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COMMENTARY

Schools Need Active-Shooter Drills

Most deaths occur during the first five minutes. Preparing teachers and students would save lives.



After the Feb. 14 shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. PHOTO: JOE RAEDLE/GETTY IMAGES

By *John G. Iannarelli*

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Hardly any American schools hold active-shooter drills, but almost all of them hold regular fire drills. It's been 50 years since fire was a real threat to safety in America's schools. It's time to rethink those priorities.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation defines an active shooter as a person "actively engaged in killing or attempting to kill people in a confined and populated area." Because schools don't rehearse their responses to these situations, students and teachers are typically unsure what to do during incidents such as Wednesday's mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla. Most often, school districts forgo active-shooter drills because they don't want to scare their students.

It is an unfortunate reality that these horrific acts will continue to produce the same tragic results unless schools take precautions. In the aftermath of each mass shooting, Americans fiercely debate the extent and proper application of our Second Amendment rights. But gun ownership is a complicated and politically fraught issue. While that debate proceeds, we should do everything possible to prepare our children and their teachers to protect themselves. Florida's shooting underscores the need for immediate action.

Most of the deaths in active-shooter scenarios occur during the first five minutes of the incident. Even when armed police officers are present in the school, as was the case in Parkland, the killing is usually over before police are able to intervene. The actions of students and teachers during those first five minutes can make the difference between life and death.

In the event of a fire, most kids know to get out of the school building quickly and in an orderly fashion. In an active-shooter situation they need to be prepared to do more, including barricading themselves in a classroom until help arrives. In a worst-case scenario, they need to be prepared to fight back.

The prevailing approach is called “run, hide, fight.” No teacher enjoys the thought of teaching students how to break classroom windows, but it may be the only route to safety in active-shooter situations. Good hiding places keep students away from the attacker and also provide them a way out when the danger has moved on. And when it comes to fighting, witnesses should do whatever it takes to evade danger. It’s not their responsibility to subdue or disarm the attacker. Students and teachers must study and drill these concepts at least as often as they participate in fire drills.

Almost every high-school student in America has a cellphone. On Wednesday, many witnesses texted their parents asking them to call the police. This was the right thing to do. Dialing 911 themselves could have attracted the shooter to the sound of their voices, with deadly consequences. We need to impress upon our tech-savvy young people that time is critical in active-shooter situations. Students and teachers shouldn’t waste precious minutes. They must find a way to contact law enforcement immediately when lives are in danger.

Likewise, sharing pictures and videos on social media during situations like the one in Parkland can help law enforcement see exactly what is happening, what students are doing, and where the attacker is located. Students need to know how important it is that they give emergency personnel as much information as possible with which to work.

Every cop or FBI agent would much rather prevent a deadly incident than stop one already under way. Teachers, students and administrators need to speak up when they see something suspicious. After many recent mass shootings and terrorist attacks, several people have stepped forward to say that they had suspected the perpetrator was planning an attack. Ordinary citizens need to get better at identifying people like the alleged Florida shooter before they carry out their deadly plans.

Until that day comes, however, Americans need to do the best with the available tools. We cannot keep waiting around for something to change. Through regular active-shooter drills, schools can equip their students with the skills to react quickly and safely to frightening situations. It might frighten them at first, but they’ll get used to it, just like they’re used to fire drills.

Mr. Iannarelli is a retired FBI special agent executive. His books include “How to Spot a Terrorist Before It’s Too Late” and “Why Teens Fail and What to Fix.”

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