

Local schools are conducting drills to prepare for armed intruders. What do they mean for children's safety and sense of security?

By Jay Copp (This article originally appeared in Chicago Parent magazine, ©2002)

The intercom crackled and the principal at Wiesbrook Elementary School in Wheaton urged teachers to start the building safety procedures. The doors were locked, the lights were turned off, and the children were instructed to leave their desks and sit in silence against one wall. The school was on lockdown, prepared for an armed intruder or a student with a gun.

But there was no such emergency. This was a safety drill, as practiced periodically at the elementary and high schools in District 200 and other schools nationwide.

After the massacre at Columbine High School in Colorado in April, 1999, and other shooting incidents at schools nationwide, an increasing number of schools are conducting lockdown drills. Administrators and parents are now convinced that what was once unthinkable could indeed happen, even at excellent suburban schools that are untroubled by gangs and distant from high-crime urban neighborhoods. The confidence that "it can't happen here" has been replaced by an uneasy sense that lack of security measures and crisis planning could lead to disaster.

Proponents of such security measures say there's no longer an excuse not to take such precautions. After all, schools practice fire and tornado drills. Why not lockdowns?

Yet not everyone is on board. "A small group of parents here is very concerned," says Julie Eakins, who has two children at Wiesbrook. "I think we're buying a sense of security at a high price. The price paid is our children's sense of security."

How do lockdowns affect children? Are they the answer to our post-Columbine world? Or they are a knee-jerk reaction to violent episodes that fails to counter the seeds of alienation and isolation that can trigger future violent incidents?

Signs of the Times

It's easy to idealize the good-old days of public education. According to William Kilpatrick, author of *Why Johnny Can't Tell Right From Wrong* (Simon & Schuster 1992), teachers in the 1940s identified as the greatest threats to the educational process talking out of turn, chewing gum, making noise, running in the halls, getting out of line, wearing improper clothing and not putting discarded paper in the wastebaskets.

Such concerns had already begun to sound quaint long before Columbine. But the spate of killings in schools across the nation spurred a wave of lockdowns, safety drills and intruder alerts. Many schools began locking doors previously not locked and limited access to school hallways. Some schools, including those in Wheaton, Naperville, Aurora and West Chicago, began requiring faculty and staff to wear photo ID badges.

"The trend is for more schools to do lockdown drills," says Joanne McDaniel, director of the Center for the Prevention of School Violence in Raleigh, North Carolina.

District 200's lockdowns are the result of the recommendations of a committee that was convened 2½ years ago to address safety issues. Before that, safety was assumed, not practiced. "In 1999, our buildings were wide open," says District 200 Superintendent Gary Catalani. "A person could walk into nearly any door in almost any building."

Today, District 200 has two forms of lockdown. The more dramatic one calls for students to get out of harm's way inside the classroom. The other one does not disrupt the activities inside classrooms but requires students who are outside their classrooms to return to them. Two lockdowns of the latter type occurred in Wheaton in the past two years, provoked by a bomb threat and a mercury spill, neither of which harmed any students.

Lockdowns have been implemented in response to real threats, too. In 1999, a student came to Jacobs High School in Algonquin with a pellet gun, knives and survival equipment. The school went to a lockdown for two hours to ensure that the student, who had left the building, could not return.

The Fear Factor

Julie Eakins sat in on a lockdown drill in her daughter's kindergarten classroom at Wiesbrook in February. When the drill began, the kids sat against the wall as they were told to do. It was quiet. No one cried. She could hear a teacher in an adjoining room say, "We're going to our safe place."

A student asked, "Why do we need to be safe?"

"Just do it," the teacher replied.

"Why are we hiding?" she heard another student ask.

Eakins was concerned about how her daughter would react. "My daughter is worrier. She has nightmare after fire drills." Not so her fourth-grade son. "My son takes it all in stride," she says. That first drill at Wiesbrook was a practice drill. Teachers knew it was coming. Since then, the drills have not been announced in advance.

That raises the likelihood of frightening children, Eakins says. "What happens when a seven-year-old is in the bathroom when there is an unannounced drill? They might panic," she says. "I think there is an excellent change that in an unannounced drill a kid will freak out."

That argument has support among child development experts. Lockdown drills are particularly problematic for kids who are vulnerable or fragile because they have been abused or exposed to violence, says Kathy HoganBruen, Ph.D., senior prevention director for the National Mental Health Association. "It could trigger post-traumatic stress."

But even kids who have never experienced violence may find a lockdown frightening, she notes. "Kids react differently to stress, even [if they come] from the same family," she says. "They have a different genetic makeup. So one child may not be bothered by something but another child from the same family can be traumatized."

But not all child development experts share HoganBruen's concern about children being frightened or traumatized. "I don't think lockdowns are harmful to children's emotional health," says Ted Feinberg, assistant executive director of the National Association of School Psychologists in Bethesda, Maryland. "They need to be done in an intelligent and preparatory way. Teachers need to explain why they're doing the drill. The message should be we hope we never have to use this drill, but it's important to prepare."

When asked whether drills might trigger post-traumatic stress in susceptible children, Feinberg is unequivocal. "I don't believe drills per se can create that effect," he says.

Prepared, Not Panicky

McDaniel of the Center for the Prevention of School Violence cautions schools to handle lockdown drills in a way that minimizes panic. "It needs to become an institutionalized procedure like a fire drill," she says. "You need to get to the point where it is a routine procedure."

She also emphasizes the importance of notifying parents, rather than letting them learn about the lockdown drills from their kids. "It's very important for parents to understand that their schools are doing this," she says.

Unfortunately, this is not always done. Eakins says she has talked to friends who were unaware their district even had lockdowns. "People didn't even know their school was doing them," she says. "They weren't too happy when I was the one to tell them."

Eakins is pleased, however, that Wiesbrook responded to the concerns of parents and made some changes to the drill before doing it for the first time. Instead of calling it a "lockdown" they called it a "building safety" drill. Students in a room with cubbies did not have to hide in them, which had been considered. Still, some parents remain concerned that all aspects of communicating about the drills haven't been fully thought out.

"The teachers are not prepared on what to say to the kids," says Denise Hughes, who has two children at Wiesbrook. "They're prepared where to put them, but they're not certain about what language to use depending on the development level of the kids."

HoganBruen agrees that it is critical during a lockdown drill that teachers choose their words wisely. "Research shows that there is an appropriate way to communicate with kids depending on their age," she says. "Even as the late 1950s, we thought of kids as mini-adults. Now we know we have to tailor what we say to their ages."

This means being clear and concise, telling kids what they need to know in a reassuring tone. "Teachers should use meaningful words. They shouldn't use a lot of dialogue. They need to set the stage for taking action," McDaniel says.

Catalani disputes Hughes' claim that District 200 teachers are unprepared to explain the drills to their students. "We don't give them a script but we talk about the best ways to communicate depending on the age of the students," he says.

Mountain or Molehill?

Proponents of lockdown drills have two words for those who fear they will traumatize children: fire drill.

"Parents get all excited about this issue. They're making a mountain out of a mole hill," says Ken Trump, president and CEO of National School Safety and Security Services in Cleveland, who has provided security services to schools in 30 states, including Illinois. "It's nothing more than a reverse fire drill. The goal is to practice safety; the only difference is that the kids stay in the building."

Trump rejects claims that lockdown drills frighten children. "Kids are not bothered a bit," he says. "Kids don't go home crying at night after a fire drill because they're afraid the school will burn down. I've never seen it in my 20 years in this business."

Superintendent Catalani agrees. Students and parents are accustomed to fire and tornado drills and accept them unquestioningly, he says, even though they are at least as disruptive as lockdown drills. "We do fire drills nine times a year. We do a tornado drill where the students have to leave the classroom and duck and cover," he says. "That's more disruptive and anxiety-producing."

Catalani doesn't dismiss the concerns of parents. "We try to be as sensitive as possible," he says. "We ask for their input and participation. But, he adds, "We get more phone calls from parents worried about security than calls from parents who say we are overreacting. We are being proactive about safety. If we err, we want to err on the side of caution."

Commander Terry Mee of the Wheaton Police Department says District 200 is taking proper precautions. His department has floor plans of all the school buildings. Each building also has walkie-talkies that connect to the police and fire departments and the central school office. "You do need to have policies and procedures in place," Mee says. "Like anything else, you need to practice them to ensure they are viable."

Of course, in an actual crisis, lockdowns may not go as smoothly as drills, but the same can be true of fire and tornado drills. "Every situation presents itself differently," Mee says. "You may have to do some ad-libbing along the way."

Reconsidering Rehearsals

Some parents, administrators and school safety experts agree that there can be a need for lockdowns with well-planned procedures, but question the value of lockdown drills that include children.

"My opinion is that it's not necessary to involve the kids," says Hughes. "Spend time telling the teachers what to do. To have the kids involved doesn't make sense because the likelihood of something happening is so small."

HoganBruen agrees. "In my opinion, the lockdown drills are not worth the risk to kids," she says. "An intruder could enter the school. That's part of reality. You need to take preventative measures and have programs in place. But you don't need to have the kids involved. On a day off from school, the teachers can do role playing and take the place of the kids."

This may be a time when schools in safe suburban areas could learn something from schools in more violent neighborhoods. Principals in the Chicago Public Schools have long been given detailed instructions on how to respond to various safety emergencies. A principal at one grade school in a high-crime area on the city's north side recalls a one time last year when his school went on lockdown after staff heard gunshots outside the school.

Over the intercom, he announced, "We have a situation." Teachers knew what to do. They moved their students away from the windows to prevent injuries from shattered glass. Teachers and students acted quickly and without panic to ensure their safety, though it turned out that no windows were shot out.

The principal, who requested anonymity, says he reminds his staff twice a year about lockdown procedures but does not practice them with students. "I think it's more important that teachers and staff know what to do," he says.

Jacobs High School does not practice lockdowns either. "I absolutely believe in having a conversation with staff on how to do them. During a crisis, you don't have time to give individual instructions," says Jacobs principal Linda Robinson. "But I don't think you necessarily need to involve the kids because of a concern they may be afraid."

The lockdown Jacobs in response to the student with a pellet gun bore out her conviction. A code word was used over the intercom to instruct teachers to lock their classrooms. (District 200 doesn't use code words because substitute teachers might not understand what to do.) Students outside classrooms were found and told to return to their classes. Even though students quickly realized that a lockdown was in effect, most were unaware of the reason for it and the entire process went very smoothly.

No one in the school panicked. Some parents, however, heard there was a problem at the school and were frightened when they were unable to retrieve their children.

It's no surprise the word immediately got out. "It doesn't take much for a child to use a cell phone and before you know it the parents are rushing to the school," McDaniel says.

Too Little, Too Late

The other objection to an emphasis on lockdowns is that they and other disaster prevention efforts tend to be implemented without attention to preventing violence in the first place.

"The intention is good, but there is an innate problem," says Ed Dunkelblau, Ph.D., director of the Hoffman Estates-based Institute for Emotionally Intelligent Learning. "If the goal is to ensure safety and attempt to remove the weapon from a student, then the battle is already lost."

Dunkelblau believes that school violence can only be reduced only if children are taught social and emotional skills along with the traditional academic ones. "A school needs to establish a real community," he says. "It should be a community that respects diversity, teaches kids how to recognize their emotions and impulses and emotions and impulses in others, and teaches them how to develop supportive relationships."

HoganBruen, too, considers lockdowns "a knee-jerk reaction to Columbine"

"We need to reduce bullying," she says. "There are a lot better ways to spend our resources and energy than on lockdowns."

But Trump isn't convinced. "A school needs both," he says. "You can have all the preventive programs in place in the world, but if the kids don't feel safe and don't have security, they are worthless."

Besides, he argues, lockdowns protect against more than an aggrieved student. "It could be police chasing a suspect. It could be a custody problem that spills over into school. It's not necessarily a student with a gun," he says.

But Dunkelblau isn't seeing the same emphasis put into anti-bullying curricula as is now being placed on lockdown drills and other security measures.

"Everyone recognizes the importance of fire drills. You do them quietly and walk two by two. I don't think anyone would argue against fire prevention, either," he says. "But people hesitate to build violence prevention into their curriculum."

But Trump remains unconvinced. "Too often, administrators fail to recognize that their 9 a.m. violence prevention class and their 10 a.m. peer mediation program are likely to have minimal success if an 8 a.m. shooting occurred that could have been prevented by better security measures," he says.

Lost Innocence

Julie Eakins grew up on the South Side. "I remember feeling safe. I could ride my bike to where I wanted. My parents made me feel like the world was safe. I want my kids to have that."

It's too late, counters Trump. "People complain, 'We didn't have these [lockdowns] when I was kid.' This is not 1960, 1970 or even 1980. When we reach Utopia, then we can do without security. Some people want to go back in time."

Trump is frustrated by the double-standard he perceives among some parents. "People don't protest surveillance cameras and armed guards at banks," he says. "When you go to a drive-through for a fast-food restaurant, a surveillance camera stares you in the face. We protect hamburgers better than we do kids and then we apologize about it."

Finally, it may boil down to what we find more threatening: the possibility of a violent incident at school, or our loss of innocence. Feinberg aligns himself with the first concern. "We live in a world where prevention and procedures are a part of life and learning," he says. "The skills taught in a lockdown are an important part of education. It adds to children's repertoire of skills and social knowledge. It teaches them not that the world is menacing but that it's place where you have to be prepared."

Eakins sides with the latter. "I don't want to let them grow up scared," she says. "We want them to have a feeling of security before the world washes over them like a tidal wave."

Either way, the world is a changed place post-Columbine and post-September 11. The question is only how to make sure children not only are safe, but feel safe, too.

How Violent Are Our Schools?

Perception and reality often are at odds when it comes to violence at schools. Consider a Life magazine story that claimed that American students "terrorize teachers" and that "it often takes physical courage to teach." The year was 1958.

The widely publicized school shootings seem to indicate that violence at schools has accelerated in recent years. In fact, violence is declining. Victimization rates declined from 48 crimes per 1,000 students ages 12 through 18 in 1992 to 33 per 1,000 students in 1999, according to a report by the Justice Department's Bureau of Justice Statistics and the Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics.

A study by the National School Safety Center in Westlake Village, California, also shows a decline in school-related violence. The number of violent deaths at schools or at school-related events decreased from 56 in 1992-93 to 23 in 2000-2001. The statistics, based on media stories, include deaths from suicide and accidents.

Children are far safer at school than elsewhere. Only a few of the more than 2,000 children killed each year are killed at school. And for every teen killed by a gun in school, more than 300 are killed by a gun outside school.

But not everyone finds these figures comforting. "It's true that schools are often safer than other places," says Ken Trump, president and CEO of National School Safety and Security Services in Cleveland. "But safer than what? What is an acceptable level of school violence?" Jay Copp is the father of three children, ages 6, 4 and 2, a freelance writer in La Grange Park, and manager of communications for Lions Clubs International Foundation in Oak Brook.