

This Teacher Doesn't Want Active Shooter Training; He Wants Safer Schools

 dpogreba.wordpress.com/2018/04/03/this-teacher-doesnt-want-active-shooter-training-he-wants-safer-schools

April 3, 2018

As I was flying home over the weekend, I happened to read this [Bozeman Daily Chronicle](#) [story](#) about the Bozeman School District's plan to train its teachers to respond to "active shooter situations." There was nothing wrong with either the story or the district's plan, but I felt a sense of unease as I thought about the central message that our students and teachers need to be prepared for a potential assault in a place that should offer emotional and physical security for kids. Other stories have discussed how tornado shelters have transformed to also offer protection from shooters, acting like mini-panic rooms in the elementary classrooms.

It's not just elementary school anymore; it's preparation for war.

Later, I came across [this article from The Atlantic](#) that explores the psychological impact of active shooter drills on students. The author argues that, while there has been little research conducted about the impact of active shooter drills and, in fact, that one took place just a month before the shootings in Parkland, schools have become the epicenter of blame for mass shooting incidents, and have responded by implementing these drills to appear to be doing something to stem the violence.

Unfortunately, these drills don't come without harms of their own:

Colleen Derkatch, an associate professor at Ryerson University in Toronto, studies how we assess risk when it comes to our health. "The more prepared we are, the more heightened our sense of risk," she told me. "And one potential effect we haven't considered is how these kinds of preparedness activities affect kids psychologically and could increase a sense of feeling at risk. They really expand the ways in which we feel increasingly under siege."

I can't imagine the experience of being an elementary student who has to role play while a trusted teacher pretends to be a gunman, checking the doors for any student or teacher foolish enough to have left everyone at risk in the exercise. I can't imagine the experience of being a teacher going through a drill where someone, roleplaying as an attacker, fires blanks to teach me what it might sound like while my students are shot in front of me. I can't imagine that I truly seem to live in a country that lacks the resources to make sure that students have current textbooks, but that has the resources necessary to turn our schools into miniature prisons, complete with metal detectors, dogs, and clear backpacks.

These drills have to take a toll on teachers and students. For many kids, school offers a haven from violence and chaos; it hardly seems conducive to their education or psychological well-being to remind them that even their classroom isn't safe from the threat of trauma and

violence. I don't know that there are many more powerful symptoms of the sickness in our society than that it's more palatable to terrify children than it is to upset the reactionary members of the right wing and disturb their ahistorical, unsafe belief in the unfettered right to guns.

I wonder if those who advocate for this kind of active shooter training really believe that it will make a difference. Human nature already seems to have a pretty embedded sense of fight or flight when we are confronted with dangerous situations. I find it hard to believe that a few hours of training will make a person any more likely to fight than she would have been or any more likely to run than he would have been before. There's a strain in the macho gun culture world in which dudes seem to believe that they'd be the ones who heroically confront a gunman in one of these situations, but none of us can know how we'd respond, training or no.

Some might argue that active shooter training is just a sensible precaution like a fire drill, but that seems to ignore the simple reality that no one believes a school is burning when we walk out to the football field and that none of us feel a sense of real danger. No one is lighting practice fires to scare us or forcing a child to perform practice CPR on a dummy representing a stricken student, either. We walk to our safe spaces, wait a few minutes, and head back to class.

Anyone who believes that students—or teachers—can simply walk back to class and learn after practicing for a mass shooting neither understands students nor teachers.

The hard truth is that active shooter drills are a placebo designed to give us an artificial sense of security in our schools and, for some, an excuse not to change the laws that make it too easy for anyone to get incredibly dangerous weapons and for anyone to keep them, no matter the threat they might pose. Schools implement these drills because they feel like they must do **something** in the face of potentially devastating violence, but they do nothing to change the political climate in which a person's right to own an arsenal including weapons not suitable for home defense trumps the right of children to attend school, parishioners to attend church, or workers to go to their jobs.

A few years ago, I experienced a moment of real fear at our school. One of our normally unflappable secretaries abruptly came on the intercom and announced that we were going into lockdown procedure. Everyone could immediately tell something was wrong: none of us had received a warning about a drill, it should have been a principal who made the announcement, and our secretary's voice had none of the unshakeable authority it normally had. My students were scared, and they could tell that I was scared.

Pretending to be joking to reduce the tension, I positioned myself by the door to my classroom holding a four-foot long hurley stick I had brought back from Ireland. Another teacher in the building hid his students in a storeroom and others prepared for the worst. In

the end, it turned out to be a false alarm: a passerby had seen someone walking outside the school and assumed what the person was carrying was a rifle. It turned out that it was a fishing pole.

Once the adrenaline faded and once our fears abated, we all felt better and began to joke about the experience, but it was hard to shake the lingering feeling that this has become our reality. Because we lack the political will to confront the gun lobby, every child in school has to worry that an unplanned announcement or fire alarm might lead to disaster, every teacher has to wonder if she should get “trained” to respond to a shooter, and every community has to feel just a bit less safe.

All the hurley sticks and all the active shooter trainings in the world can’t shake that fear, nor shake the fear of the gundamentalists who can only see their absolutist interpretation of the Second Amendment in black and white terms, either unfettered access or tyrannical confiscation, rather than sensible policy-making and reasoned discussion.

And just how broken is our system that the majority, the people who believe schools should be less likely to become shooting ranges and that children should feel safe, are ignored by our political leaders while the gun lobby buys politician after politician—lock, stock, and barrel?