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EDUCATION

Preventing campus violence: it's critical to connect the dots

By Joseph DiSalvo

Virginia Tech ... Columbine ... Arkansas ... What horrendous school massacre is next? Can schools and their administrators prevent the pathological anger of their students who are hell-bent on committing violent acts of aggression? Absolutely, we can and we must. Now more than ever. However, it will need to be a team effort.

We must commence this critical mission by paying careful attention to the literature on the prevention of violence. If we do so, we can make these incomprehensible events a thing of the past. With or without gun control, the adults working with students could significantly reduce the likelihood of another Virginia Tech, although it would probably be easier with the purposeful control of semiautomatic handguns (since this is an education column, this issue is for someone else to address).

One thing for sure is the professional faculty and staff of all schools must understand and be aware of risk factors and warning signs of potential violence, such as student isolation, depression and disturbing writings.

Here is what the experts tell us: School shooters in most cases have been bullied by their peers and have told people in a variety of ways what they plan on doing, and sometimes in graphic terms just prior to the act of violent aggression. Therefore, all schools (kindergarten through college) must teach students that when they hear something, see something, read something threatening and potentially calamitous they must say something.

Then the person(s) they tell must take the threat seriously and to the next level. In the case of Virginia Tech's shooter, Cho Seung-Hui, 23, he was bullied in high school; he wrote violent phrases from songs on his dorm room wall just days before the murders; he was assessed for mental illness and deemed potentially harmful to himself and others, and he stalked some of his female college peers. One bold professor took him aside to mentor him one

on one because other students would not come to class with the weird, violent and anti-social behavior that Seung-Hui exhibited through his writings.

Did anyone connect all the dots? It is very troubling to say that the dots were not connected in Virginia. Why?

The authorities of any school system must connect the dots and turn their suspicions over to a team of experts to analyze the data and appropriate next steps to ameliorate the growing potential for violence. These experts should come from the local institutions of psychiatry and psychology in hospitals, private practice or universities. School administrators do not have the expertise to assess the legitimacy or non-legitimacy of student threats. The experts in their field do.

There is a plethora of outstanding research on the prevention of school violence. Someone I met several years ago as principal of Russell Middle School in Milpitas is Dennis Embry. He was the recipient of the 2006 Science to Practice Award from the Society of Prevention Research. Embry is a developmental and child psychologist who works with states, schools and communities to develop programs to prevent and reduce violence. He created the PeaceBuilder violence-prevention program for elementary and middle schools.

A fascinating finding in his research indicates that violence and substance abuse are as much interpersonal events as biochemical-physiological events in the brain's neurochemistry. He points out the need for young adolescents to receive praise. Unfortunately, young adolescents are often victims of bullying and ridicule. Those adolescents who are high-risk for aggression in their behavior need high levels of praise for attention to task and academic productivity by school staff and teachers, according to Embry's violence-prevention research.

In fact, he posits that when children feel valued and praised, they have an increased production of serotonin, a neurotransmitter in the brain. Another way to increase low levels of serotonin is through artificial means like Prozac. Authentic praise works as well. Schools should find more ways to praise and value all their students. Cho Seung-Hui was tormented in high school by bullies who made fun of the way he spoke, as well as his Asian heritage.

This type of humiliation is cumulative and leads to rage in many cases. Schools must have anti-bullying programs in place to address these harmful behaviors by students. An overall positive school climate can have a mitigating effect on anti-social behavior.

In California we have the benefit of invoking an involuntary hold for up to 72 hours for children or adults who are deemed to be dangerous to themselves or others. This involuntary confinement can be issued by a peace officer or clinician only. School administrators and/or counselors must have a working relationship with the police or county clinicians to provide this type of hold and evaluation for high-risk students exhibiting potentially violent behavior.

We cannot be afraid to use this tool. During this hold, if deemed valid, the person confined will be reviewed for mental health by a psychiatrist.

In summary, all schools in Silicon Valley and beyond must work to:

- * create positive learning environments while building strong relationships from adults to students;
- * reduce incidents of bullying;
- * increase opportunities for praise;
- * collaborate with mental health experts as part of a new team to evaluate high-risk aggressive or violent students;
- * connect all dots relative to potential violent offenders including awareness

of risk factors;

* train all students to report anti-social and potentially violent behavior.

Our children deserve to live in peace, especially while attending school. Embry's research is vital to our full and complete understanding of violence prevention in schools. If Cho Seung-Hui received praise instead of ridicule in middle and high school, would his rage have been ameliorated enough to prevent these senseless murders of his fellow Hokies?

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