



Publisher/Editor-in-Chief

Failing Grade in Campus Security

Recounting the tragic slaying of hundreds of hostages, including more than 150 schoolchildren, in the Russian town of Beslan last year by terrorists, Bo Mitchell, CPP, paints a scenario as frightening as any Hollywood movie producer ever could. What's more, he says the idea that a terror event of such epic proportions could occur in the United States is not that far-fetched.

"What frightens American parents more than anything? Something that would put their children in peril," says Mitchell, president of 911 Consulting. "But the truth be known, in 29,999 out of the 30,000 school districts in this country, gaining access and creating the type of havoc that occurred in Beslan would be like a walk in the park." We received a stinging affirmation of this statement last month when a gun-toting 14-year-old killed an assistant principal and wounded two other administrators at his rural Tennessee high school.

"I don't believe it is possible to shut down acts of random violence in public venues like schools," admits Linda Watson, CPP, president of Whirlaway Group LLC. "First off, most schools were not designed with security as a primary issue when they were built 40 years ago (the average age of a school in the U.S.). Before you can address safety, you must assess the threats, risks and vulnerabilities that are present inside and out. Knowing that no one solution fits all schools, and taking into account their budgets and/or social and political agendas, each assessment has to be done on a case-to-case basis."

But to hear Mitchell tell it, many schools complete their risk assessments and still do nothing by way of planning. They believe a comprehensive security/safety strategy is too difficult, or they deny the risk, noting that they have been lucky so far.

"Luck is not a strategy," Mitchell says. "Unfortunately, that is the mindset of the majority of organizations I deal with. We have to get out of denial and set a policy of encouraging everyone to recognize the signs of workplace and campus violence. People never just snap. Every police incident report I have ever read on campus violence (describes) witnesses who recognized that the perpetrators were acting oddly weeks or days before the incident."

Security product vendors have tapped the school market as one of their hot verticals, but Mitchell and Watson agree that technology will not cure these ills. "Technology is only part of the answer. We still need to incorporate the most important element of the equation into the mix, and that is the human component," says Watson.

"Technology will not solve this problem," agrees Mitchell. "And if technology was deployed, it is often defeated by people. For example, holding doors open for 'people who look like us.'"

The acclaimed philosopher and expert in emergency response, Pogo, said it all: "We have met the enemy, and he is us." **STD**