

Chapter 3

Fear vs. Threat, School Shootings and Violence: An Administrative Response

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ABSTRACT

The first recorded school shooting took place in Charlottesville, Virginia on November 12, 1840. The most recent school shooting took place on July 11, 2019 in Hartford, Connecticut. Over 500 school shootings have taken place since the Charlottesville incident. Sadly, school shootings are not an anomaly to many communities in America. Administrators, and particularly principals, are faced with significant challenges in creating an environment that is conducive to the development of a productive and safe school culture. The content of this manuscript will explore the existing administrative roles and responsibilities with respect to school safety and the implementation and supervision of those procedures. Also discussed in the manuscript will be the role that fear plays in the decision making process and how some decisions may be misplaced and could be redirected toward more favorable areas of emphasis (i.e., counseling, active supervision, alternative academic options, community outreach, and inclusive student opportunities).

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AN ADMINISTRATOR'S STORY

It was a late January morning when I decided to go for a run. The school semester was nearing an end and I was preparing to return to my campus after a semester of sabbatical. I had been finishing up my doctoral requirements, one of which required me to spend one semester as a resident student at the University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, a long way from California.

I started the run from my house, and was planning to take a course along the levy for about two miles and then deviate off the levy to West Lane Racquet Club. As I started my run, I noticed a number of police cars and ambulances racing down Pacific Avenue, a street not more than a block from my house. I noticed immediately that the sirens were ending, and the police cars were making turns very near the direction that I was running. I decided to make a detour and head in the direction of all of the commotion. I soon realized that the commotion was coming from a school not four blocks from my home. The school was Cleveland Elementary.

When I approached the school, I paused near a huge oak tree that was growing in the middle of the street near the school. I knew the area really well as I had grown up less than a mile from that neighborhood. It was a really quiet area with tidy little homes that were located less than three blocks from the University of the Pacific. As I approached the school, I was overwhelmed by the sight of first responders and police officers. I immediately noticed a fire engine spraying water on a vehicle on the other side of the campus. I knew immediately that something terrible had happened. A number of neighborhood residents were standing next to the fence overlooking the school. I approached a man who was obviously distraught and asked him what had happened. He told me that somebody had just shot a bunch of kids on the playground. The terror and the panic were something that I will never forget. People running, screaming and trying to comfort one another at the same time. The first mass school shooting had just taken place and, unfortunately, I was there, Thursday, January 17th, 1989, Stockton California (Personal notes, S. Benigno, August 20, 2018)

INTRODUCTION

School shootings and school violence are not an anomaly in the United States. Over the last 100 years there have been too many incidents to count. The recent school shootings in Florida and Texas combined with the atrocities in Las Vegas, the mass shooting at the church in Sutherland Springs, Texas, and the recent synagogue shootings in Pennsylvania and California have caused a frenzy of concern with public

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