

This paper was downloaded from

The Online Educational Research Journal
(OERJ)

www.oerj.org

OERJ is an entirely internet-based educational research journal. It is available to anyone who can access the web and all articles can be read and downloaded online. Anybody can submit articles as well as comment on and rate articles. Submissions are published immediately provided certain rules are followed.

School Shootings: Is my school safe?

Tony Durr, Ph.D.

Augustana College

In the part of rural Midwestern America there was recently a shooting at a school that ended in the death of an assistant principal and the suicide of a student. In short, a student who had recently transferred to Millard South High School in the State of Nebraska had troubles adjusting to his new school. The article reports, the student was suspended after he was caught driving his car on the school's football field. Later in the day after his suspension, the student returned to the school and fatally shot an assistant principal and also wounded the principal. The student fled the building and was found dead of a self inflicted gunshot wound.

This event scares teaches and awakens images of the horrific evens of Columbine in 1999. The purpose of this paper is to educate readers on what is actually known about issues relevant to schools and deliver that information in an understandable, easy to access format. In the case of this school shooting I see two important areas that teachers should be informed. First is what the research has taught us about school shooting in general. Second is the importance of developing a sense of school belonging in students.

First, what do we know about school shootings? Based on media coverage of events like Columbine, the Amish school shooting, the Millard South shooting, and others it might be easy to assume that schools are increasingly unsafe. However that may not be case. From the 1992-93 school year to the 1998-99 (year of Columbine) school year there were an average of 31 student homicides per year at schools. From 1999-2000 to 2004-2005 the average was 16 (Modzeleski et al., 2008). So, on average, school shootings have been less common since Columbine. It should be noted that the decrease in student homicides could be because of an increased awareness and school policy changes that include lock down drills and more stringent sign-in policies. Over a ten year period from 1996-1997 to 2005-2007 the average student homicides where 21 which represents less than 1% of the annual

homicides of youth ages 5 to 18 in the US (Modzeleski, et al., 2008). Statistically speaking, children are much less likely to be involved in a homicide while at school than any other place. They are safer in the school building they are at home, the mall, their neighborhood or anywhere else they may spend time. With that said these events do happen and I am sure the people involved in the Millard South shooting find “unlikeness” of these events irrelevant. Which brings me to my second point, the importance of school belonging.

School belonging is the sense of connectedness a student feels towards their school. It refers to how much they feel like a part of the school environment. To explain it in a more explicit way, you can think of a member of the school’s volleyball team. If the school they play for is the Tigers, then the player may have a real strong connection to the school, feeling that she is a Tiger herself, she might say, I am a Tiger. By feeling like she “is a Tiger” she has a deep connection to the school and an important part of the Tiger community. Of course, you don’t have to be a member of a sports team to feel like you are one of the Tigers. As long as the student feels like they are part of the community and have trust in that community they are said to have a strong sense of belonging. There is an increasing body of literature that documents the positive outcomes of students’ having a strong sense of school belonging (see Osterman, 2000, for a review). Specifically, students with a greater sense of belonging in their school report higher general well being (Anderman, 2002), and increased academic achievement and efficacy beliefs (Roeser & Midgley, 1996). In addition, students with a strong sense of belongingness are less likely to engage in risky behaviors, less likely to experience emotional distress, less likely to engage in suicidal ideation or violent activities, and less likely to begin having sexual relationships with other adolescents (Resnick et al., 1997).

In the case of the Millard South shootings I believe school belonging is something important to consider. Let me emphasize that I have not spoken to anyone personally about the event at Millard

South and I have no knowledge in regards to the shooter's sense of belonging. Based on the media reports and the fact that he recently transferred into the school lead me to reflect on the topic of school belonging, but it may not have had anything to do with the shooters actions. With that said, it is still important for teachers and administrators to consider how they are developing their school communities. At an individual level teachers can do this in their own classrooms. If a student feels like they are respected, trusted, cared for, and an important member of an individual classroom, then it will be easier for them to develop those same feelings for the school as a whole. In the case of the Millard South shooting the student was suspended from school. The student does need to be held accountable for his actions, but in the case of school belonging, it may be impossible for him to develop when he is suspended. It could exaggerate his disconnectedness with the school community. As I previously mentioned students that have a strong sense of school connectedness are less likely to engage in violent activities both in and out of the school.

References

- Anderman, E. M. (2002). School Effects on Psychological Outcomes During Adolescence. [Article].
Journal of Educational Psychology, 94(4), 795.
- Cordes, H. J., & Ferak, J. (2011, January 5). Millard South shooting: Suspension ignited fury, Omaha
World Herald.
- Modzeleski, W., Feucht, T., Rand, M., Hall, J., Simon, T., & Butler, L. (2008). School-Associated Student
Homicides -- United States, 1992-2006. (Cover story). [Article]. *MMWR: Morbidity & Mortality
Weekly Report*, 57(2), 33-36.
- Osterman, K. F. (2000). Students' Need for Belonging in the School Community. *Review of Educational
Research*, 70(3), 323.
- Resnick, M. D., Bearman, P. S., Blum, R. W., Bauman, K. E., Harris, K. M., Jones, J., et al. (1997).
Protecting adolescents from harm: findings from the National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent
Health. *JAMA: Journal of the American Medical Association*, 278(10), 823-832.
- Roeser, R. W., & Midgley, C. (1996). Perceptions of the school psychological environment and early
adolescents' psychological and. [Article]. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 88(3), 408.
- Timeline of a tragedy. (2011, January 7). Omaha World Herald.