

What if?

Regrets and Lessons from a School Shooter



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PRINCIPAL EVALUATION CRITERIA

Creating a Culture, Ensuring School Safety

What if all students were connected to an adult? What if all students were committed to keeping friends safe? What if all guns were secure? What difference might it make? **It would save lives and heartache.**

A STUDENT PROFILE

Picture a 14 year old boy in your school. He is quiet, in advanced classes but not a high achiever. He rarely makes eye contact. You notice him as he passes in the hallway. What you don't know is that he has not connected with one adult in his junior high school. Not one. He also doesn't have siblings at home, or any relatives that live in his town — they live thousands of miles away. His parents are separated, he lives with mom and she is suicidal, often confiding in him about her suicidal thoughts. There are several unsecured guns in the home. He shares dark thoughts with friends, and even asks one where he can get ammunition for a gun. None of the friends share this with an adult. His father lives in another town with his girlfriend. This boy is literally on his own.

He is required to attend a school dance the last afternoon before Christmas. He is with a friend, standing to the side of the cafeteria. His friend gets asked to dance by a girl. He tells himself he will never get asked to dance; he is a loser and

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always will be. This incident starts a downward spiral for him and there is no one to stop it.

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Several months later this boy, Barry Loukaitis, opened fire in a classroom in Frontier Junior High in Moses Lake. The harm he did that day was in his words, “irreparable.” And he is correct.

SANDY HOOK PROMISE

Anyone who has suffered a tragic loss endures great, long-lasting pain. I have two nephews who were directly affected by the school shooting at Freeman High School outside of Spokane. I also am the leadership coach for the Freeman School

District. Having seen up close the devastation to everyone involved I felt I had to do more than just feel badly. I decided to act. I began contributing to Sandy Hook Promise. If you have not reviewed their materials I encourage you to do so. At www.sandyhookpromise.com, you will find five research-based programs and practices. The curriculum is yours to use.

While you probably have similar programs, check these out to see if there is anything to add to what you have, to be sure a comprehensive approach to school safety is in place. If you don't have similar programs, then start — now. The materials are very well done and easy to implement for busy principals. From what Barry has told me, these programs would have made a difference for him.

I also wondered what could be learned from a perpetrator who survived the incident. I was curious if anyone had ever talked to a school shooter who had survived, and what would they say with the benefit of years of reflection and added maturity?

SHARING HIS STORY

I had read Barry Loukaitis had expressed deep remorse to the loved ones at a recent hearing. Would he have advice that might be a deterrent? I know students listen when the words come from a place of credibility. I shared my thoughts with Barry Loukaitis, who has had 22 years in prison to think about his actions. No, he had never been asked.

Barry agreed to share his story, but only with the understanding that it not be sensationalized, and that it be solely to prevent another family from experiencing the life-shattering trauma a shooting brings to loved ones. He was reluctant at first, out of concern and respect for the loved ones of his victims.

As I think back to my days as a principal, three areas emerged as most important from my conversations with Barry, and would have been helpful as I thought about keeping our school safe.

First, can you say with confidence every student in your school is connected to an adult? If not, start the process. Teachers will be more than willing to help when they understand the importance of these connections.

Second, do students know how to safely and easily share concerns about a friend? I asked Barry if his friends would have been able to change his plans. His response: “Totally.” As with other incidents, the signs were there. According to Sandy Hook Promise research, four out of five school shooters give you the power to stop them. And do friends understand they are saving their friends, possibly their life and certainly their future?

Third, do parents understand that they must secure guns in their homes? Are parents aware of the legislation that took effect July 1? Gun owners can be charged under a crime of community endangerment



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if someone not allowed to have a firearm, such as a child, gains access to it and shows it publicly, shoots it, or uses it in a crime. And do they know without any doubt that they are secure? I asked Barry about the guns in his house. What if there hadn't been guns? He replied, “I maybe would have taken a knife to school, but that's it.”

And if you are talking to a student who has thoughts about violence, have them read them Barry's words. He knows what he is talking about. He will spend the rest of his life in prison. Barry and I are hopeful that his message, perhaps shared in a threat assessment with a student or other conversation, could change the actions of a potential shooter, or convince a friend to come forward with information.

BARRY'S OWN WORDS

I believe Barry's words are more powerful than anything I could ever convey to students:

“It will not happen as you envision. You'll imagine revenge, retribution. A sense of justice. All you'll feel is horror and shame. There's nothing cool about it. People won't fear or admire you. They'll feel only the contempt and disgust normally reserved for an inveterate child molester, and they'll be right. You won't be hard, respected, or feared. There's a sickness to what you've done, a twisted revulsion you will feel all the time. You will never forget it. Nor will anyone else.

You will regret it. If you take away nothing else, remember that. There's a common thread among all of us who've hurt others. We wish we could take it back. That alone should be proof enough that it's a bad idea. We know what the aftermath is like, and none of us sits around gloating about it. All we wish for is a time machine.

Maybe you think you have nothing else in your life, so you may as well take others down with you. I promise you, you're wrong. When you've destroyed other's lives and wrecked your own, you discover very quickly that you took a lot of good things for granted. You will definitely miss those things. Yes, you will lose every material thing you care about. You will lose freedom, and will spend the rest of your life following other people's orders. (You think you're already doing that now? Trust me, it can get much worse.) I'm sure you expect that. What you don't expect is missing other things. One of those things is self-respect. Another is innocence. You will miss being innocent. You will miss being able to look at yourself in a mirror and see a person, someone who has rights, someone who deserves something. You will miss having a soul. That is what you truly give up.

There is no coming back from this. It will never, ever go away. It's there every time you look in the mirror, every time you think you can enjoy yourself. You will become a thousand times worse than anyone you claim to despise. Some people are jerks? You are a bigger one. Some are losers? You live off tax money. Do others lack honor? You hurt a bunch of children. That will be your legacy, and it will be the best you can hope for.

If you hold on, you're going to be okay. I promise you, the life you want is out there for you.”

— Barry Loukaitis

It is Barry's hope, and mine, that his story might be used to help prevent another tragedy. Principals, you will know the best way to use his story.

Thank you for all you do, every day, to keep students safe, healthy, and achieving. ■