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## School Safety in a Seeming Age of Rage

By Laurie Snyder

Following news of the Dec. 14 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in affluent Newtown, Conn. - a town demographically similar to Lamorinda - many area parents began paying more attention to the design of buildings, pondering security issues as they queued for frenetic holiday concert drop offs and after school pickups.

Sandy Hook had solid security protocols in place - a veritable fortress, some thought, because it was locked down for the school day every morning by 9:30 a.m. - yet a gunman was still able to enter. Lamorinda schools might be even less secure, it's reasoned, because many local buildings employ the open campus design so common across California.

Last week's incident involving at least two female students at Freedom High School in Oakley serves as a reminder that it's not always intruders who pose a threat to student safety. In the Freedom case, a girl was hospitalized Jan. 24 with a concussion resulting from a fight with another student (or students). The victim and her alleged assailant reportedly bumped into each other in a hallway the day before. One of the girls then used social media to express anger over the incident, sparking an online battle. Rather than tempers cooling overnight, the flames appear to have been fanned by way of Instagram.

### Keeping Kids Safe

The Superintendent of the Orinda Union School District, Dr. Joe Jaconette, said that he and his OUSD staff think constantly about protecting the children in their charge. "We actually started a review of our safety plans and our school site safety a few months before the Connecticut tragedy."

John Nickerson, Ed.D., superintendent of the Acalanes Union High School District, reported that AUHSD also "started a major revision last June to incorporate our new bullying policies into the comprehensive safety plan" with enhanced staff training. This assessment will also analyze intruder response. "Each school practices procedures every year through drills. It is my understanding that all local districts collaborate with public safety agencies in their planning and drills, as we do."

With open campuses, said Nickerson, "we depend on staff diligence and student reports to monitor for outsiders on campus. Additionally, each campus has a campus supervisor who effectively monitors the campus for 'strangers.'" Jaconette brought in "experts who could walk our sites and give us their opinion." By the time Newtown happened, the Orinda Police had already analyzed three schools with two more to go, their report slated for delivery in January. Post-Newtown, OUSD assessed "specifically for that aspect of safety related to intruders." Police retrained the administration team and principals; staff drilled on intruder response Jan. 28.

One key difference is already known. While school visitors often must wear badges after signing in at Lamorinda school offices, many buildings lock down only when a threat is perceived. "If an intruder or stranger is reported ... or if there is reason to believe that a dangerous person could be on campus (i.e., an armed robbery in a nearby neighborhood)," said Nickerson, "a lockdown is called ... (students/staff inside, doors locked, window coverings drawn, lights out, silence)." Redundant systems enable staff "to communicate status during the lockdown." Additionally, multiple buildings have outside-locking classroom doors; many will switch to locks that can be secured from the inside. OUSD is moving quickly but there is "an expense and time element," said Jaconette. AUSHD is "evaluating options" with a decision "made in the coming months." Lafayette hopes it will take less than \$60,000 to upgrade all four elementary buildings plus one middle school.

Orinda, Moraga, and Lafayette districts are also collaborating with the Contra Costa County Child Abuse Prevention Council to fund a "child safety coordinator" to teach students how to prevent bullying, child abuse, and sexual harassment.

In contrast, Orinda's private Holden High School is different, serving a student body of just 40, said Admissions Director Kristin Lamoureux. "We're kind of a special case because we're so tiny; we reside in the basement of a church. We're not a big school that needs to have metal detectors or a security guard." They do have strict anti-bullying protocols. "Kids will tell you it's a very safe school," she said. "We put a lot of emphasis on how to treat people and respectful communication."

OUSD, AUHSD, and Holden all offer counseling services. "We are fortunate," said Nickerson, "to maintain counselors at under 350 to 1. Each school also has a school psychologist and an intervention specialist, who provide support for students with emotional disturbances or mental health challenges." OUSD employs psychologists and cooperates when parents need outside help. Holden gives all students 30 minutes of adult mentoring each week to talk about anything on their minds.

Each child needs a "go-to person that he can trust," Lamoureux said. Kids rely too often on peers when what they really need is "a sounding board," someone who has seen enough of life to be able to offer perspective. But taking on this role can be difficult - especially for parents of teens. When kids are feeling badly, she said, they just need to let it out - with someone who won't judge them. Studies show that it's often a single connection that makes the difference.

A trained therapist and mom herself, Lamoureux also urges parents to monitor their kids' social media accounts - and to talk regularly with teachers to find out what they see happening in class. (See also: [www.lamorindaweekly.com/archive/issue0605/Managing-Your-Childs-Reputation-in-the-Digital-Age.html](http://www.lamorindaweekly.com/archive/issue0605/Managing-Your-Childs-Reputation-in-the-Digital-Age.html))

All three also reminded readers that school shooting, while distressing, are rare. "Obviously when they happen,

they capture our deepest fears and sympathies," said Jaconette. "We go about living our daily lives knowing that there is a degree of vulnerability, but it's rare."

#### Help Keep Kids and Communities Safe

Several workshops on school safety and bullying are being offered in the coming month. For information, see our "Not to be Missed" section on pages B10-11. Additional informative websites include:

Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence: [www.bradycampaign.org](http://www.bradycampaign.org)

California Safe Schools Coalition: [www.casafeschools.org](http://www.casafeschools.org)

Protect Children Not Guns, Children's Defense Fund: [www.childrensdefense.org/child-research-data-publications/data/protect-children-not-guns-2010-report.pdf](http://www.childrensdefense.org/child-research-data-publications/data/protect-children-not-guns-2010-report.pdf)

Stopybullying.gov: [www.stopbullying.gov](http://www.stopbullying.gov)

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