



Paul Novak

SPRING CONFERENCE WRAPUP

By DON HARRIS

Paul Novak: Schools Can Take Steps to Diminish the Possibility of a Shooting

A detailed visual walk-through of the Sandy Hook massacre four and a half years ago gave AASBO members a chilling reminder of what can happen when a crazed individual enters a school with a weapon.

Paul Novak, a 20-year Army veteran who then served 21 years as Safety, Security and Transportation Director at Tempe Elementary School District, issued this stern warning: "Never forget what happened that day – and it will happen again."

In a breakout session at the AASBO Spring Conference on April 6, Novak, who is President/CEO of Gauge Precision Consulting in Phoenix, recommended steps to take to create a safer environment. But he added that there is only so much a school can do, given budget constraints.

Recalling the Sandy Hook massacre, which took place on December 14, 2012, in Newtown, Connecticut, Novak noted that the shooter, Adam Lanza, killed 20 students aged 6 and 7, and six adult staff members before taking his own life. And it all happened in 4 minutes and 24 seconds, even before police entered the building. Just prior to his assault on the school, Lanza also killed his mother.

When Lanza was found dead in a classroom, he had 253 rounds of ammunition on him. Lanza's previous behavior indicated he had the potential for violence. Novak urged AASBO members to be aware of such traits, adding that some students may have mental health issues. "You have to connect those dots, but you can't connect them if you don't collect them," Novak said.

Schools are "a very soft target," he said. "Some schools are better prepared than others with the right training, but even those have vulnerability," he said.

He mentioned the Columbine (Colorado) High School massacre in 1999, in which two students murdered 12 of their fellow students and one teacher and injured 21 others. "One day again," Novak said, "a new school name will be at the forefront of our attention with such unspeakable tragedy — today, next month? We don't know. My job, your job, is to ensure that your district, your individual schools, never become a headline for the nation to mourn. The job of every superintendent is to keep their staff, students and facilities safe. If we don't make sure we've done everything reasonably possible to protect students, staff and facilities, then shame on us."

There is a limit to what schools can do, however. For example, schools can't hire armed guards 24 hours a day. They can't rebuild schools, knock holes in walls to put doors in.

"Business managers will tell you, they have to justify every expense," Novak said. "That's absolutely true. When it comes to school safety, it's like zero-based budgeting in reverse. Can we justify not spending the money to create a safe environment – to protect the students, staff and facility, and the school's image? Image is very difficult to repair."

After an incident occurs, the time to push for safety improvements is limited – while emotions are still high. To business managers, Novak said, "You have a limited amount of time, maybe two months, to convince the

Governing Board and the principals to do whatever it takes to find the resources."

So what can schools do? Physical safety is No. 1. "There should be no one on your campus who doesn't belong there from bell to bell," Novak said. "A visitor who becomes violent, we re-label an intruder. What would you do if you have an intruder in your home? You'd call 911 – immediately."

But Novak said that's not necessarily the case with schools, where parents sometimes raise their voices. But don't ignore tell-tale signs. An angry adult could be a disgruntled former employee who was fired or the spouse of an employee who suspects he or she is having affair with another employee.

"Parents who feel their child is being treated unfairly can lose all rationale," Novak said. "They're not reasonable."

Every school has fences, but if there is a gap in your perimeter, if you don't close gates, you might as well tear down your fence, Novak said. "You cannot have one point of penetration," he said. "We can't prevent everything, but we can make it difficult. That's physical security."

Schools should have plans in place in case of an emergency, and should train staff on their individual responsibilities. "If you don't train, you're asking for trouble," Novak said. "When the police come, who else comes? The media. With crisis management, don't talk to the media without going through your public information officers. Training is critical. If an employee says he or she was on the job for three months and had no training in an emergency, there goes your school's image."

Novak recommended against using code words in case of an emergency because parents and substitute teachers won't know what's going on. Just say you're in a lockdown or you have a shooter or everyone evacuate, he said.

"If you're in a lockdown, all the doors are locked," Novak said. "Don't move. The shooter won't see anybody to shoot. What about a bomb threat? You don't have to evacuate just because you get a bomb threat. If you think it's real and you do evacuate, don't have the students gather in the parking lot. The best place for a bomb is in a car."

After an event, a debriefing meeting should be conducted with key staff members to determine what went well and what didn't. "If something needs to be done differently, that's not embarrassing," he said. "It helps other schools in the district not make the same mistakes."

Changes Novak suggested include considering a wireless panic button that alerts an alarm company, which notifies police, and an automated school-wide notification system that is activated even if the principal is not available. Also, he recommended a two-door entry that enables school employees to see who is in a holding area before they are admitted to the school.

"Remember," Novak said, "not a single child should ever go to school and not come home – ever."

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