

# Opinion: Schools owe it to children to be more safe

By Lisa Huard

Details in the Newtown, Conn., tragedy will continue to evolve for quite some time. Lives will never be the same; rather they will end up being a “new normal” for the families and friends of all the individuals lost.

Did it happen because gun control allows people to buy assault weapons? Was he mentally ill? Was he bullied? Was he on drugs?



Lisa Huard

When bad things happen we want a definitive answer. We want this because if we have it, then we can prevent it from happening again.

Turn on any newscast throughout the nation and you'll see schools and districts practicing their drills this week and reviewing their safety plans. Because this situation occurred at an elementary school safety is now again the flavor of the month. Safety and what encompasses it should always be at the forefront of concerns and operations for all schools.

I can tell you as someone who works in the field that it is always an uphill battle to get schools to focus on plans and procedures because it takes away from subject time in the classroom. If safety and all that encompasses it were on

standardized tests, I believe our children would grow up healthier and happier and more productive.

As a safe schools consultant I've had emails and phone calls this past week asking me basic questions on how this kind of an event can occur. And each day the media poses a new question with headlines. Today it's asking "Who is to blame?" I don't believe there is ever only one source at the root of violence, rather a continuum of weaknesses in our systems that harm many of our kids, and therefore our society.

I became a teacher in the early 1980s and have watched our school system become less student centered, less humanized. There was a time when our focus did concern itself with what our kids dealt with outside of the school walls. There was a time that the system wanted us to build inclusion in our classrooms, as it was believed that individuals who felt connected and cared for become more secure within themselves and therefore would be better individuals and create better communities.

Many remember years ago when our own school board's mission statement was that all children would have an advocate. We as teachers were a part of trainings that built on this basic need. We as teachers were encouraged and supported to build relationships with our kids and with each other. We in essence built family.

Because of this we were more connected with our kids. We knew the kids who were struggling and who were having trouble and furthermore we had in place support systems to help these kids. As in life, you can't "fix" all situations, but I will tell you, we did fix many.

This premise is no longer the case here. In fact, it's no longer the case throughout the nation. The days of our schools being supported financially to provide the basic elements for a happy and healthy life for kids is no longer available.

“Penny wise and pound foolish” in our education system has become the norm.

When I work with school districts in developing safety plans, more often than not, they think about only about procedures for lockdowns, evacuations, and such. On the news I’ve seen story after story about how schools around the nation are going to be adding more fencing, security cameras, and other such hardware. It’s sad how money is available to do this, but money is not available to address the root of the problem. Again, we’re reacting with a Band-Aid rather than working on the probable issues. While I do believe there are certain tactics that are essential, I worry that we could be building situations that detach us even more. I don’t believe creating fortresses is the answer.

Education always swings on a big pendulum and with that pendulum goes the money. As I said, there were years of financial support from the state and federal government with training and programs to help children develop stronger values and respect for themselves. We believed that helping youth to develop more resiliencies would help them to cope better in life and therefore stay healthier and happier.

Unless tragedy strikes, all children become adults. Our desired outcomes for those adults begin when our kids enter school as those precious young beings. I believe if time and money were spent on our kids feeling safer at school, cared about if they miss, if they were more included as individuals and as a group, then, teachers could teach, kids could learn, test scores would improve, and perhaps communities such as Newtown would not have to suffer.

Santa, if you have time to listen to an adult, would you please bring the basics back into our schools and keep them there forever?

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