

Combating Violence In Schools: A Proactive Solution

Plan Action to Achieve Success & Ingenuity

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Contact Information

Breiane Cage
info@PAASlcoach.com
972-345-9522

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Violence In Our Schools

A Problem Worth Solving

Mass shootings are growing exponentially across the United States, both in schools and outside. The attacks in schools range from elementary school to college campuses, and in almost every case, the perpetrator is either a current student or a former student of the school being targeted. The age of the perpetrator varies from teenage to young adult.

What caused the suicidal ideation, and why did it turn homicidal? Suicidal ideation has many possible contributing factors, such as biological, psychological, cognitive, and environmental. Each shooter will have different factors that led them to this decision, which adds to the complexity of finding a solution that eliminates, or at the least diminishes, the growing rate of mass murders. Progressing from suicidal ideation to suicidal/homicidal or the opposite going from homicidal to suicidal/homicidal, at the current growth rate we are observing, gives cause for great concern. The growth pattern could possibly be attributed to contagion from the extremely high level of media coverage, which is exacerbated by the present use of technology and social media, but the last item in the shooter's plan of action is his death, either by suicide or suicide by cop. The choice to commit the act at a school instead of another crowded location leads to the theory of the homicidal development being emotionally driven from past experiences at the school. The emotional rage that has developed in these individuals is the ultimate issue that must be addressed.

Emily Durkheim's sociological theory of social integration was developed along the lines of suicide, but is extremely relevant to the growing school homicidal epidemic. The theory is based on societal integration and social regulation. Societal integration accounts for the level at which the person is immersed in their family, their group, their community, and/or their society. Social regulation accounts for the level of control their personal society has over their emotions and desires by customs and norms.

As a country, we have been watching these heinous acts unfold before our eyes, and every time our society becomes even more fractured from disagreements on solutions. The fractures that are created are then splashed across every media outlet, telling future homicidal/suicidal assailants exactly what their future heinous act will do, fueling their desire to act. The societal chaos gives their rage a positive reinforcement in the eyes of the emotionally disturbed, which ultimately leads to the true problem needing to be solved, which is finding a way to diminish the emotional disturbances before it progresses into explosive rage. These acts are acts of crisis. The person's coping mechanisms and knowledge of tools and resources available do not produce a solution for their emotional state, which is more than they can handle, and the emotional state develops into an unmanageable phenomenon.

Proposed Plan of Action

Elementary School Protocol

Preschool & Kindergarten

The best laid plans are ones built on a strong foundation, which is why we begin with implementing the Montessori educational protocol for children entering pre-school and kindergarten. Many studies show the effectiveness of a Montessori program with children through the age of 12. It would be of the utmost benefit to create a plan on implementing the program further past kindergarten, but not an essential necessity at this time due to cost. As seen by research studies, children who attend Montessori through pre-school and kindergarten, at a minimum, are more socially and emotionally developed, which ultimately leads to achieving higher academic results. "There were strong differences suggesting that Montessori students were feeling more active, strong, excited, happy, relaxed, sociable, and proud while engaged in academic work. They were also enjoying themselves more, they were more interested in what they were doing, and they wanted to be doing academic work more than the traditional students" (Rathunde, 2003).

In Milwaukee during the mid-1970s, two public schools implemented the Montessori program for students in preschool through fifth grade. A study was conducted to research the long term effects of Montessori versus traditional teaching on students. In the late 1980's, they began to track students who entered the Montessori program at age 3 and continued in the program through the fifth grade, at which time they were merged back into the traditional public school system. They tracked the progress of 201 students all the way through high school graduation from the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS). They used a control group of students who followed the traditional public school education for the same time frame in MPS. The results found that children from the Montessori program were able to transition into the traditional school setting without negative effects academically. The study found that the children from

the Montessori program ranked significantly higher in math and science, and comparable to the traditionally educated children in english and social studies.

Another study on the Milwaukee public Montessori program was conducted to study the social effects of Montessori on the children in the program compared to children in the traditional Milwaukee public school system . When evaluating 5 year olds who entered the school system in both 1997 and 2003, there was a significantly higher level of reasoning that included justice and fairness in the solution to a social problem. "Observations at the play ground during recess indicated Montessori children were significantly more likely to be involved in positive shared peer play and significantly less likely to be involved in rough play that was ambiguous in intent (such as wrestling without smiling)" (Lillard and Else-Quest, 2006). When examining the children's understanding of the mind using the False Belief task, 80% of the Montessori children passed, while the traditional education yielded 50% of students passing (Lillard and Else-Quest, 2006). "By the end of kindergarten, the Montessori children performed better on standarized tests of reading and math, engaged in more positive interaction on the playground, and showed more advanced social cognition and executive control. They also showed more concern for fairness and justice. At the end of elementary school, Montessori children wrote more creative essays with more complex sentence structures, selected more positive responses to social dilemmas, and reported feeling more of a sense of community at their school" (Lillard and Else-Quest, 2006).

In 1978, Lumin Charter School opened its doors in East Dallas, using the Montessori program curriculum for children aged 3 to 9 years old. Since then, they have opened a total of 4 charter schools in Dallas, and serve over 600 children and families. In areas that have a 50% high school graduation rate, children who started in the Montessori program at Lumin before joining the traditional Dallas public school system has a 96% high school graduation rate. Of those high school graduates, 88% of them go on to attend college.

References

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<https://lumineducation.org/>

Grades 1 - 3

Once the children come out of the Montessori curriculum, it will be important to continue fostering the social, emotional, and behavioral learning within the traditional educational system. This can be done in many ways, which do not increase cost, but instead include implementing practices into the curriculum that fosters social and emotional learning (SEL). Manuals for implementing these practices will be created for the teachers to use. For example, one protocol is to incorporate more group tasks, teaching them how to work together and learn how to work with many different people. The teacher will be responsible for assigning groups, and not allowing children to choose their own group partners, in order to prohibit children from only working with others whom they have already formed bonds.

In addition to the social aspect, we must address emotional intelligence as they progress from year to year. These skills will be continued to be taught and addressed throughout the school age years, and will be explored in more detail during the middle school years. The proposed focus for elementary ages involves teaching:

* Empathy includes understanding and compassion for others, being able to see things from their perspective. By working towards instilling empathy early on, it will become

ingrained in their personality, thus making it more difficult to dismiss in later situations.

* Self-awareness is about being consciously aware of yourself within each situation, each social setting, each identifying group that they belong to, and each decision that they make. When you become aware of your thoughts, feelings, needs, and desires, you begin to understand who you are. It may seem advanced for children in this age group, but the studies on the Montessori programs prove that they absolutely have the capacity to accomplish this task. The work will need to continue into later school years, but it is imperative this begins early in order to create the base on which it will be built.

* Social awareness begins on the playground after they are taught the lessons of becoming aware of our social situations. This equates directly to bullying and isolation, and teaching social awareness will diminish these current societal issues, as well as promote empathetic actions. For example, children will become more aware of those who play by themselves; will be more likely to invite others to play with them; and will understand that the one sole bully does not have the kind of power that has been perceived.

* Self-regulation is another skill that needs to begin being taught to children of this age in order to build on it through the years. It involves thinking first, then acting, and finally evaluating the action. This may seem complex at first, but it can be taught in a way that children of this age can understand, and begin practicing. They will not be successful every time, but the idea stems from creating a foundation of knowledge to build on, understand, and integrate into actions.

Middle School Protocol

Grades 4 - 8

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and Social, Emotional and/or Behavioral (SEB) programs are extremely important for helping our children grow and develop into

adults. Research studies have been tested for decades, showing the effectiveness of universal school-based programs in teaching and instilling these qualities in students. The universal ideal is about teaching all children, not just the ones we perceive to be problematic. "Reviews also point to significant indirect effects: reduction of anxiety and depression or emotional distress, prevention of conduct problems, such as drug use, improved attitudes toward school and enhanced school achievements, prevention of aggressive and antisocial behavior, and promotion of positive or prosocial behavior" (Ben, et al, 2012, p. 893). Teachers will be given a manual to follow when integrating these skills into their lesson plans. The following are the proposed aspects of SEL/SEB that have been proven to be most effective in development:

* Assertiveness is about being able to effectively communicate your thoughts and feelings. It's about not being passive, but also not having to be aggressive to be heard. As Cardelle-Elawar, et al (2003) explains, "... characteristics of being assertive: advocating one's personal rights; knowing how to say no, how to start, carry on, or end a conversation; how to solve specific social problems; how to resist group pressure; how to experience a strong sense of identity or freedom to act or choose; the use of positive comparisons; and gaining others acceptance and support, thus avoiding social rejection". Assertiveness is about looking people in the eye when communicating, showing you are an active listener. It is about being able to be the first to speak at times, including standing up for someone in need, instead of being quiet. When children lack the ability to express their thoughts and feelings in a way that brings understanding, they are more likely to revert to inappropriate behavior and beliefs out of frustration. "Assertive behavior is also linked with self-esteem and self-confidence, because individuals who feel competent and self-assured, interact more sincerely and naturally in developing relationships" (Cardelle-Elawar, et al, 2003).

* The self-regulation "process involves three phases- forethought, performance, and evaluation- that the student applies repeatedly during learning. The aim of forethought is to guide both the mind and the performance in any specific task, and to plan future actions. Performance consists of the execution of the activity, controlling not only every

aspect involved in the development of the activity, but also those factors that may affect specification and distribution of time and effort. Evaluation refers to the phase subsequent to learning effort; that is, the analysis of whatever occurred, the results obtained, and the relationship between that particular activity and other similar ones" (Cardelle-Elawar, et al, 2003).

* Empathy incorporates both understanding and compassion for others; being able to imagine what it would be like to be in the shoes of another, and how you would think, feel, and behave if you had an experience similar to that of another. "Empathy is the capacity to feel, perceive, understand, and identify with other people's needs, interests, and viewpoints" (Cardelle-Elawar, et al, 2003). Without instilling empathy in our youth, they will continue to grow and develop in a maladaptive way. Racism, sexism, and all other -isms come from people who lack empathy. If we do not begin to teach our children how to be empathetic, we will never overcome the harsh realities that come with racist, sexist, etc, ways of the thinking.

* The most important skill for changing behavior is self-reflection. Thinking about the day, about how we interacted with others, what we said and what we didn't say, and the outcomes we experienced from our own choices is how we can adjust our thoughts, words, and actions tomorrow. It helps us to understand ourselves on a deeper level, and allows us to become aware of our strengths and weaknesses. Awareness of both ourselves and others is a huge step toward changing behavior.

* Decision making skills will equip students with the ability to navigate through difficult situations, and have a higher probability of resolving those issues. If it is addressed on an interpersonal and intrapersonal viewpoint, children will have more confidence to approach an issue directly, instead of becoming emotionally bound in negativity without hope of a different outcome. It will help them understand how to make healthy, positive decisions followed by positive actions that will yield a potentially positive outcome to a problem. Hope is also a part of the decision making process. If we do not believe there is anything we can do to change the problem before

us, then why would we try? Why would we take the time to attempt making a positive decision if we only believe a negative outcome is possible? In hope, we find purpose, and we observe change in both ourselves and in others.

Many studies have been conducted over the last 20 years, and now we are seeing research done on comparing the effectiveness of the outcomes of SEL and SEB programs. In one study that assessed 75 different school based universal SEB programs, they found that the outcomes from these programs "...include enhancement of social and emotional skills; positive self image; prosocial behavior; reduction or prevention of antisocial behavior, mental problems, and disorders; and promotion of academic achievement" (Ben, et al, 2012, p.905). Ben, et al (2012), also found that the programs positively enhanced personality development and academic success. Another study assessed 82 SEL programs, and found long lasting effects up to 18 years later, including positive social relationships, increased rate of high school and college graduates, and a reduced rate of arrests and clinical disorders (Durlak, et al, 2017).

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Community Service

Formal community service is defined as volunteering to help people and organizations outside of our own family unit. For middle school aged children, performing community service is dependent upon their parents being able to drive them to and from the service location. Given this, community service projects will be open to many different levels of service with few guidelines to follow, such as helping the elderly couple that lives down the street. They will be allowed to define their own project, whether it be alone or with a group of other students, which will establish creativity. Community service projects will be given a time frame for completion, and then followed up with a reflection paper about what acts they performed and what they learned. The reflection papers should be presented to the class as a whole to incorporate the sharing of knowledge, sharing of experiences, and sharing of feelings associated with the work they completed. Studies show that community service can be linked to increased happiness and well-being, which will be discussed further in the high school section of community service below.

High School Protocol

Discussion Groups

The purpose of the discussion group is to get students from different social circles talking to their peers about issues that affect their peer group. The idea is to give them a safe space to listen to each other, learn from each other, understand each other, have compassion for one another, and most of all, extend their empathy to the outside world. They will be taking the lessons they learned from middle school, and applying them to a real-life situation, the discussion group. Students will be placed into discussion groups of no more than 20 students per group. The moderator of the group will give them a discussion topic every session. Some topics will take more than one session to completely discuss the issue, and will be addressed in the manual.

All groups will meet during the "free" period on the current schedule. For the freshman level, it will be a full school year discussion group. Sophomores, juniors, and seniors will be mixed together, and will meet either monthly or bi-weekly. Seniors, who want to take a leadership role, will be given the opportunity to be the moderator for a freshman group. It would satisfy their group discussion requirement; it would help the freshman feel more comfortable about opening up; and it would minimize the need for teacher involvement for the bulk of this section, which also minimizes cost. There are few studies on the benefits of involving youth in planning and implementing, but it will be beneficial to empowerment and leadership, which are both important aspects to the systemic future of our youth.

In order to truly work through all the issues that surround our youth today, it will be imperative to incorporate sessions that give time to talk with those who are similar. This can be accomplished in many ways, such as setting specific days that are allocated to a change in groups based on their choice. Students could secretly sign up for a subgroup they want to join during those specific days, and then be divided into the smaller groups. Those groups would need to be worked into the schedule in place of the regularly scheduled randomized group, for a time period no less than 12 weeks for freshman level, and no less than 6 weeks for sophomore through senior level. The specialty groups will be dispersed throughout the school year, which will allow for camaraderie on difficult topics, as well as self-confidence when discussing the issue among the standard group.

Trust, acceptance, and cohesiveness are extremely important to the productivity of the group, and it will take time to build those feelings. The standard group will need to meet for a minimum of 4 sessions before the similar groups begin meeting. In the similar groups, it will be extremely easy to build rapport; however, it will be much more difficult with the randomized group settings. Given that fact, by giving more time to build relationships with those we do not feel comfortable with in the randomized groups, it is more likely trust will be built.

The Buddy System

"For more than 100 years, Big Brothers Big Sisters has operated under the belief that inherent in every child is the ability to succeed and thrive in life" (www.bbbs.org). The Big Brother Big Sisters program uses mentoring of youth by those who are older. The proposed buddy system will deploy this proven philosophy by utilizing older peers to mentor their younger peers. Every student will be randomly placed in a group of 4 consisting of one freshman, one sophomore, one junior, and one senior to form their own personal buddy system. As the senior graduates, a new freshman is added to the group. By keeping the students in the same group as they progress through high school, the students will be able to build trust, acceptance, and cohesion among themselves. They will teach each other, and support each other. For example, if the senior group member sees his younger freshman buddy being bullied in the hallway, that particular senior will be more apt to stopping the problem instead of simply walking by because they don't know the kid being bullied, and the one being bullied will still be hurt by their classmate, however empowered by their older "buddy".

It is important to give these buddy groups time to get to know each other. This can be accomplished in multiple ways. The first step is to welcome the new freshman into their group. One way is to set a designated day where the sophomores, juniors, and seniors decorate the locker of their new freshman buddy to welcome them into their group and new school. This could also be applied to the farewell of the senior in their group. It will allow the groups to work together and strengthen their bonds. The next steps include creating times that the buddy groups can get together for "lunch on the field", where the groups can each bring a dish for them all to share, and together they have a picnic outside when the weather is accommodating. These are just a few scenarios, but again, this will be covered in the manual for the schools to decide which activities they want to implement.

Community Service

Being involved in your community and volunteering your time to help others has many beneficial effects on people of all ages. It allows us to see the struggles of others, and gives perspective to our own personal problems. High school students who participate in formal community service will gain intrapersonal learning, experiential learning, and a decrease in negative emotions while increasing positive emotions.

- * Intrapersonal Learning includes self-confidence, gaining a sense of purpose, communication skills, social responsibility, understanding diversity and multicultural aspects, and aids in finding a passion beyond ourselves.
- * Experiential learning includes the ability to work with people different from ourselves, social and relationship skills, teamwork, job skills, and leadership.
- * Negative emotions that will be decreased include stress, anxiety, anger, and depression.
- * Positive emotions that will be enhanced include happiness, compassion, and empathy, as well as an increase in physical health well-being.

High schools will partner with organizations that have volunteer activities for students of high school age. Students will be able to sign up for specific activities to streamline the process of volunteering. However, they will not be bound to only volunteering with the partner organizations. Students should be encouraged to work with organizations that inspire their passions. For example, a musical student may want to share their talent at a nursing home, drug rehab facility, or even a facility for the mentally ill to bring peace and happiness to people who are struggling. Each class will be given a total number of hours that must be completed each year, allowing them to take responsibility for finding and completing their hours. Each year, they will complete more hours than the year before.

Similar to the middle school students, each student should write a reflection paper, and present it to the class that monitors the community service. It will provide inspiration to classmates, and promote social responsibility for groups we do not always think about needing help. To further increase the reach of these personal projects, each individual class should vote on their favorite community service project that was presented. Each one of the winners reflection paper will be posted, while the author stays anonymous, and then every class as a whole votes for their favorite to be presented to the school at an assembly. For example, each one of Ms. Jones' social studies classes chooses a winner within their respective class period. Then all freshman winners are combined with authors staying anonymous for the entire freshman class to vote on their favorite. By keeping the anonymity, we can eliminate votes based on popularity. At the end of the year, the school has an assembly that allows for the freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior winners to present their community service project along with what they learned. This is important because it is easy to choose a service organization to work with as a freshman, and then continue doing the same thing for the next 3 years. However, by hearing what others have chosen to do with their time may inspire creativity, and possible transitions into more involved work over the next 3 years.

Execution

Implementing The Solution

Preschool & Kindergarten

In order to transition from a traditional program into Montessori is two-fold: training teachers and stocking the classrooms with Montessori tools. For all new teachers, Montessori training should be required for anyone wanting to teach preschool and kindergarten. For current teachers, Montessori training programs offer summer sessions so teachers do not have to take time off to complete the training. As for the classroom, Montessori uses materials specifically created for the child's learning process, as well as everyday items that are child sized, allowing the child to be able to accomplish tasks they would not be able to with the larger items, such as a broom to sweep the floor.

Grades 1 - 8

A panel of experts consisting of psychologists and/or psychiatrists, as well as educators will need to be established in order to create the manuals needed for implementing the additional curriculum. As stated above in the proposed plan, there have already been numerous programs created and tested over the last 20 years. The panel will gather all previously tested manuals, and will combine them to make one robust manual for all schools and teachers to follow in order to be successful in the implementation process. Once the manuals are created, teachers will need training to ensure their understanding of the material, which will streamline their ability to integrate the lessons into their current lesson plan. As for the community service section for grades 4-8, teachers will simply need to add the assignment to their lesson plans. The panel will decide the number of hours required for each year that is attainable by the students.

High School

The discussion groups will need to be added to the students class schedule, with randomly generated placement to establish heterogeneity. In the first year, group moderators will need to be utilized for all groups, including the freshman groups. This will allow all students to be a participant, and learn how groups work. Students at the junior level will have the opportunity to become a moderator as a senior for the freshman groups during the second year of this proposed plan. Moderators can be either teachers or from the counseling field, including graduate students needing to complete their required hours, which will minimize the cost of moderators. The same panel of experts that create the universal manual for grades 1-8 will also create the selection of topics for the discussion groups.

To implement the buddy system, all students will need to be assigned to their randomly generated group of 4. Each school will need to include the "buddy days" on the calendar, allowing teachers to work their lesson plans around them. A school assembly will be used to explain the system, the "buddy days", and the process for reporting issues in their buddy group. By outlining the process and goals to the student body as a whole instead of per class will minimize confusion and contradictions. During the "buddy days", for example the field picnic, all teachers will be utilized to monitor and visit with different groups to ensure productivity.

The panel of experts will set the number of community service hours required for each grade to complete. School districts will utilize the media in order to create a robust list of organizations willing to work with the students on service activities. The compiled list will be published on the school website for easy access, as well as a form for other organizations not listed to request being added to the compiled list.