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# School Shootings and Counselor Leadership: Four Lessons from the Field

*This article discusses four lessons for school counselors responding to any serious crisis: (a) School counselors can expect to take on leadership roles in times of crisis due to their expertise. (b) Crisis teams are temporary organizations within a school structure. Membership in two organizations can create role conflict. (c) Effective school counselors have found subtle ways to support and counsel formal leaders. And, (d) school counselors must be vigilant in their own care, especially during a crisis.*

The Virginia Tech shootings in Blacksburg, Virginia, in April 2007 set a new "record . . . for campus carnage" (Thomas, 2007, p. 24), almost doubling the number of fatalities of the 1966 University of Texas shooting incident. Six months prior to Virginia Tech, in October 2006, the nation watched in horror as children's bodies were recovered in the small Amish schoolhouse of Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania. Until the massacre at Virginia Tech, the shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, were the most widely known case of school violence in the United States. These incidents of rage and violence have become a wake-up call that our campuses not only are vulnerable to attack, but that our children can be murdered as well.

Recent campus violence probably also conjures memories of other shooting events: Frontier Middle School in Moses Lake, Washington (1996); Pearl High School in Pearl, Mississippi (1997); Heath High School in West Paducah, Kentucky (1997); Westside Middle School in Jonesboro, Arkansas (1998); Thurston High School in Springfield, Oregon (1998); and Santana High School and Granite Hills High School in suburban San Diego (2001), to name only a few. These school shootings still register on the public radar in the form of lawsuits, insurance settlements, and ongoing community mental health services for victims and families (Breen, 2001; Flaherty, 2001; Pitman, Sparr, Saunders, & McFarlane, 1996).

Campus mass killings and the terrorist strategies employed by both rage-filled students and adults have forced American educators, including teachers, school administrators, and school counselors, to prepare for and deal with assault situations (Auger, Seymour, & Roberts, 2004; Carlisle & Frare, 2003). Public school personnel have recently become conversant in such terminology as "lockdown drills," "search-and-rescue duties," and "triage sites"—a vernacular that did not previously exist in school policy books just a few years ago. The demand for trained crisis leadership on campuses has forced new roles for administrators, and not surprisingly, for school counselors.

Fein (2001) interviewed leaders at four North American school shooting sites to understand the leaders' experience of responding to these incidents. Formal leaders such as superintendents, principals, and other administrators were the anticipated participant pool. However, these formal leaders often named other informal leaders, including school counselors, as key contributors in the aftermath of the shooting incident. Consequently, Fein's study also included school counselors and other mental health practitioners who assumed leadership roles during the crises. This article will draw on the results of this study to present some general lessons for school counselors who may be faced with disaster situations.

School counselors who responded to a major school incident or disaster have voiced feelings of inadequate preparation (Lovre, 2003; Shen & Sink, 2002). One school counselor stated, "We had nothing. We started at zero. Nothing" (Fein, 2003, p. 147). Although school districts attempt to keep training updated and drills current, school counselor preparedness is frequently overlooked (Auger et al., 2004). Fein found that professional school counselors played significant leadership roles in the aftermath of some school shootings—especially in the immediate aftermath. Debriefings of counselors and other leaders from high-profile shootings revealed that many school counselors performed duties that were not part of their formal preparation or training.

However, the gap between the knowledge and skills required for effective leadership in crisis response and actual counselor preparation is significant (Allen et al., 2002). Demands placed upon school counselors in crisis response situations continue to increase as the scope of school and community critical incidents broadens. We argue that these disturbing trends present school counselors, and those who professionally support them, with four lessons.

## LESSON 1: BE PREPARED TO LEAD

When a disaster occurs, school counselors often must often respond to the needs and demands of students, staff, and administrators. Student safety and accountability, staff needs, law enforcement communications, fire and rescue squad requirements, administrative directives—all these functions can (and in some instances, did) converge on the shoulders of the school counselor.

When one is overseeing the needs of children and adults during a crisis response, tensions can run high among those seeking support (Chibbaro & Jackson, 2006; Luna, 2000). Responding to a disaster or emergency situation distresses everyone, especially those in leadership roles. School administrators who have responded to shootings attempted to contain and control further harm. They were called upon to address the media and perform duties they never dreamed possible. Unanticipated demands on school administrators made them unavailable to make many other decisions. Often school counselors were asked to perform duties that included executive decision-making about issues of student safety or security, or triage needs following the shootings (Fein, 2001, 2003; Riley & McDaniel, 2000).

In the days immediately following the campus shootings, some school counselors, largely due to their training and expertise, became extremely influential, sometimes emerging as a kind of "CEO" of post-shooting events (Fein, 2001). At one site, the superintendent announced that he planned to close the schools the day after the shooting occurred, but a school counselor advised against the decision, explaining that many children might be left in situations where no adults would be available to help them cope, arguing that the children would be cared for and be safer at school. The superintendent took her advice and district schools remained open the day after the shooting.

In another setting, a school counselor refused to allow the district maintenance department to patch up the bullet holes in walls immediately after the shooting, which the department had been directed to do by a central office administrator. The counselor reasoned, "We left the bullet holes there for students. Some put their fingers in saying, 'I was here,' or 'That one came close.' Those kids needed to do that. I told maintenance when it was time to patch them up" (Fein, 2003, p. 140). In another situation, a school counselor, reflecting on the scope of his role, stated that he bore a lot of the weight of what was going on in the school and the entire school district (Fein). Shootings caused school counselors to be thrust into positions of responsibility (Fein, 2003). Wiger and Harowski (2003) found that during crises, school counselors took on administrative tasks without incident command training or formal role assignment. One counselor in Fein's study described how he was selected to head the incident response team:

> I arrived right after the shooting. There were still bodies on the ground. We got everything under control and got the children home and I went up to the superintendent and said, "You have got to put someone in charge of this." He pointed his finger at me and said, "You're in charge." (Fein, pp. 135–136)

According to Fein, both administrators and counselor leaders worried about making mistakes; they felt the "weight of leadership" (p. 147). One "counselor CEO" said, "I never felt so alone in my life" (p. 147). This feeling of isolation was a frequent finding for leaders, including school counselor leaders, in similar situations.

During a school crisis, a disproportionate transfer of intense emotions from traumatized individuals to school counselors often occurs. One counselor described what he referred to as the "boy-on-a-bike syndrome" (Fein, 2003, p. 99) to characterize the weight that came with crisis intervention and the need for a team approach under circumstances such as a school shooting:

> A boy is riding his bike and he falls and scrapes his knee. He gets up and sees three or four people looking at him; but he won't cry. He will get on his bike and peddle home as fast as he can, and when he sees his mother at the door, then he cries. So the boy-on-the-bike syndrome is what happens in schools. Teachers will often hold it together. Students even will hold it together, if they are being informed that the counselors and the crisis response team are on their way. But once we enter into the school, then, like the boy-on-the-bike, there is this invisible, yet tangible transfer of power from the teachers onto our shoulders, in relation to the emotional well-being of the students—and at some level, of the staff. Typically only one or two of us go into a school, but how can one or two handle

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> that emotional transfer of power for [so many] students [for an event of the magnitude of a school shooting]? So an entire team went in and worked collaboratively. (pp. 99–100)

What this counselor did not state directly, but which no doubt also occurred, was that this same transfer of power onto the shoulders of school counselors also occurs from formal organizational leaders who feel absolutely in new territory in violence or disaster situations.

## LESSON 2: SERVING TWO ORGANIZATIONS CREATES ROLE CONFLICT

**When a disaster occurs, school counselors often must often respond to the needs and demands of students, staff, and administrators.**

The crisis response team for an event of the magnitude of a school shooting has as its primary mission the management of both the event and post-event counseling needs of students, staff, and the community. This "organization" remains in place as long as immediate and long-term post-event counseling needs remain to be addressed by the crisis team.

The school counselor's role has historically varied from district to district, from campus to campus, and from day to day. Especially in smaller districts, school counselors have traditionally been assigned quasi-administrative duties such as student supervision or responding to parent or visitor emergencies (Allen et al., 2002). At some school shooting sites, administrators were absent or unavailable when shootings erupted. Therefore, when a school is subjected to such a horrific event, leaders arise not only from those who are well versed in crisis situations, but also from those who do not have classroom responsibilities (Lovre, 2003). In essence, school counselors constitute "slack" resources in the system—available resources beyond the minimum necessary to conduct daily operations (DeMarco, 2001).

School shootings are such an overwhelming disaster that many organizational adaptations are needed in response. In the aftermath of the shootings, counselors could not simply continue to perform the same tasks for which they were normally responsible (Auger et al., 2004). Scheduling, testing, and guidance took a back seat to the needs of traumatized students, teachers, and support staff. School counselors carried out their normal counseling functions, but the scope of their work quantitatively and qualitatively went well beyond their usual routine. Also, counseling needs often exceeded the school districts' capacity to provide it, so public and private agencies offered to assist (Fein, 2001, 2003). Although the membership and structures of these outside agencies did not change, their role and their relationship to the public schools changed dramatically.

As often occurs in response to a crisis or disaster, new "organic" structures emerge (Dynes, 1970), and this occurred at some school shooting sites with "counselor CEOs" in the lead. Freed up to manage some aspects of the chaos (such as coordination of response efforts and/or channeling of communications), school counselors took on administrative roles that forced them to make hundreds of decisions they would not normally have made in more ordinary times (Fein, 2001, 2003). However, there were very few, if any, structures in place to address issues such as determining licensing qualifications for outside counselors and monitoring their counseling activities. Some non-school counselor volunteers had no experience with children. Some clergy volunteers had no counseling credentials and/or insinuated their particular religious perspectives onto victims. One crisis team leader described having no protocols and no policies or guidelines to consult (Fein, 2003).

One counselor, who served as a kind of lieutenant on the crisis response team, described the organization that emerged at her site:

> I describe it as a kind of octopus with [name of school counselor] at the center—not as a negative characterization, but structurally. There were several people who were like the tentacles. I was one of those people. We basically did the planning process. They [formal leaders] relied on our expertise. Those of us who were the arms of the octopus were not directly involved in facilitating groups, rather, we just kind of moved around to make sure things were getting done. Quality control. I did very little direct service. (Fein, 2001)

Even in non-crisis times there is much confusion about the role of professional school counselors (Beesley, 2004; House, 2002; Lieberman, 2004; Paisley, 2001), with role confusion exacerbated by the changing needs of schools, by differing administrative views about the role of the school counselor, and by assignments to multiple campuses. The onset of a crisis also contributes to role confusion because crisis response teams became an "organization within an organization" (Fein, 2001, 2003). School counselors who led the crisis response teams had to set aside one role for another. The goals of the school or district and the goals of the crisis response team certainly overlapped, but they were not identical.

School counselors who find themselves in these circumstances must understand the inherent role conflicts in serving two different organizations simultaneously. As leaders in the emergent crisis team organization, school counselors had authority and responsibility, often based on their expertise,

that they did not have in the larger organization of the school or district. In the immediate aftermath of the crisis, they sometimes "outranked" their principal or superintendent, due to the unusually compelling circumstances brought upon them. The same school counselors seen as heroic during a crisis sometimes became the target of post-crisis criticism for having overstepped their authority. This type of harsh judgment underscores the tension inherent in serving two organizations simultaneously.

## LESSON 3: EMPLOY SUBTLE COUNSELING

Typically, formal leaders (i.e., superintendents and principals) refused to attend debriefing sessions, and if they did attend, they participated only perfunctorily, or they left early (Fein, 2003). A typical response from school leaders regarding their participation in critical incident debriefings was they "didn't have time" (Fein, p. 65). One principal stated,

> You felt like you had to protect the children that were still here and had to be concerned about the teachers and the community and you didn't have time to be concerned about yourself. You are kind of forced in a position of leadership where everyone is looking for you for an example, so you just had to set the example that you wanted everyone else to follow. (Fein, 2001)

The professional culture of school leaders has promoted care for others over care for oneself. School counselors, sensitive to these leadership norms, often used informal conversations as an effective method of "counseling" despite administrators' refusals or reluctance to attend formal debriefings. Counselor training and expertise proved invaluable to formal leaders, both organizationally and personally, because district and building administrators were overwhelmed with unfamiliar and threatening issues they had never before faced (Fein, 2001, 2003; Lerner, Volpe, & Lindell, 2003). According to Fein, formal leaders were poorly equipped to make sense of their own normal responses to traumatic events as they tried to maintain what they viewed as proper leader demeanor.

Because of their training, school counselors had a clearer vision of what was needed to address basic human needs than did many school district administrators. One counselor stated that his role and that of the team was to try to mitigate the trauma response by allowing victims "to ventilate some of their feelings in a safe environment" (Fein, 2003, p. 89). Another explained that he saw his role as "mega-family therapy. . . . I applied system principles from the family and broadened it to the school and to the community at large" (Fein, p. 158). Often what some principals, superintendents, and other central office administrators did not realize was that they did have opportunities to talk about their own experiences when fortunate enough to dialogue with school counselors who practiced "subtle" counseling (Lerner et al., 2003). Skilled school counselors employed stress-debriefing strategies and counseling techniques that appeared to school leaders to be just another conversation (Fein, 2001, 2003).

Even when debriefings were set up exclusively for school and district managers, school leaders tended not to participate fully. One superintendent's comment was representative of the attitude toward counseling and debriefing expressed by formal school leaders:

> We [the administrative team] thought, "We're tough," you know. We can do this [critical incident debriefing] in a half an hour or two hours in an afternoon and be done. Probably we didn't do that very well. It would be something to learn. Because you need to allow time to debrief. (Fein, 2003, p. 65)

School counselors who understand the school leader culture can address individual leader needs and help leaders to make sense of their own experiences in a crisis. Many school counselors understand their role as serving and supporting others; by doing so in times of crisis they provided much-needed support to students, parents, and staff, including administrators.

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## LESSON 4: MINISTER TO THYSELF

School counselors were as impacted by the shootings as the formal leaders. Investigations into the depth and scope of mental health issues following campus murders reveal long-term health impacts on a broad population, including school administrators, school counselors, teachers, support staff, and any direct witnesses to the event (Lerner et al., 2003; Riley & McDaniel, 2000). Fein (2001, 2003) found the most commonly reported physiological response to the shootings by all participants was disordered sleep. Sleep disturbances are a major marker of both short- and long-term traumatization (Wiger & Harowski, 2003). One school counselor who headed the crisis team in his school district described his lack of sleep during the first few days after the shooting: "My sleep was four hours max a night, for that week—interrupted sleep. I would wake up, you know, a half-hour after falling asleep, panicking over something I forgot to do. Literally, I was hyperaroused for seven days" (Fein, 2003, pp. 52–53).

Hyper-vigilance is one of many fallout phenomena that can occur for even the most prepared crisis responders. Other physiological responses to trauma may include a heightened startle reflex, loss of appetite, general nervousness, increased fatigue, and listlessness (van der Kolk, 1987; Wigert & Harowski).

Emergency personnel are trained to prevent themselves from experiencing secondary trauma exposure and to limit their periods of trench-level work (Lerner et al., 2003). Law enforcement officers, fire department personnel, hospital staff, and other emergency responders are usually trained in the Mitchell model of critical incident stress debriefing (Lerner et al.; Wiger & Harowski, 2003). However, in educational settings, neither school counselors nor administrators are routinely trained for crisis response or formal stress debriefing (Chibbaro & Jackson, 2006).

It is unthinkable for major government organizations that respond to emergencies, such as police and fire departments, to set up work shifts without scheduling incident stress debriefings (Lerner et al., 2003). Without these debriefings, emergency responders may be vulnerable to secondary trauma due to either direct exposure to the traumatic event or to interactions with traumatized victims. Disordered sleep, irritability, and impaired judgment are all symptoms of secondary trauma (Figley, 1995). In times of extreme crisis, school counselors and administrators are especially vulnerable to secondary trauma.

**Like the instructions recited by flight attendants before takeoff, crisis responders must put on their own oxygen masks first.**

In Fein's (2001) study, one school counselor acknowledged the effects of secondary trauma on the counseling team: "We were all impacted. We were all traumatized, but at a much lighter rate than the kids" (p. 121). Counselors reported that they were aware of their own susceptibility to secondary trauma—a result of contact with individuals who were traumatized—but that their desire to help victims trumped the personal risk. Often they did not seek counseling for themselves. One stated, "We did not debrief as much as we should have" (Fein, p. 121). Therefore, school counselors, like many of the formal leaders of schools where shootings occurred, carry scars from these incidents. One counselor reported, "Emotionally, I am fine" (p. 110), but then described an experience that suggested otherwise:

> There's a memorial case in the school. I walk in there and see some of the things in there. That bothers me, so I don't look at it, even now. When I get in the front door, I just avert my head because it bothers me. I don't know why, but it does. (p. 110)

When they were able to draw upon their knowledge and expertise, counselors could access resources that were not available to formal leaders. One school counselor crisis team leader described looking at himself as his own private science experiment. As he experienced several days of hyper-arousal, he was able to look at his own experience and to make sense of it:

> Is this happening to me because I am weak or because I am going nuts? Or is this just a normal human reaction? The crux of crisis intervening is to try to normalize some of what victims experience. I was able to naturalize my own experience as well. At that time I realized that I was probably under more pressure than most folks, so I knew I was okay. (Fein, 2003, p. 173)

## CONCLUSION

We are indebted to voices from the field, the men and women who shared their experiences with us, sometimes at considerable personal cost. They did so because they wanted something good to come out of a horrific event they had experienced. Their experiences and the continued leadership trends in crisis response needs in our society led to the four lessons presented here. Based on these lessons, we offer the following recommendations.

### Be Prepared to Lead

Care-giving is central to the role of school counselors and is what is most needed in a crisis event. Most school district policy and procedure books are woefully lacking descriptions or directions for the school counselor's role in emergencies (Wiger & Harowski, 2003). Critical incident tasks are either unaddressed or omitted entirely in these policy records. Whether or not they are trained, and despite ongoing ambiguities about their role, school counselors will likely emerge as leaders during crises. School districts must identify and prepare all leaders for multiple role responsibilities during and after a crisis event. Formal training can only enhance their effectiveness. School counselors and administrators must be certified in critical incident stress debrief methods in order to promote and model self-care, and to better serve their constituencies. Counselor educators should be able to network at state and national levels to regularly review certification procedures. Changes in certification standards also must be conveyed to school administrators on an annual basis.

### Serving Two Organizations Creates Role Conflict

Crisis teams are organizations that temporarily emerge within an organization, but few recognize them as such. During a crisis, school counselors may find that their roles and duties expand to meet needs

and demands that did not exist in pre-crisis times. As reported in Fein (2001, 2003), the weight of such expanded leadership was stressful. To reduce stress, much of it caused by the extreme ambiguity engendered by major crises, crisis teams should have co-leaders so that responsibilities can be shared. Finally, all school counselors, along with administration, should review incident response roles and duties and understand the inherent role conflicts during crises.

### Employ Subtle Counseling

The culture of school leadership places high value on caring for others over care of oneself. A major crisis is a time when both the school district community and its leaders are most vulnerable. The needs of others will always trump personal needs. Denial is no substitute for the pain of gnawing self-doubt, deep sorrow, guilt, or shame. Leaders are just people, regardless of their assumptions—and sometimes our own—that they are super-human. Leaders who were reluctant to attend critical incident debriefing sessions were willing to spend a few moments checking in with the crisis team leader. One superintendent described how he casually mentioned that he wasn't sleeping well and his appetite was diminished. The school counselor's response reassured him that *not* feeling that way would be worrisome. In a crisis, leaders experience substantial anxiety about events over which they have little or no control. Subtle counseling helps reduce some of the anxiety that leaders may have about themselves.

### Minister to Thyself

Care-givers or other responders should not become casualties in incident response because they are overburdened. Despite their knowledge and training about secondary trauma (Figley, 1995), care-givers in the Fein (2001) study did not take the time to debrief as often as they should have. One rule of thumb for responders is to serve only 3 to 4 hours or less on a critical incidence response shift and then be immediately allowed to debrief with trained personnel (Lerner et al., 2003). Like the instructions recited by flight attendants before takeoff, crisis responders must put on their own oxygen masks first.

One school counselor's words, responding to the question "What if you had it all to do over again?" captured what may have been true for many of the mental health professionals who provided assistance in the days following school shootings. His words capture both the horror of counseling work under crisis circumstances and the tremendous contribution that counselors made: "That was the worst three weeks of my life, but it was rewarding. We sure did a lot out there" (Fein, 2003, p. 165). Whatever scars these school counselors suffered from their experiences were seen as preferable to the scars they might have carried if they perceived themselves as not having done all they could have done in such situations. In other words, living with a traumatic injury was seen as preferable to living with personal and professional shame of not serving students—albeit in ways never even imagined when choosing the school counseling profession. ▮

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