations R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6, and R8 by 5 August 2018.
- Twin Ridges School District for Recommendations R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6, and R8 by 5 August 2018.
- Union Hill School District for Recommendations R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6, and R8 by 5 August 2018.
- The Nevada County Sheriff's Office for Recommendations R1, R2, R6, R7, and R8 by 6 July 2018.
- The Grass Valley Police Department for Recommendations R1, R2, R6, R7, and R8 by 6 July 2018.
- The Nevada City Police Department for Recommendations R1, R2, R6, R7, and R8 by 6 July 2018.

- Nevada County Behavioral Health for Recommendation R7 by 5 August 2018.