



School Safety: Securing the System

In 1999, two students entered Columbine High School killing 13 people and injuring 26 more before killing themselves. From that day forward, school systems remain challenged to change the trajectory of school safety to protect students, faculty, and staff.

Twenty years after Columbine, the school shooting at Robb Elementary in Uvalde, TX showed the world exactly how easily things could still go terribly, terribly wrong.

Executive Summary

More than 323,000 students have experienced gun violence at school since [Columbine](#).¹ There have been 181 individuals killed and 394 wounded, as of Dec 2022. An entire generation of children has grown up practicing how to keep from getting killed in their classrooms. Despite our best efforts, we are failing them.

There is no one-size-fits-all for school safety. Districts are wildly diverse with buildings and budgets determined by the communities they serve. Variance in geolocation – urban, suburban, rural – brings economic and cultural differences that impact the approach. The public education system is often divided among municipalities or counties, depending on the state.

Those challenges should not deter us from attempting to find a methodology to identify and mitigate the risk factors. It would be naïve to assume we can prevent all future attacks. There are so many outside variables that contribute to school incursions. Many are cultural, some are influenced by outside advocacy groups and in a polarized political environment, the purpose of a security analysis gets lost.

This is about preventing loss of life. It's not a talking point.

We must start with an evaluation of the system as a whole. The district level is where the framework of the system is built. Each school within the system is evaluated against those policies. Where do they align and where is there an inability to comply?

By aggregating the data from the individual schools against the district's plan for safety and intrusion prevention, gaps become clear. If the framework represents the ideal environment, then steps must be taken to overcome any inability at the school level.

A successful effort must start with the goal of prevention and a contingency plan of response. To have one without the other is to miss the whole point of risk management. The prevention element requires the system to look at itself, its relationships, and protocols.

Bureaucracy must be seen as an obstacle for both the system and its partners. Both schools and law enforcement have layers of decision-making review and approval. Red tape slows the framework's change process but can be the difference between life and death in a response, as was [suggested at Robb Elementary](#).²

We can no longer afford such an approach.

Our Alternative

We utilize a phased process; the first is to assess the framework and the second is to facilitate a response. The steps will take place at the district level, followed by a school-by-school evaluation. By combining the results of each, we complete the following:

¹ Washington Post: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2018/local/school-shootings-database/>

² New York Times: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/28/us/valde-school-police.html>

- Establishment of a baseline at the district level
- Ranked alignment of the schools within the framework
- Conflicts between the framework and the school's ability to comply
- Actionable insights to improve school response capabilities
- Process improvements made at the district level

GAP ANALYSIS

1. **Evaluate the current state:** This is where a baseline is established. Improvement will not occur if progress cannot be measured. The current state takes an unsparing look at how safety and security are currently managed.
2. **Envision the desired state:** This is where we assess the difference between where we are and where we need to be. The gap must be measurable and the reasons for it documented.
3. **Bridge the gaps:** Devise steps to close or minimize the gaps across the system. Modify the documentation of the current state. Clarify the changes required to bring the entire system into alignment.

These three steps are consistent in any gap analysis and there are [multiple methodologies](#)³ for doing the work. Choose the one that best clarifies your objective but keep it simple. Complicated diagrams and too many metrics can dilute the ultimate purpose – to define the problem and identify opportunities to fix it.

Project Definition

There will be two phases to the project. The first will assess the framework of the Education system as a whole. The second will evaluate the alignment of the schools within that framework.

- Phase 1: System Assessment
- Phase 2: School Evaluation

The Education system is ultimately responsible for establishing the district's safety framework. The framework should be measurable across the system and actionable at every school. The outcome of Phase 2 will determine the success of the latter. By marrying the two phases together, we close the gaps in the system framework and identify critical improvements at the school level.

Phase 1: System Assessment

The goal of the first phase is to review the framework established by the district to identify gaps and potential workarounds. The framework must be tight and secure – all the schools will be evaluated on their alignment with those policies and procedures. For this exercise to be useful, based on the information provided, we must find and close the opportunities for a shooter to gain entry.

The details below outline the project's team structure, roles and responsibilities, and the task timeline. There is no guarantee that we can stop a determined shooter, but we can create an actionable framework. The work product from this session must be doable for all components of the system.

³ Jotform.com: <https://www.jotform.com/blog/gap-analysis-tools/>

Some schools may require additional resources but the purpose is to standardize safety for all locations. Budgetary constraints must be resolved equitably. Public outcry over the loss of life would be devastating and costly. (See [Uvalde](#))⁴

The details below walk through the typical project structure, tasks, timeline, and deliverables. They may vary, depending on the size of a district or the number of schools.

PROJECT TEAM

ROLE	RESPONSIBILITY	From
Project Champion	This person has a leadership position in the administration. His or her role is part advocate, part cheerleader, and part problem solver. They help keep the project moving forward.	Client
Project Lead	This individual the point of contact for the project. They provide oversight, identify resources and make final decisions.	Client
Project Manager	This is an outside consultant with expertise in school safety, project management, and data aggregation. They manage to budget and schedule and communicate directly with the Project Lead	Consultant
Stakeholder Group (s)	Stakeholders represent different interests throughout the administration. A typical group represents district leaders, principals, superintendents, teachers, IT managers, legal and community members. The size of the group should be manageable – 8 to 10 maximum. If necessary create two groups and populate them with a mix of representatives.	Client (Identifies stakeholders and invites them to participate.
Documentation Staff	On the client side, this person will produce policies, procedures, and plans on safety, security, crisis response, community engagement, contingencies, etc. On the consulting side, this person will conduct the review and manage the comparison of different documents, providing an overview to the Project Manager.	Client/Consultant
Interviewer(s)	This person(s) will conduct interviews with stakeholders and identify outstanding questions, workarounds, and gaps in documentation.	Consultant

PROJECT TASKS

The client is responsible for choosing and inviting stakeholders, with guidance from the Project Manager. Stakeholders should include representatives from administration, logistics, HR, IT, maintenance, and communications. We suggest that legal and someone from the budget office be involved.

1. Kick-Off Meeting:

- Introductions by the Project Lead.
- Brief Overview by Project Manager
- State the Mission
- Roles & Responsibilities
- Timeline
- Q&A

⁴ Forbes: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/brianbushard/2022/12/01/valde-survivors-file-27-billion-class-action-suit--here-are-all-the-suits-filed-against-police-gun-makers-and-school-officials/>

2. Documentation Review

- Documentation handoff
- Relationship btw policies and procedures
- Doc comparison
- Gap Analysis

3. Stakeholder Interviews

- Safety Concerns/Incidents
- Number of schools/students
- Communication structure btw admin and schools
- Budget Constraints
- Variance in communities
- Needed Improvements
- Open discussion

4. Training Review

- Safety Curriculum
- Schedule and Frequency
- Attendees

TYPICAL DELIVERABLES

An interim report will detail the gap between the current and desired states. It will include recommendations on closing the gaps and the benefits of doing so. There has been no school-by-school review as yet, so this report is specific to the district. It will be used as a tool in the school evaluations that follow.

The Documentation Review looks at any incongruities between policies and procedures. It assesses the resources required and usage overlap. (i.e. – what equipment needs to be where and who gets it there.) The references to partners – local/state/fed/ law enforcement and other first responders – are checked for updated contact formation and clarity of process. Who does what when is a key analysis of procedures for overlap in roles and responsibilities.

Stakeholder interviews serve multiple purposes. First is their understanding of safety as a system issue versus as a school issue. Next is collecting and confirming their understanding of the current gaps and suggestions to bridge them. Stakeholders bring an inherent intelligence of the system from their role's perspective. By collecting and aggregating their information, we can identify common recommendations and obstacles.

The training materials will be checked for alignment with the system documentation. Training should always be ongoing – part of onboarding and reoccurring quarterly. Training attendees should include stakeholders and any relevant participants in the safety/security protocols. Training materials should include lockdowns, emergency response plans, outreach to law enforcement, and communication with parents and the community.

The final step in this phase is a presentation of the findings and a group discussion.

PHASE 1 TIMELINE

Expect the reviews and stakeholder interviews to require between 2 and 3 months, perhaps more depending on the size of the system. The data is compiled and analyzed and documented in the final report. The report contains an executive summary, followed by a detailed evaluation of the current state with actionable recommendations for moving forward. From start to finish, estimate 4 to 6 months.

Phase 2: School Evaluation

Phase 2 begins with an in-person meeting with each school in the system. This evaluation determines whether the school has the resources to conform to the desired state. The evaluation is a practical process, focused on how safety/security is executed in real-time – the who, what, when, where, and how. The schools are where a gap becomes a critical risk putting lives at stake.

As important as the overview of the system is, the ability to turn premise into practice rests at the school. For example, all the necessary planning and training had been documented and provided by the city of Uvalde.

Despite that, the response fell apart. [Leadership diverted](#)⁵ from the plan – from an active shooter response to barricaded suspect. The 9-1-1 calls from students in the classrooms where the gunman was shooting were not communicated to the incident commander. The radios didn’t work well, there was no master key to enter locked classrooms and leadership was undefined. As a result, 376 law enforcement officers were on the scene and waited over an hour to confront and kill the gunman.

Most people don’t know Uvalde wasn’t even close to the last school shooting in 2022. The assault on Robb Elementary became a nationally shared tragedy in part because of the botched response that cost far too many lives. There was no maliciousness, instead a series of bad decisions, a break from standard procedure, and a lack of leadership in midst of crisis.

Everyone thought there was a plan but no one ever gave it a trial run. Though every school does active shooter drills for faculty and children, they rarely do a simulation of a response. It’s one of the services we offer.

The goal of a school safety evaluation is prevention. In a perfect world, the response would be an afterthought. We all know this is not a perfect world – the surety of response is priority one.

PROJECT TEAM

ROLE	RESPONSIBILITY	Chosen By
School Principal	Each principal is the lead for his or her school. The team leader guides the school staff and its partners through the evaluation process. The principal is a resource on school policy and the final decision-maker in event of disagreements among stakeholders.	Client
Project Manager	Each school will have a project manager. Depending on the number of schools, we’d suggest they cover no more than 4 schools, preferably with similar socioeconomics and geolocations.	Consultant
School Staff	Each school will identify a team to facilitate access to the building, answer questions, and discuss critical and secondary needs. People in this group should include faculty, staff, coaches, bus drivers, janitorial/maintenance staff, parent aides, and resource officers.	Principal
First Responders	Contact information for local law enforcement, EMS, and hospitals for a discussion of their role in a response. Strengths, limitations, and recommendations for improvement in the process.	Principal
Evaluation team	This group should be limited in size to two or three members. They are security professionals who do a building walk-through. They also assist	Consultant

⁵ Fox News: <https://www.fox4news.com/news/ualde-cisd-police-officers-active-shooter-training-march>

ROLE	RESPONSIBILITY	Chosen By
	with several tasks, including physical security, safety protocols, stakeholder interviews, documentation, and training review.	

INTRODUCTIONS

A welcome meeting should be convened by the school principal to let staff and community stakeholders know what is going on and why. The Project Manager will outline the process and introduce the evaluation team. He or she will clarify expectations for participants and answer questions or address concerns. Make sure they understand their feedback is welcome and respected.

DHS ASSESSMENT TOOL

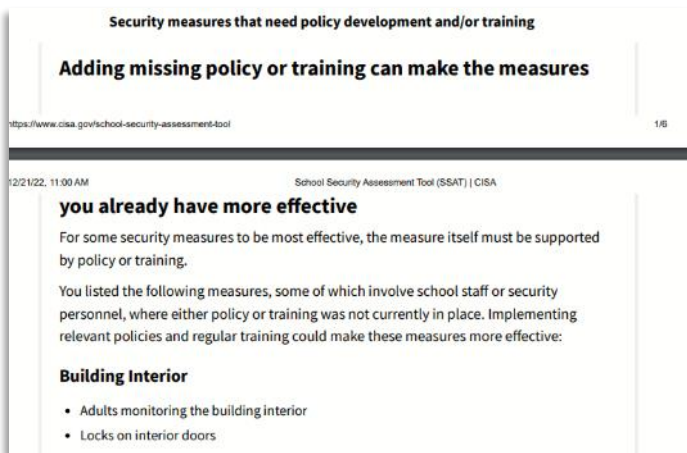
The first step for school staff and principal is to complete an [assessment created by the Department of Homeland Security](#).⁶ The purpose of the survey is to standardize baseline data based on the awareness and perceptions of individuals on the ground in the event of an attack.

SCHOOL SECURITY ASSESSMENT TOOL (SSAT)



Designed by the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), the online tool collects information on the safety and security of the school. It is a method of gathering data in a format that is easily replicated throughout the district. This provides insights into variants between schools – rural, suburban and urban.

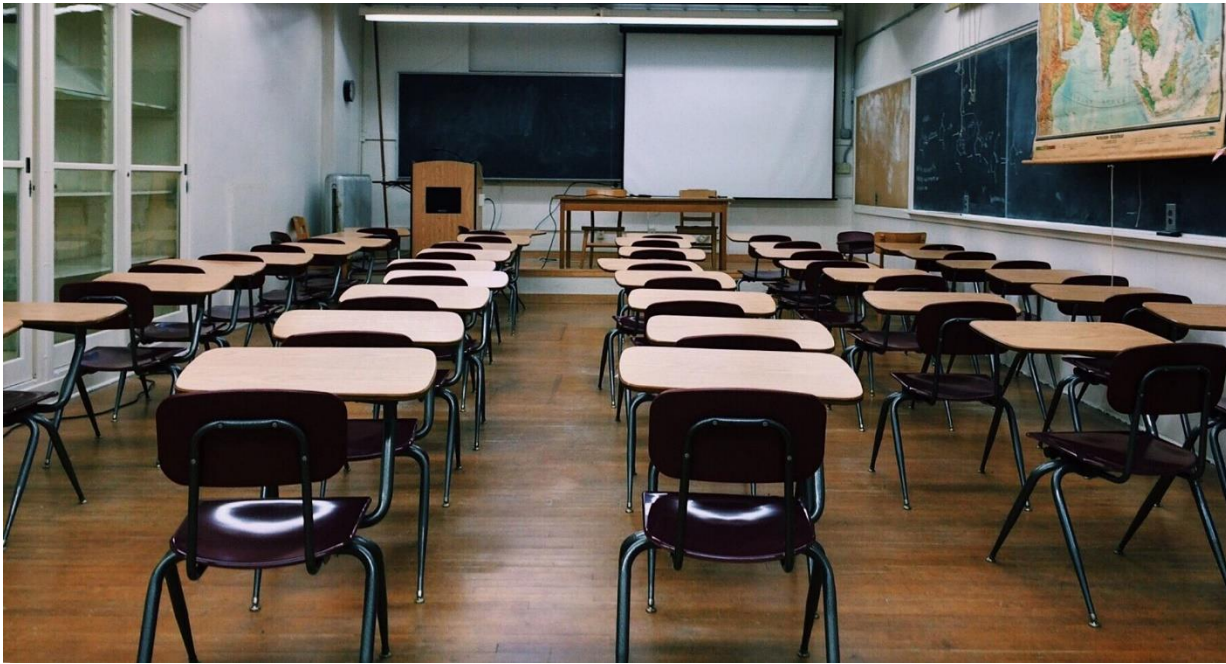
For item 3: Choose a Scenario: Please use item two: *An active assailant who is a student enters the premises from outside the school grounds after making a threat on social media. The attack occurs inside the school building, on a weekday during the instructional time when most students are in classrooms. The attacker has a gun.*



School staff will be asked to complete the assessment and provide a copy of the results to the project manager. The results are anonymous and will be entered into a spreadsheet or database. Some of the collected information may be used to supplement training curricula, and policy documents or be provided to first responders.

Based on the information you provide, the results page will show a series of improvements specific to your school.

⁶ CISA <https://www.cisa.gov/school-security-assessment-tool>



PROPERTY WALKTHROUGH

The physical security of the building is assessed by the evaluation team. They will use standardized templates to capture information so it can be compared across all schools in the system.

Staff members handle the walkthrough of school buildings, the parking lot, bus pickup area, and carpool lanes. The identification of vulnerabilities and any history of hostile events – successful or stopped – should be covered. Be conscious that team members may not be comfortable sharing unflattering information in the presence of authority figures.

There should be a checklist of necessary equipment and the contact person for the agency that provides it. They should be checked and charged on a schedule. The master key location should be known to at least three people, including one person who wasn't employed at the school. The contact information for all school officials, law enforcement, EMS, and other first responders should be posted and updated regularly.

DOCUMENTATION REVIEW

Look at the school policies and procedures on safety and security. Watch for discrepancies in response preparation, communications with law enforcement and the community, lockdown alerts, command structure, and evacuation locations.

Information related to community partners should be confirmed. It helps to compare documentation from partners with that of the school for inherent gaps between the two.

GROUP DISCUSSIONS

School staff discussion groups are most effective when roles are mixed in small, manageable groups. A group might be composed of two teachers, a parent aide, a janitor, and a bus driver. This is less structured, though the evaluation team will lead the groups with sample questions about security, safety, and responsiveness.

It is important to include any existing efforts to improve and the obstacles that may have prevented them. Given that budgetary constraints are an ongoing reality, we must capture as much data as possible to rank improvement options in the final recommendations,

The second set of discussions is with first responders. This may be done in person or remotely depending on availability. If necessary, we will create an online form to capture their thoughts and recommendations for improving interactions with the school.

Setting up discussions with parents should be structured through existing groups – PTA, etc.

REPORT

The Evaluation Team will pull the relevant information into a brief report, with an executive summary that prioritizes recommended improvements, ranked by the impact they have on prevention and response.

PHASE 2 TIMELINE

The timeline is driven by the number of schools in a district as well as the distance between them. Assume that a single school will take a minimum of four hours to assess. At most, the team will complete two a day. Best case scenario is to divide the number of schools by two. That is the number of days required for a single evaluation team. Additional teams will shorten the duration and a large number of rural schools will likely lengthen it.

Final Deliverable

The information from both phases must now be combined into a final set of recommendations. The body of both reports will be maintained separately. Sections may be quoted in the final list of recommendations.

The final deliverable is a table of priorities. Based on the initial measurement of the gap, the table lists steps to improve safety, strengthen a response and reduce the loss of life in the event of an attack.

The data table will include the number of schools with similar priorities, and the actions to be taken at the district level and the school level. There will be a candid discussion of funding and the cost of acting now versus after an active shooter. The goal is to provide the district and schools with actionable steps to support a secure and safe environment, as well as a fast, coordinated response should an active shooter be on the premises.



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