

## Public Advocacy



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# When the Unthinkable Occurs

In a crisis, parents and the community need more information, not less

### HOW MANY TIMES HAVE YOU

heard — or used — the phrase, “Schools are the safest place for kids”? If you look at federal statistics, that phrase is not far off the mark. However, a different picture emerges when you listen to parents and community members increasingly affected by a series of mass shootings over the past two years.

This spring, just before the 20th anniversary of the Columbine High School shooting, a survey conducted by The Associated Press and the NORC Center at the University of Chicago found only

35 percent of parents feel “very confident” that their child is safe at school. Almost 75 percent of parents of school-age children feel campuses are less safe today than they were in 1999.

That runs counter to federal data, also released in April, that shows violent crime, theft, physical fights, and bullying have decreased in schools since 2001.

Data vs. opinion. Perception vs. reality. Fear vs. fact. If that’s not a communications conundrum, I don’t know what is.

### SCHOOL LEADERS AND TRAUMA

Over the past two decades, I’ve be-

come fascinated by how school leaders deal with crisis, trauma, and disasters, whether natural or man-made. For this magazine, I’ve written stories about reopening schools following the 2011 Joplin, Missouri, tornado; how a New Jersey district dealt with a hazing scandal that led to the cancellation of its highly touted football program; and how schools in Texas began a lengthy recovery process in the wake of Hurricane Harvey.

Last fall, I returned to Santa Fe, Texas, to work on a story in the wake of the school shooting where 10 were killed and 13 were injured in 2018. The town, located only 12 miles from where I grew up, is still reeling from the aftereffects of the shooting and Harvey, which left many of the district’s families displaced.

For that story, I interviewed David Schonfeld, director of the National Center for Crisis and Bereavement, which is based at the University of Southern California. Schonfeld started the center after 9/11 following his work with schools in New York City. He has since worked with numerous districts, including Broward County following the 2018 Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting, and we’ve talked more than once about issues around trauma and grief.

“Communicating effectively is tremendously difficult in these types of situations,” Schonfeld says. “Something like this brings up a lot of controversial issues, and people start taking to social media to express their views in very strong and accusatory ways toward those in leadership positions.”

The reason, he says, is we need to find someone to blame when something goes wrong.

“If you don’t think someone has made a mistake or was incompetent, that means it could happen again, and that’s not acceptable,” he says. “That’s hard for people to sit with, because they

believe someone had to make the very big mistake that allowed something like this to happen.”

When Schonfeld’s team works with schools following a crisis, much of his focus is on messaging. The tendency for districts, he says, is to hunker down and not communicate openly, but that’s the worst thing you can do.

“Parents and the community need more information, not less. You must be as transparent as possible. You must explain what you’re doing and why you’re doing it, over and over and over again. It’s not easy,” he says.

## FALLOUT

While open and honest communication is key, school leaders can’t be afraid to make decisions around issues they know will be controversial, Schonfeld says. While the short-term blowback might be intense, holding your ground can sometimes be a benefit.

“When you’re under attack, you feel like no matter what you do, you can’t make anyone happy. You’re getting conflicting advice from people and feeling overwhelmed. That makes it extremely hard to lead,” Schonfeld says. “But, in these instances, you need to be more transparent, not less. As people feel more and more out of control, they’re going to distrust you.”

As an example, he points to a rural school district where a young child was killed in a school shooting. Batman was the child’s superhero, and his parents opted to bury him in his costume. A Batman impersonator gave the eulogy at the child’s funeral.

Several months later, the Batman impersonator wanted to provide anti-bullying lessons in the school. “The parents really wanted it. The schools didn’t want it,” Schonfeld says. “It was just too close. The staff just did not want that to occur.”

The schools called in Schonfeld at the height of the controversy. His advice: “If you don’t want him there, just say no.”

“These types of things happen all the time,” he says. “It’s easy, when you’re dealing with something like this, to become overwhelmed and not know what to do. We tend to look at just the event, not at all of the other things that occur afterwards and base our decisions through that prism.”

## NO GOING BACK

When — not if — a crisis occurs in your school district, you must be prepared for the long slog of moving forward. Communicating as openly as legally possible throughout the process, while it may be painful at times, is the best way to reestablish trust.

“When I meet with the board and superintendent, the first thing I tell them is, ‘No matter what you do, it’s not going to be OK. This will not go smoothly. People will be upset. Kids are not going to learn as well for a period of time. Teachers will have trouble teaching. There are all of these challenges that you will have to work through.’”

Schonfeld says he is often asked, “When are we going to go back to the way we were?” The answer, he notes, is inevitably disappointing.

“You’re not,” he says. “You can’t go back in time. You can only go forward, so going back shouldn’t be a goal. Some people will emerge with new skills if they get enough support for long enough and have the internal resiliency and capacity to cope. They will be able to cope with future adversity with more empathy, even spirituality, with a greater sense of purpose.”

That noted, he says, when someone is going through significant stress or trauma, you “shouldn’t predict that they’re permanently damaged. Telling people to

have the expectation that they’ll never be OK is not helpful,” he says. “We talk about how these communities are affected by these life-changing experiences and they are.

“We should never forget these experiences, and we don’t just ignore them or the effect they have on people. But it doesn’t mean people are permanently damaged. It just means their life circumstances are different.”



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