

The Impact of School Safety Drills for Active Shootings

Lockdown, Lockdown. Lock the door.
Shut the lights off, Say no more.
Go behind the desk and hide.
Wait until it's safe inside.
Lockdown, Lockdown, it's all done.
Now it's time to have some fun!

— Seen on a poster at Arthur D. Healey School, Somerville, Massachusetts. Sung to the tune of “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.”¹

Introduction

Last year, Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund (Everytown), the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), and the National Education Association (NEA) joined together to lay out a [comprehensive safety plan](#) that combines carefully tailored gun safety policies with school-based intervention strategies. Our plan incorporates proactive measures schools may take that can prevent mass shooting incidents and help end gun violence in American schools. For schools that continue to rely on reactive solutions, we joined together again to provide an overview of the detrimental impact of school safety drills for active shootings, as well as considerations and recommendations for schools that decide to include students in these exercises.

Active shooter incidents in schools are tragic and traumatize communities and the nation. While only 0.2 percent of the approximately 36,000 gun deaths a year occur on school grounds, drills to prepare students and staff to respond in the unlikely event of a shooting have become a near-universal practice in American schools today, starting in preschool and continuing through high school. Beginning largely after the shooting at Columbine High School in 1999, schools began implementing drills in an effort to protect students from active shooters, and the practice has steadily increased since. In the 2005-06 school year, only 40 percent of American public schools drilled students on lockdown procedures in the event of a shooting;² by the 2015-16 school year, 95 percent did.³

Lockdown drills refer to procedures in which students and staff in a school building are directed to remain confined to an area, with specific procedures to follow. Active shooter drills are a type of lockdown drill tailored specifically to address active shootings.⁴ Though there is scant evidence that they are effective at preventing deaths in school shooting situations, school-based drills are required in at least 40 states.⁵ But state statutes on this type of drill are often vague and leave the nature, content, and identification of who participates in these drills up to the interpretation of school administrators. As a result, students and educators are required to participate in drills that vary dramatically across America's schools, from some that involve advanced parental notification of trauma-sensitive, developmentally appropriate exercises to others that deploy “masked gunmen” actors, require students as young as 3 and 4 years old to be confined within a space for extended periods, and fail to inform children that they are in a drill until it is over.⁶

At Lake Brantley High School in Altamonte Springs, Florida, chaos ensued after a “Code Red” drill. Students were not told the exercise was a drill. One student commented that **“No one really talked about the emotional impact, which I feel like is more longer lasting. I feel like [administrators] never really recognized that people had panic attacks.”**⁷

Mental health professionals have begun warning about the effect of these drills on students' well-being and about the possible short- and long-term consequences on school performance and physical and mental health. According to Melissa Reeves, former president of the National Association of School Psychologists, "What these drills can really do is potentially trigger either past trauma or trigger such a significant physiological reaction that it actually ends up scaring the individuals instead of better preparing them to respond in these kinds of situations."⁸

"I was genuinely not sure if I would finish the day alive," said an eighth-grade student in South Orange, New Jersey, about her experience during an active shooter drill.⁹

Given growing concern among parents, students, educators, and medical professionals about the impact that active shooter drills can have on student development,¹⁰ Everytown, AFT, and NEA do not recommend these drills for students and believe schools should carefully consider these impacts before conducting live drills that involve students and educators. For schools that do conduct drills, Everytown, AFT, and NEA support—at a minimum—six important stipulations that experts have found can help protect students' well-being:

- ① Drills should not include simulations that mimic an actual incident;
- ② Parents should have advance notice of drills;
- ③ Drills should be announced to students and educators prior to the start;
- ④ Schools should create age and developmentally appropriate drill content with the involvement of school personnel, including school-based mental health professionals;
- ⑤ Schools should couple drills with trauma-informed approaches to address students' well-being; and
- ⑥ Track data about the efficacy and effects of drills.

Drills involving students should not be the only plan to respond to school shootings. If schools decide to adopt these drills, they must be part of a comprehensive safety plan that includes measures to prevent active shooter incidents from happening in the first place, such as threat assessment programs, access to mental health professionals, collaborating with law enforcement, and engaging the community to ensure guns are not easily accessible.

Key Findings

Although nearly all students and educators experience drills, and a \$2.7 billion dollar industry¹¹ has grown up around the anguish of parents and school staff and the desperate feeling that we must "do something," there is extremely limited research available on drills' effectiveness.¹² One 2007 study found drills that prepare students for an "intruder," and that utilize best practices to minimize fear, have the potential to improve students' response to a threat without increasing their anxiety.¹³ Another study commissioned in one school district following the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida found drills that were announced in advance and followed by a debrief session increased students' perception of their safety preparedness.¹⁴ Given drills' relatively recent widespread implementation, however, there is not yet enough data to comprehensively study their effects. Further, the enormous variety of types of drills makes it difficult to measure and compare effects.

During a drill at Meadowlawn Elementary School in Monticello, Indiana, law enforcement officers lined teachers up and “shot them” with an airsoft rifle. Pellets left welts and caused panic. **“They shot all of us across our backs. I was hit four times. It hurt so bad,”** one teacher said.¹⁵

While there is almost no research affirming the value of these drills for preventing school shootings or protecting the school community when shootings do occur, stories abound in the media of incidents where students, educators, and staff have experienced distress and sometimes lasting trauma as a result of active shooter drills.

In an incident in Tucson, Arizona, a mother described the impact of drills on her young son. **He started biting his nails and “refused to go anywhere alone, even to his room or a bathroom at home.”**¹⁶ Joy Levinson, a clinical psychologist who serves elementary school students, had patients who had soiled themselves in schools because these drills made them fear going to the bathroom alone. She commented that lockdown drills can signal to young children that school is unsafe or that it is not an environment suitable for learning.¹⁷

Mental health professionals are increasingly concerned that active shooter drills can negatively impact students’ performance and mental and physical health.

Dr. Laurel Williams, chief of psychiatry at Texas Children’s Hospital in Houston, has warned about the anxiety active shooter drills can induce: **“It’s psychologically distressing for a young child to practice active shooters coming into your area. It’s not clear to them that the drill is not real. The younger the child, the less likely they are to understand that an act of violence is not occurring during a drill.”** The sense of dread these drills can evoke can be quite pervasive, she says. **“If you’re constantly given the viewpoint that the world is scary and unpreventable things happen, it pervasively makes us less secure as a society. We see everyone as suspicious, and it changes the way we act around people.”**¹⁸

What little we know about active school shooters suggests student-involved drills may in fact be counter-productive, as the shooters are very often current or former students at the schools. A recent study of mass shooters from 1966 through 2019 found that nearly all mass school shooters were students and they exhibited warning signs prior to the incident.¹⁹ In these cases, school preparedness protocols and procedures are being shared with the very individuals most likely to perpetrate an active shooting. This is exactly why these drills, if adopted by school districts, cannot be the sole element of a school safety plan.

Moreover, despite a lack of research proving active shooter drill training’s effectiveness and the potential to inform potential shooters of protocols, many for-profit companies charge school districts tens of thousands of dollars to provide such training.²⁰ These funds could be better spent on proven, effective measures, such as threat assessment programs, mental health professionals, physical security upgrades, and improving school climate.²¹

Recommendations

Everytown, AFT, and NEA support trauma-informed training for school staff on how to respond to active shooter situations. This might include training on lockout and evacuation procedures and emergency medical training. Our organizations do not recommend training for students and firmly believe that schools must be very mindful of the impact of active shooter drills that involve students and take that into consideration when designing such programs and determining whether to include students.

If a school *does* choose to include students in these exercises about active shooters, Everytown, AFT, and NEA support—at a minimum—the following guidelines, which are aligned with those of the National Association of School Psychologists and the National Association of School Resource Officers,²² to protect student well-being:

- ① **Drills should not include simulations that mimic or appear to be an actual shooting incident;**
- ② **Sufficient information and notification must be provided to parents or guardians in advance about the dates, content, and tone of any drills for students;**
- ③ **Drills should be announced to students and educators prior to the start of any drill;**
- ④ **Drill content should be created by a team including administrators, educators, school-based mental health professionals, and law enforcement and be age and developmentally appropriate. The content should incorporate student input;**
- ⑤ **Drills should be coupled with trauma-informed approaches to directly address students and educators well-being as standard practice; and**
- ⑥ **Information about the efficacy and effects of the drills should be tracked by schools, including symptoms and indications of trauma (e.g., bad dreams, fear of coming to school, asthma attacks, increased antidepressant prescriptions) so drill content can be reevaluated if students and/or educators are exhibiting signs of trauma.**

Creating safe schools also requires that schools foster healthy students and communities with strong partnerships inside of schools and beyond. Research shows that school climate is one of the biggest predictors of school violence.²³ School climate encompasses the relationships, values, and structures that enable students to learn in a safe, respectful, and nurturing environment. Investing in increased social support and mental health services can assist students, especially those experiencing emotional or social difficulties, in receiving the help they may need.²⁴ Everytown, AFT, and NEA recommend that schools utilize state, district, and federal support and fund programs that bring educators, families, community members and service providers together to provide this support—helping schools become true “community schools.”

Everytown, AFT, and NEA believe that robust school safety plans must be far more comprehensive than holding periodic shooter drills. Early intervention is key to addressing potential violent behavior and to providing students with appropriate treatment. That is why we recommend that schools create threat assessment programs and teams and that states make funding available to implement these programs.

Finally, comprehensive school safety plans must involve a proactive effort to enact meaningful gun violence prevention policies to enable intervention before a prospective shooter can get their hands on a gun. These policies include the implementation of background checks, Extreme Risk laws, and secure gun storage laws and awareness campaigns.

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