

**The Bill Blackwood
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas**

Securing the American Elementary School

**A Leadership White Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
Required for Graduation from the
Leadership Command College**

**By
D.M. Hampton**

**Sherman Police Department
Sherman, Texas
February 2014**

ABSTRACT

The American school campus, originally thought of as secure learning environment for students, has become a dangerous place. Most cities across the United States has police officers in the schools, however most are assigned to the middle and high schools. The American elementary school has been left out of this valuable and much needed resource. Everyone who has kids in the public school system has a vested interest in keeping the campus a safe and secure learning environment. School districts should afford elementary schools with the same security measures provided to the middle and high schools. Information on this topic was gathered from journals, articles and the internet.

One of the major issues is that elementary schools provide a “soft target” for future terrorist attacks. Workplace violence, upset parents, and sexual predators also are a source of danger to the elementary school campus. Bullying on elementary school campuses can lead to violent outbreaks by the person being bullied. To truly care about the education, safety and security of the American elementary school means that school districts need to provide police officers on the elementary school campuses of America. It needs to become a priority now before it is too late.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract	
Introduction	1
Position	2
Counter Position	6
Conclusion	9
References	11

INTRODUCTION

The world is a dangerous place. This is especially true of the American schools. The American school campus is no stranger to its share of danger and violence. The American school is now the subject of many studies on the effects of bullying, drugs, and weapons. This problem will only get worse as the years pass by. The students, teachers and faculty are under constant threat of violence erupting in the matter of moments. A few moments of violence on a school campus can amount to a tragic cost in lives. It will get much media attention for weeks, months, and years afterward. The mere mention of the name of Jonesboro, Arkansas and Littleton, Colorado will forever change how people view security at school campuses.

On March 24, 1998 at Westside Middle School, in Jonesboro, Arkansas, Mitchell Johnson and Andrew Golden opened fire on classmates as they filed out of the school because of a fire alarm. Five people were killed and ten more wounded during this incident. On April 20, 1999, Columbine High School in Littleton Colorado was the sight of one of the most violent incidences of school violence. The suspects, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, killed 13 and wounded 21 others before killing themselves.

These two incidents are a constant reminder that better security in schools is needed. No one wants to send there child to school without knowing they are going to be as safe as possible. There seems to be a problem with where this security is targeted. The incident at Jonesboro, Arkansas occurred at a middle school. The Littleton, Colorado incident occurred at a high school. Today's security measures seem to solely concentrate on the middle and high school campuses.

School districts should afford elementary schools with the same security measures provided to the middle and high schools. Most elementary schools are not afforded these measures, yet they are the most vulnerable. The ages of the students in the elementary schools range four to nine. An unsecured elementary school campus makes a good “soft target” for terrorist activity. Elementary schools can be the place for other acts of violence, such as custody battles, workplace violence, and sexual predators. They still contain everyday issues of bullying, weapons, and drugs on campus.

POSITION

Students that attend elementary schools primarily range from 5-10 years old. This fact alone makes them a better target since they are more trusting and usually not able to defend themselves. In Lewisville, Texas, a 9 year old girl was taken off campus by a 22 year old professional magician. The suspect, Daniel Reyes, was a former student at the elementary school and was familiar with the staff. On the day that Reyes abducted the student, he had showed up unannounced. Reyes put on an end of the year magic show for the elementary school students. The 9 year old victim was taken to the suspect’s parent’s home and asked to perform sexual favors (Dennis, Goolsby, & Fox, 2008). This one example shows how trusting children in the elementary school are with people that they know. Even if the victim realized that she was in a bad situation, she could have been easily overpowered by the older suspect.

Another threat that looms over the American school is that of Islamic terrorist activity. There has been evidence found in Iran that suggests several states have been targeted for these attacks. One recommendation is that officers go through a mock

scenario for training. Any school in the United States is a potential target for terrorist activity (Davis & Walker, 2005). The American schools present what is known as a “soft target” to those countries who view the United States as their enemy.

A “soft target” is a facility or location that is difficult to secure because of its widespread use of the public. The facility or location needs to be easily accessible without encumbering those people using it. These places usually have a high concentration of people. One of ways to help with these “soft targets” is to increase police or patrols around the area (Hanson, 2005). Instead of just having an officer pull around to all the schools in a patrol car, it would be beneficial to have an officer assigned to the school. Recently, the United States has seen “soft targets” hit overseas. The terrorist is no longer thinking about hitting military type targets; they are going for the less guarded. This has made it necessary to plan for this contingency by making out lists of “soft targets”. One of the “soft targets” that comes out of that list is schools (McCreight, 2007). Providing that police officer in the elementary school can help the school look less like a “soft target” since someone is there that would fight back.

There are external dangerous situations that can arise in the elementary school. There is workplace violence, upset parents, and sexual predators. These incidents can happen at any campus within a cities school district. In February of 2010, special education teacher, Jennifer Paulson was shot and killed outside Birney Elementary School in Tacoma, Washington. The suspect, Jed Waits, had arrived two hours before the teacher arrived with a co-worker. Jennifer had recently obtained an anti-harassment order against Jed (Washington, 2010). There were no children present or injured at the

time of the incident. It is easy to see how situation could have spilled over into the school if the suspect had arrived later.

The school system can also come under “attack” from angry parents. This rage can come from a student being disciplined too harshly or not being treated fairly by a teacher. Chief Jim Kelly of the Palm Beach County Florida stated that police are being called more and more to the elementary schools because of upset parents: “Parents are becoming a major issue in the schools—just like road rage, you get parents coming in who have a lot of anger” (as cited in Toppo, 2003, p. 2). Parents that get upset can start off angry and become assaultive toward the principals, teachers, and staff. They can also take out their anger on a child who they view as the reason their child got in trouble.

There are people in society that are of great danger to elementary school kids. They are what people refer to as “perverts and child molesters.” Many of these criminals that have been caught are required to register as a sex offender. Sex offenders pose a real threat to the safety of children on a school campus. To keep sex offenders from getting into the schools, some campuses have a driver’s license scanner that search the person’s name against sex offender data bases. Without proper security measures, a registered sex offender could make his way onto campus and exploit the students.

For as many external threats as there are to student’s safety, there are just as many internal threats. There has always been bullying going on at school. Students have also been known to bring weapons and drugs to school with them. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (Dinkes, Kemp, Baum, & Snyder, 2009) found

that “Student bullying is one of the most frequently reported discipline problems at school” (para. 1). According to their statistics, 21% of elementary schools, 43% of middle schools, and 22% of high schools reported instances of bullying. This information was obtained by the principal or the person with the most knowledge of crime in the school (Dinkes et al., 2009). The percentage may be higher since most of bullying activity goes unreported. It is not reported because most of the time the victim feels this will escalate the violence toward them.

Bullying is critical to deal with at the elementary school age. Both the victim and the bully can have adverse psychological effects. This creates an escalation in violence by the bully and can result in the victim lashing back in a violent way. The victim and the bully become “time bombs” for this violence as they are exposed to it more. The longer it is left unresolved the more aggressive this violence can become as the bully and victim move into the teenage years. The use of school resource officers can help combat this problem (Kranich, 2005).

Bullying encompasses acts such as intimidation, physical aggression, and harassment. All of these acts cause an elevated fear of the student placed in that situation. Public humiliation and rumors spread to other students can be considered bullying as well (Juvonen, 2001). Students become isolated as the bullying continues.

There is also the problem with elementary students bringing weapons to school. Federal figures show that 3,523 students were expelled for bringing a gun to school. Of those students, one in ten was in elementary school (Toppo, 2003). A teacher’s assistant at Leila G. Davis Elementary School in St. Petersburg, Florida found an unloaded .22 caliber pistol in the backpack of a six year old kindergartener. The child,

who lives with his grandparents, had taken the weapon from a container in his grandparent's bedroom. The child claimed that he had only brought the gun to show his friends, and did not want to harm anyone (Abel, 2008). This weapon could have easily been loaded and used at that campus had the 6 year old wanted to hurt someone. If the weapon had been already loaded it could have been accidentally discharged by the student that brought it. Even without the intent of harming other students at school, there could have been tragic consequences of someone being seriously injured or killed.

COUNTER POSITION

There are critiques that are opposed to using law enforcement officers in the elementary schools. Most of the controversy comes from the fact that to place an officer in an elementary school will be costly and the officers can be better used patrolling the city. The opposition also takes the stance that placing officers in the elementary schools will make it feel more like a prison than a place of learning.

In Philadelphia, no school was going to be without an officer starting in September of 2004. Officers had been stationed at middle schools, high schools, and some elementary schools. The decision was made to expand coverage to 40 elementary schools, and 18 kindergartens through eighth grade. The expansion of the coverage was going to cost about \$3 million dollars (Snyder, 2004). In Garland, Texas, the City Council approved a tax rate increase after voting to reassign nine school officers back to patrol duties. The decision was made mainly because the belief was that having officers on the streets was more critical than having them in the school (Anderson, 2005).

The belief that it is too costly may be a valid argument in a more rural community that has a tighter budget when it comes to allocating funds to get a police officer assigned to an elementary school. However, there are alternatives to cities and school districts funding this endeavor. There are federal grants available to pay the expenses.

Last year, the U.S. Department of Justice awarded Tarpon Springs Police Department with a \$125,000 grant to hire an officer. This officer was to assist with traffic, student crime, and education in three elementary schools. The grant covered the salary of the officer and his benefits. It required Tarpon Springs to pay for a fourth year (Koch, 2005). This is one example of a grant issued by the federal government to place an officer in an elementary school.

In most instances, the school districts are paying for at least half of the officer's salary. This shares the cost between the school district and the city thereby making it more cost effective for both entities. It would allow both entities to more effectively balance their respective budgets and make the proposal of a shared cost more palatable to the citizens, city and school leaders.

Another alternative to the cost is to provide at least one officer for several elementary schools. The officer would split there time up between the assigned schools. The cost would be for just one officer instead of three. In Toronto Canada, they are planning to assign every uniformed officer in the division to one elementary school and one secondary school. The plan is for that officer to visit the assigned school at least twice during each shift. They are expected to build a rapport by walking the halls and communicating directly with the students. This will allow the students to talk to the officers about any concerns they have such as bullying (Abbate, 2002). In

this way more information will be shared with the officer by the students. The effect will be a safer learning environment.

Another concern is that the officers working in the schools would be better left for cities to utilize as patrol officers. This would allow better coverage for the city instead of assigning officers to every school. In Garland, nine officers were pulled out of the elementary schools and placed back on patrol. This decision was made because of understaffing of the police department and the inability to hire enough officers for patrol. Garland Independent School District paid for half of the officer's salary. They also may lose a federal anti-gang grant because of the move (Abshire, 2005).

Another argument against police officers in the elementary schools is that they will be viewed as prisons instead places of learning. Winchester (2005) reported that Florida police officers arrested a 5-year-old and used handcuffs on the kindergartner. This incident drew global attention because it raised questions as to the methods and used by officers when they deal with children. In St. Petersburg, Florida, where this took place, the Chief of Police stated that "he wanted his officers out of the elementary schools unless students were armed or considered violent" (Winchester, 2005, para. 8). Additionally, a school administrator informed principals that he thought officers should not be called "to discipline elementary students except in dire situations" (Winchester, 2005, para. 8).

Another critique for having officers on campus is that some students will not perceive the police officer on campus as a friend or defender. The uniformed officer can create a climate of suspicion among the students, thereby having an undesirable effect at the school (Juvonen, 2010). However, the police officer assigned to an

elementary school does more than provide security. They are also there to teach and provide a positive role model for the students. Officer Mike Kazouris of the Tarpon Springs Police Department teaches at the Sunset Hills Elementary School. He teaches the children about stranger danger and about appropriate and inappropriate touching. He helps with planning the schools crisis plans and actively attends Parent Teacher Association meetings. He also attends schools functions such as skating parties (Koch, 2005). Officers in the elementary schools provide the opportunity for the children to get acclimated to officers. They have the ability to see them as a person and begin building trust of police officers in general.

CONCLUSION

The protection of school campuses is of utmost importance in today's dangerous climate. Too often the elementary school is overlooked when it comes to supplying security measures. The elementary school is the most often overlooked when it comes to security planning. The ages of the kids make it a prime target for people who want someone that is trusting and will not fight back or protect themselves. Furthermore the threat of Islamic terrorist's attacks is real. The elementary schools provide a "soft target" nationwide for attacks to be carried out against American children. A coordinated strike could be carried out with devastating results and mass casualties.

Elementary schools face threats of workplace violence, where an upset worker or spouse can bring acts of violence to the school grounds. Upset parents can cause a climate of disruption that can lead to violence in the school. Sexual predators are also prevalent in the communities and may target elementary school age children and the campuses that they attend.

There are also internal threats of concern to elementary schools. Bullying is a real problem in today's society. It can breed escalated violence acts from both the victim and the bully if allowed to continue. Elementary students' bringing weapons and drugs onto the campus is a real threat to the safety of the student, faculty and staff.

Placing an officer in the elementary schools can help in protecting and eliminating some of these problems. The opposition will say that it is too costly to provide. However there are grants that can be awarded. If the expense is too much to cover all elementary schools, then one officer could be assigned to several elementary schools and rotate between them. There are also other programs that place volunteers or dads in the schools that could help with the safety and security of the students.

The presence of an officer may make some feel like the school is being turned into a prison, instead of a place of education. The fact of the matter is that officers in the elementary schools provide an opportunity for students get acclimated to officers. In turn they will establish a rapport with the officer and may be more willing to tell the officer about their concerns. The officers will be more approachable and able to get information about criminal activities on campus. This will only make the campus that much safer.

Children are the future of our country and a valuable asset. School districts, law enforcement, and the community need to provide the safest learning environment for the elementary schools. One way that it can be done is to provide an officer on campus for the elementary schools.

REFERENCES

- Abbate, G. (2002, May 17). Board head wants to see more police in schools. *Toronto News*, A18.
- Abel, J. (2008, October 25). Child brings gun to school. *Clearwater Times*, 1.
- Abshire, R. (2005, May 26). Elementaries may lose 9 officers proposed transfers to patrol faulted by some on council. *The Dallas Morning News*, 1R.
- Anderson, K. (2005, September 8). Police to be pulled from schools garland: council oks reassigning 9 resource officers, raising tax rate. *The Dallas Morning News*, 1B.
- Davis, D. W., & Walker, J.R. (2005). Protecting the innocent: Are our nation's schools prepared for terrorism on campus? *Campus Law Enforcement Journal*, 35(1), 25, 27-37.
- Dennis, D., Goolsby, K. A., & Fox, L. (2008, January 18). School security questioned after girl taken. *Dallas Morning News*, 1A.
- Dinkes, R., Kemp, J., Baum, K. & Snyder, T. (2009, December). *Indicators of school crime and safety- 2009* (NCES 2010-012, NCJ 228478). Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2010/2010012.pdf>
- Hanson, D. (2005). What's next--soft target attacks. *Law Enforcement Technology*, 32(8), 18, 20, 22-24, 26-27.
- Juvonen, J. (2001). School violence prevalence, fears, and prevention. Retrieved from http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/issue_papers/2006/IP219.pdf
- Koch, N. (2005, February 5). Officer's job is elementary. *North Pinellas Times*, 1.

Kranich, D. (2005). Creating a new climate for kids. *Law Enforcement Technology*, 32(9), 170, 172, 178.

McCreight, R. (2007). Soft targets in your backyard: Building our hometown readiness. *Homeland Defense Journal*, 5(10), 30, 32-34.

Snyder, S. (2004, July 15). Police will cover all Phila. schools. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, A13.

Toppo, G. (2003, January 12). School violence hits lower grades. *USA Today*.
Retrieved from http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/nation/2003-01-12-school-violence-usat_x.htm

Washington, S. M. (2010, February 27). Teacher shot dead- stalker gunned down by police. *The Sunday Mail*, 41.

Winchester, D. (2005, August 22). Spread thin, Pinellas schools police face daunting task. *St. Petersburg Times (Florida)*, 1B.