The Security of Virginia's Public Schools

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Introduction: In the past decade, school shootings and stories about guns in schools have thrust the issue of school security into the forefront of public concern. Moreover, despite evidence that school-based violence has declined, there is a pervading sense that our schools have never been as vulnerable to violence as they are today. This, I believe, is a consequence of post-9/11 anxiety, media focus on "guns-in-school" incidents, and citizen worry from events such as the terrorist attack that killed 134 middle-school students in Belsan, Russia. It may also stem from a lack of knowledge about the policies and programs that affect school security. This article attempts to rectify the latter with regard to schools in Virginia.

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For this article, school security is defined as the level of safety produced by the policies, programs and activities that are used to prevent or limit school-based inter-personal violence and/or criminal behavior. It does not concern the security issues attendant to the prevention of personal injury or the prevention of alcohol or substance abuse.

To begin, comfort can be taken from the fact that, in the past eight years, there has been a gradual, movement to improve the security of Virginia schools. The movement began in October 1998, when Governor Jim Gilmore, responding to school shootings in Mississippi, Arkansas and Oregon, reallocated federal funds to increase the presence of uniformed law enforcement officers, that is School Resource Officers (SROs), in Virginia middle and high schools. The 1999 General Assembly contributed state revenue to this endeavor and increased their SRO allocation following the massacre at Colombine High School in April 2000. From this time onward, if somewhat sporadically, there has been a profusion of federal, state and local initiatives on school security.

Greater concentration on school security

Implementation of the movement has been the work of personnel from the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE), the Department of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS), the 134 school divisions, police departments, county sheriffs' offices and the juvenile courts. Much of its creative energy, however, has come from staff of the Virginia Center for School Safety (VCSS), an entity within DCJS that was created by the General Assembly in 2000. Funding has come from federal grants, the General Assembly, and state and local agency budgets.

Basic Components of School Security

There are four basic components of school security:

- **Site Hardening.** Site hardening is the process of designing and equipping school-related buildings, athletic fields, parking lots and other venues so they minimize the opportunity for criminal activity and violence. It includes such considerations as line of sight hallways/stairwells, abundant indoor/outdoor lighting, elimination of hiding spaces, secure doors and windows, and the use of surveillance cameras and two-way, office-to-classroom communication. Site hardening also involves policies and signage that control visitor and student movement, restricts entry to buildings and rooms, and safeguards the critical components of building operation (heating, cooling, electrical service, water service, etc.).

- **Security Personnel.** This is the use of School Resource Officers (sworn, uniformed police officers or sheriff's deputies) and School Security Officers (non-sworn, mostly uniformed employees of local school divisions). These officers work with school personnel, juvenile court officials and others to improve school safety.

- **Violence Prevention.** This entails the school-level policies, procedures and programs that are designed to minimize violence and other anti-social behavior. They include codes of conduct, disciplinary procedures, crisis management planning, and programs that train staff and students about conflict resolution, bully prevention, anger management, social and civic values, drug and gang awareness, etc.

- **Intervention.** These are the programs and procedures that identify students "at risk" of committing violence or criminal acts and intervene in ways to prevent these students from continuing or escalating this behavior. Such programs involve truancy prevention, psychological counseling, in-school detention, assignment to "alternative schools" and after-school mentoring and recreation.

This article explains why these components have become stronger in Virginia in the past eight years.

Site Hardening

The degree to which Virginia school buildings, athletic venues, parking lots, etc. are designed, equipped, and programmed to prevent or contain criminal activity is unknown. There is no database cataloging the design flaws, hardware limitations or access control problems of Virginia schools. The creation of such a database, however, is part of a VCSS plan to implement a standardized yet flexible method for conducting school safety audits at all primary and secondary schools.

In 1997, the General Assembly ordered Virginia's 134 school divisions to conduct formal reviews or audits that assess "…safety conditions in each public school…and, if necessary, develop solutions for physical safety concerns, including building security issues.…" VDOE responded by creating audit guidelines and these, along with additional legislation, created an annual audit process whereby, in nearly all school divisions:

- the local school superintendent assembles a safety audit team;

- team members review security-related documents at each school in the division (code of conduct, visitor access, key control, crisis management, etc.) and schedule one-day visits that include a visual assessment of each school's buildings and grounds;

- two or three team members rate each school on a detailed, DOE-created checklist of optimal safety conditions, policies and procedures, while others conduct security and safety interviews with school administrative staff and selected teachers and students, and

- the team prepares an audit report for each school that includes recommendations, and files these reports with the school principals and the superintendent.

As this process developed, heightened public interest and new legislation called for it to become more standardized and more useful to state officials. At issue was the fact that the original legislation established audits but did not

create a mechanism by which audit information was made public. VDOE was not required to collect audit reports or summarize audit findings. As concern about school safety grew, however, the General Assembly took action. In 2000, it created the Virginia Center for School Safety (VCSS) and charged it with the responsibility for collecting, analyzing and disseminating audit information. In the 2001 session, it required school divisions to submit their audits directly to VCSS.

To work out their separate yet interdependent mandates regarding safety audits, VDOE and DCJS officials formed a VDOE/VCSS Safety Audit Task Force. The group met in May 2002, identified the weaknesses of the audit process, cited the need for a uniform reporting format and called on the DCJS Research Center to review audit practices. Consequently, in early 2003, school superintendents and principals were requested to submit their latest audit reports and supplemental materials to VCSS. A total of 1,624 schools out of 2,033 primary and secondary schools responded.

The subsequent study found a disconcerting degree of variation in the conduct and reporting of audits and called for a standardized process that would produce information of greater utility. The VCSS and Research Center staff, in consultation with VDOE officials, are currently designing a new audit system and will begin testing it in spring 2005. Though the development, implementation, and refinement of this system will take several years, one of its by-products will

be a database by which school site hardening efforts can be assessed.

Meanwhile, there is evidence that site hardening is already a concern of local authorities. A study of 2,231 recommendations from the safety audits found that 46% were directed toward the improvement of site hardening. Forty-eight percent of the latter recommended greater physical deterrence (e.g. the installation of secure doors and locks, fencing, external lighting, security alarms, etc.) and 52% were CPTED (Crime Prevention through Environmental Design) recommendations that advance site hardening by controlling human movement or making this movement more visible. The CPTED recommendations called for staff, student and visitor identification systems, the installation of security cameras, "no trespassing" or "restricted access" signs, the removal of shrubs and other obstacles to line-of-site visibility, and classroom to office phone systems.

More evidence of site hardening was found in a review of SRO quarterly activity reports. Fifty-five percent of the SROs who submitted quarterly reports between fall 1999 and spring 2002 said they had applied CPTED principles to improve school security.

Security Personnel

The order and security of Virginia schools has typically been the responsibility of administrators, teachers and staff, and, in some school divisions, school security guards hired by local

Table 1: Differences between ROs and SSOs

Characteristic	School Resource Officer (SRO)	School Security Officer (SSO)
Employer:	Local Police Department or Sheriff's Office	Local School Board
Uniform:	Local Police Officer or Sheriff's Deputy uniform	Optional but most wear school division SSO uniform
Weapons:	Carries gun, baton and pepper spray	No gun; baton rarely
Legal Authority:	May detain, arrest and charge persons for violating the Code of Virginia if "probable cause" exists.	May detain persons for violating the Code or the security policies of the local school board if there is "reasonable suspicion."
Responsibilities:	Provides security and crime prevention advice to staff, enforces the Code of Virginia, instructs law-related classes, serves as role model for students, provides liaison to community public safety agencies.	Maintains security and promotes crime prevention. Other related duties as assigned by the school.
Mission:	Represent and protect the interests of the Commonwealth yet honor local Memoranda of Understanding that guide the interplay of law enforcement and school officials.	Serve, as do other school officials "in loco parentis," that is, as guarantors of the safety and welfare of the students (and other staff).

school boards. The presence of uniformed law enforcement officers is a relatively new phenomenon, but one that increased rapidly since 1999. Today Virginia schools receive officers or deputies who serve as School Resource Officers (SROs), Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE) Officers, Gang Resistance Education and Training (GREAT) Officers, Class Action Officers, who teach about law and judicial process, and, in a few jurisdictions, Child Safety Officers, who work to establish positive attitudes toward the law and law enforcement personnel. The use of truancy officers and drug-dog officers has also increased. Though most bring a specific message to students and staff, all contribute to a secure school environment.

By far, the most numerous of these personnel are the SROs and the school security guards (now designated School Security Officers or SSOs). Currently, there are 543 SROs serving in 86 of Virginia's 95 counties and 34 of its 40 cities. SROs are assigned to 94% of all Virginia high schools, 80% of the middle schools and 4% of the elementary schools, with 77% being assigned to a single school on a full time basis. The distribution of SROs to localities ranges from 47 SROs in Fairfax County to 1 in 51 other jurisdictions (25 counties, 18 towns, and 8 cities).

VCSS data shows that there are at least 958 School Security Officers. In contrast to the School Resource Officers, however, SSOs are more geographically concentrated. Only 35 jurisdictions employ SSOs (21 counties, 12 cities and 1 town) and SSO distribution ranges from 200 SSOs in Fairfax County to 1 SSO in six other jurisdictions. Seven cities and three counties employ 87 percent of all SSOs. Table 1 describes how SROs and SSOs differ in their provision of school security.

Two significant initiatives have been undertaken to improve the professional readiness of SROs and SSOs. The first increased the number of SROs, established SRO professional and educational standards, and created basic and advanced SRO training curricula that would facilitate the entry of SROs into Virginia's schools. The second involves the creation and implementation of SSO certification and training standards, standards that are unique among the 50 states.

The SRO Initiative

Between 1999 and 2004, federal funding and new state revenue brought about an increase in the number of SRO positions from 350 to 540. Most of the new positions were funded by DCJS-administered grants. Although only a portion of Virginia SROs were, and continue to be, so funded, DCJS officials used this funding authority to improve the professional readiness of SROs statewide. By attaching conditions to the SRO grants, DCJS grant administrators required that SROs be:

- experienced law-enforcement officers with proven ability to work effectively with adolescents and young adults, and who are capable of performing multiple law-enforcement, instructional and mentoring roles in the school environment;

- assigned full-time to only one middle or high school (unless schools are adjacent to one another);

- guided in their work by Memoranda of Understanding negotiated between the employing local law enforcement agencies and school officials, and

- trained in subjects critical to their mission. Grant-funded SROs must complete a 40-hour course with instructional units that draw on the talents of specialists in adolescent behavior, juvenile law, crisis management, etc. These units include Threat Assessment for Schools, Crisis Management, Current Youth Culture, At-Risk Behavior, Youth Gangs, Building the School-Law Enforcement Partnership and Communicating with Demanding Parents and Difficult Students.

These conditions have since become the standard to which nearly all local SRO programs subscribe. For example, 72% of all SROs are now assigned to one school only and at least 550, many more than the number of grant-funded SROs, have completed the 40-hour SRO basic training.

The presence of SROs in school is widely supported by Virginia high school and middle school staff. Staff surveys from 2000 and 2002 found that at least 97% of those sampled supported having SROs in school. Furthermore, 67% said SROs reduced bullying; 64% said SROs reduced fighting; and 71% said SROs reduced fear of crime among staff.

As counterpoint, there is a good deal of turnover among SROs and the integration of SROs into the school environment remains an ongoing process. As far as the latter, SRO quarterly reports indicate that SROs often feel hindered in their role as law enforcers. Fifty-four percent (54%) of the SROs who submitted reports between September 1999 and June 2002 cited factors that, in their opinion, made it

difficult for them to enforce the law. The factors most frequently cited were (1) teachers and staff who failed or refused to report criminal incidents (38%), (2) the lack of investigative tools such as private offices, phones, two-way radios and secure file cabinets (21%), and (3) workload pressures from having to deal with a large number of students and from having to perform multiple roles such as instructor on law and judicial procedure, crime prevention specialist, security expert, liaison to local public safety agencies, investigator and role model (13%).

The SSO Initiative: In 2002, the General Assembly asked the Virginia Crime Commission, a legislative research entity, to study Virginia's SSO programs. The study lead to 2003 legislation requiring SSOs to be certified by using a new training curriculum that was developed by DCJS in consultation with VDOE and the Crime Commission. Consequently, as of September 1, 2004, new SSOs have to complete a 32-hour certification course within 60 days of their hiring. Previously hired SSOs had to complete this course within one year and all SSOs were subject to new in-service training requirements. It is expected that the VCSS's SSO Basic Training Course will be attended by 800 SSOs by November 2005. In addition, VCSS offers a "SSO Instructors Course," that enables those who pass to deliver the new curriculum to other SSOs in their localities. VCSS has also developed an online database to record SSO training information and ensure that SSOs meet their ongoing training requirements. The certification program and internet-based tracking system are unique to Virginia.

Violence Prevention

The assessment of Virginia's school violence prevention efforts is hampered by the fact that state officials have never cataloged the types and number of programs that schools use to help students and teachers prevent violence and manage conflict. The decisions to use certain programs or trainings are made by local officials who can choose from a wide range of programmatic options. No state revenues are specifically set aside for school violence prevention,

Almost all Virginia school "prevention" money comes from the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) Safe and Drug-Free Schools (SDFS) grant program. For the past three fiscal years (2003-2005), Virginia's 134 school divisions received an average annual total of $6,469,898 in SDFS funds. VDOE, using a prescribed formula weighted 60% (number of children in programs such as the free or reduced price lunch program) and 40% (K-12 enrollment), allocated these funds to the divisions in parcels that range from an average $593,700 per year for Fairfax County to $2,500 per year for Highland County, with an average annual division sum of $49,014. SDFS money is often the only funding for alcohol, substance abuse and violence prevention programming.

The most recent report on the use of SDFS money stated that violence prevention "activities" were funded in 96% of the divisions and violence prevention "instruction" took place in 84%. Data limitations precluded revelation of how much money went to specific programs or specific schools.

Although the adequacy of the school violence prevention funding is unclear, SDFS guidelines require that school divisions "have a plan for keeping schools safe and drug-free that include appropriate and effective discipline policies, security procedures, prevention activities, a student code of conduct, and a crisis management plan for responding to violent or traumatic incidents on school grounds." In addition, SDFS-funded prevention programs must meet six "principles of effectiveness," one of which requires scientific proof that the curricula being used reduce violence or illegal drug use.

One area of violence prevention in which Virginia has been particularly progressive is school crisis management. In 1990, VDOE published a manual titled Crises Affecting Youth and trained school crisis teams in its use. In 1996, VDOE produced a nationally recognized Resource Guide for Crisis Management in Schools, and in 1999, following the horrific shootings at Colombine high school in Colorado, it expedited the release of a Model School Crisis Management Plan. The Resource Guide was revised and updated after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. At about the same time, federal authorities released reports on the school shootings and published their own model policy for the handling of school crises.

These materials have been used to improve the policies and capacity of Virginia school officials to handle various possible threats to the safety of students and staff. Each primary and secondary school is required to have crisis response and crisis management policies and to review them annually. VCSS bolstered the content of these policies by developing the curricula and hiring experts to teach 18 crisis management classes. These trainings were held between fall 1999 and spring 2003 with over 600 school administrators, SROs, counselors, school nurses

Virginia's focus on crisis management

and local first responders in attendance. About a third of the attendees were two person SRO/school administrator team.

VCSS also provided (and provides) training on "bullying prevention," "communicating and intervening with at risk juveniles," and "legal responsibilities of SROs and school staff." These trainings were also (and are) directed towards school administrators, SROs, counselors, etc. In addition, each year, VCSS sponsors a general conference on Virginia school safety.

School violence prevention is also supported by SDFS money that is distributed through the Governor's Office for Substance Abuse Prevention. A review revealed that between October 2001 and the end of fiscal year 2005, $4,011,635 of this money will have been awarded to programs that are solely or partially working to reduce school and other youth violence. Twenty-nine grants were awarded, with the recipient programs serving students in 38 localities (10 cities and 28 counties).

Intervention

Intervention to lessen the probability that certain students will continue or perhaps escalate their use of violence is also difficult to assess.

Intervention may occur in a variety of ways. Some intervention takes place when students are before the juvenile court on complaints or petitions alleging that they are in need of services or supervision, or are juvenile delinquents. Complaints and petitions are often dismissed if these students successfully partake of the counseling, anger management, community service or other intervention services offered by the court.

The most direct student intervention strategy, however, lies in VDOE's operation of 29 regional alternative-education programs. Students are assigned to these "alternative schools" when they have pending violations of local school board policies, have been expelled or suspended on a long-term basis, or are in transition from juvenile correctional centers. In fiscal year 2004, the alternative-education programs provided intervention services to 3,534 middle and high school students in 114 of 134 school divisions. In addition to educational services, students receive counseling services, social skills training and drug prevention education.

Intervention services are also provided by government, private-non-profit, and faith-based organizations through sponsorship of after school mentoring programs and programs aimed at reducing truancy and juvenile delinquency. Such programs are often funded with federal Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) grants. These "Title II Formula" and "Title V Prevention" grants are recommended by the Virginia Advisory Committee on Juvenile Justice and awarded annually by the Criminal Justice Services Board. For the period FY2002-2005, the average annual amount of OJJDP money distributed was $1,680,700. Approximately 40 communities from across the state received this money.

Other Components of School Security

The Juvenile Law Handbook for School Administrators: Among the other reasons why Virginia school security has improved in recent years is the development and distribution of the Juvenile Law Handbook for School Administrators. First published in 1999, the Handbook promotes an understanding of Virginia's juvenile and school laws, how these laws are interpreted and enforced, and how the educational, law enforcement and juvenile justice systems interface. Chapters describe the workings of the juvenile justice system, outline criminal law pertaining to alcohol, tobacco, illegal substances, simple assault, disorderly conduct and theft, explain school-court communication including the giving of testimony, and clarify issues or offenses that often require the collaboration of educators, law enforcement officials and juvenile court authorities. More than 20,000 copies of the Handbook have been distributed. Now in its third edition, the Handbook promotes strong working relationships between educators, school security personnel and juvenile court officials.

Better Reporting of School Crime and Violence: The measurement of school security depends on an accurate recording of a school's disciplinary actions, crimes and violence (DCV) data. Virginia recently improved DCV record keeping by modifying offense definitions and codes to match federal definitions and codes and expanded the category of reportable incidents so it ranges from criminal acts involving the notification of law enforcement officials to behaviors that are simply disruptive to classrooms. The decision as to whether or how an incident should be reported, however, remains with locally autonomous school officials. This fact and the fact that student Codes of Conduct differ (and thus offense types differ) among school divisions, makes the comparison of one school's or division's DCV data with that of another inadvisable if not impossible.

School Security and Homeland Security: In January 2002, Governor Mark Warner formed the Secure Virginia Panel to improve Virginia's preparedness for natural disasters and emergencies such as terrorist attacks. Recognizing that terrorists could target schools, the Panel issued three recommendations that affect K-12 schools and school divisions. It recommended that the Governor: (1) direct the Secretary of Public Safety to improve the reporting of school crime and violence; (2) direct the secretaries of Safety and Education to clarify the responsibilities of state agencies in the development of school Crisis Management Plans, and (3) propose legislation that creates a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) exemption that allows Superintendents to withhold portions of safety audits that reveal "security weaknesses and vulnerabilities." The first recommendation is being addressed by the VDOE (as noted above). The second has not drawn a clear response, although, indirectly, the General Assembly ordered the Virginia Department of Emergency Management and the VCSS to assist schools on emergency and crisis planning. For its part, VCSS plans to offer training classes to help school officials assess threats and become aware of factors that make schools vulnerable to terrorist attack. The third recommendation was addressed in 2003 legislation that established and set forth procedures for the FOIA exemption.

Concluding Thoughts

Measuring the Security of our Schools: The initiatives outlined above suggest that Virginia schools are safer and more secure today than they were 10 years ago. Clearly, a great deal of time, money, policy development and policy implementation have been applied to the issue. It is not known, of course, if this expenditure has made Virginia schools as safe as they can be. The optimal level of school security is virtually impossible to determine, as it would require that a multitude of social factors, physical conditions and individual pre-dispositions be identified and measured against agreed-upon "optimal" levels of these variables. Aside from its technical complexity, the effort would be undone by the fact that "optimal" can and would be defined differently by different people for each variable.

Only the basic components of school security have been considered here and our assessment has been mostly a description of efforts intended to make them stronger. The success of these efforts could be surmised, however, if school occupants came to feel that there was an acceptably low level of violence or fear of violence within our schools. Unfortunately, there is no data that adequately measure the incidence of school crime and violence and only limited data about the fear of crime and violence. Virginia's school divisions have reported disciplinary actions, crimes and violence data since the early 1990s, yet questions about the data's accuracy, validity and reliability have precluded the comparison of one division's data with that of another or even of one division's data across time. Virginia's data may allow this, however, (hopefully to the point that individual divisions have reliable trend data) if there is more consistency in the classification and reporting of offenses.

DCJS sponsored surveys from 2000 and 2002 offer some insight as to staff and student feelings of safety. These surveys found that middle and high school staffs and students do feel safe. In response to the question "In general, how safe do you feel in school?," 93% of the 2000 staff sample and 96% of the 2002 staff sample felt "very" or "somewhat" safe in school as did 86% and 87% of the 2000 and 2002 student samples. Also revealed, however, was that staff are much more likely than students to feel "very safe." Sixty-one percent and 70% of the staff samples felt "very safe" compared with only 27% and 30% of the students samples. This difference persisted across the various grade levels and across subsamples from small, medium and large-sized schools. While it may simply reflect the general tendency for young people to feel less secure than those older and more adorned with authority, this hypothesis could not be tested.

A periodic assessment of how safe our school staff and students are feeling is needed. It could be done as part of the annual school safety auditing process, given that the audit legislation calls for such assessment. If not, perhaps the survey research organizations of our universities could provide this service.

Whose job is it? To what extent should educators be expected to provide prevention and intervention services to their students, let alone those who are "at risk?" Does the attainment of prevention and intervention skills by teachers unfairly intrude and interfere with their main task of educating students? Furthermore, as concern about school security grows, the question as to who is responsible for school security will become more pressing. While large school divisions assign the task of promoting school security to one person or one unit of division staff and others leave it to school administrators, there is no one state-level agency with authority or responsibility for school security. This matter needs to be addressed. ●

Schools are safer and more secure

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