

## After Surviving Classroom Shooting, L.A. Teacher Reconsiders

### What School Safety Means

By Evie Blad

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While big, rampage-style school shootings get most of the attention in school safety debates, smaller incidents of gun violence in school can also traumatize students and staff and upend their sense of safety.

Los Angeles teacher Sherry Zelsdorf learned that firsthand.

In February, a 12-year-old girl fired a handgun in her science class at Salvador Castro Middle School, the bullet striking two students. It happened quickly, so quickly that Zelsdorf wasn't sure what she was feeling when a piece of shrapnel struck her in the forehead.

The incident briefly dominated cable news coverage as helicopters filmed students evacuating the school in single-file lines with their hands held over their heads, unsure of how many were wounded inside. But after Los Angeles police said they suspected the student fired the gun unintentionally, much of that attention faded away.

Zelsdorf took some time off work to recover. When she returned to her classroom on Feb. 14, she made Valentines with her students to ease back into the routine. Later that day across the country, a former student shot and killed 17 people in a Parkland, Fla., high school, setting off school safety debates that have already sparked policy changes at the state and federal level.

"It was barely in the news," Zelsdorf said of the incident in her classroom. "I had never feared for my safety at school, and I didn't think that kids did either. It's supposed to be like their safe space."

While much of the focus since the Parkland shooting has been on divisive issues like gun laws, she believes there are smaller, easier changes schools can make right away to ensure safety, like evaluating practices such as random searches to make sure they are effective. Educators can also work to change the culture of schools so that students feel comfortable reporting safety concerns about their peers, Zelsdorf said.

"No one has to vote on those things," she said.

Salvador Castro Middle School enrolls 345 students, nearly all of them Hispanic and nearly all of them with family incomes low enough to qualify them for free and reduced-priced lunches. Many of those students carry pain with them from traumatic experiences before they immigrated to the United States, Zelsdorf said. And many of them face difficult circumstances, like exposure to gang violence, outside of school.

And now the trauma was in their classroom.

Gun incidents in schools are painful, overwhelming experiences for students, even if no one dies, Zelsdorf said. And regardless of the student's intention, she still had access to a loaded gun, she still decided to bring it to school, and she still made it into a classroom with the firearm undetected.

## **What Happened That Day**

On Feb. 1, students were working independently in Zelsdorf's first period, 7th grade science class, when a student sitting right in front of where the teacher stood asked her for a worksheet.

"It's really quiet," a girl said as students continued to work.

"Right at that moment, there was an explosion," Zelsdorf said. "It was the gunshot."

She felt something smack her forehead.

"In that instant, I was thinking, what was that?" she said. "It was the loudest thing I had ever heard."

She sized up the situation in a matter of seconds, but explaining what she saw could take an hour to unpack: The boy who had taken the worksheet was bleeding from the forehead. About four desks away, a girl was bleeding from the wrist. Students started to scream as they saw the blood.

A teacher ran in from next door, putting pressure on the girl's wrist to stop the bleeding as Zelsdorf rushed her students into his classroom, she said. As he helped her, the girl said she believed a classmate sitting right next to her had a gun. That classmate had evacuated into the other classroom with her peers, apparently bringing the gun with her. She stood silently in the back of the room as a school police officer from Belmont High School, which shares a campus with the middle school, came to take her into custody.

Police said the gun fired one bullet from inside a backpack that traveled through the girl's wrist before striking her classmate in the head. Two other students and Zelsdorf had more minor injuries, like abrasion wounds.

The school went on lockdown as a precautionary measure as officers ensured that no other students had guns.

It wasn't until Zelsdorf later returned to her room that she really grasped the extent of what had happened. The worksheet she had give the boy, the one who had been injured, still sat where he left it. "He had circled maybe one word," Zelsdorf said. "There was a pool of blood on the desk, there was blood on the walls, there was blood everywhere."

Close to her family, Zelsdorf trades text messages with her mother regularly. The day the gun went off in her classroom, she was so shaken up that she couldn't figure out how to word the message she kept trying to type into her phone letting her know what had happened.

"You go to the airport and you know that no one is bringing a gun on the airplane," she said. "You can't even bring a water bottle through."

Prosecutors later charged the girl who brought the gun with two felonies: being a minor in possession of a firearm, and possessing a firearm on school grounds. It's unclear exactly how the gun went off, where the student got it, and why she brought it to school. Some students, talking with local news reporters that day,

speculated she was preparing to show it off to her peers. A spokeswoman for the Los Angeles Unified School District would not answer questions about the student's disciplinary status last week, citing federal privacy laws.

## **Safety Concerns**

The incident sparked some immediate conversations about school safety in Los Angeles, conversations that later intensified in that district and in districts around the country after the Florida shooting.

Within hours of the Salvador Castro Middle School incident, the editorial board of the Los Angeles Times called for the district to examine whether its policy of random searches for weapons is effective at detecting weapons in students' bags and deterring them from bringing them to school in the first place. Among the paper's concerns: Are the searches being performed consistently? And are any students being unfairly singled out? Was the incident proof that the district needed to do more searches? Or that the searches aren't effective in the first place?

National civil rights groups have said equipment like metal detectors and practices like random searches can build a sense of distrust between students, particularly students of color, and school staff. But parents and schools often believe such measures are necessary to keep weapons out of schools.

"The shame of the matter is that no one really knows because, despite years of challenges to the random searches (known as "wandering"), the district still hasn't taken a comprehensive look at whether its policy is effective," the Los Angeles Times editorial said. "Nor has it examined whether other forms of violence protection might be just as effective without the intrusiveness that fosters a culture of mistrust between students and school staff."

Such searches have fallen out of favor in many schools, the most recent federal data show. In 2015-16, 4.5 percent of U.S. public schools reported random metal detector checks, compared to 7.2 percent of schools in 1999-2000. And that decline happened as the use of other security measures, like controlled entrances and security cameras, increased.

Overall, crime and school safety issues have decreased in recent years, the data show. But still, 6 percent of public high schools and 2.6 percent of public middle schools reported taking a "serious disciplinary action" against a student for "use or possession of a firearm or explosive device" in 2015-16, according to the federal data. In 2015, about 4 percent of students in grades 9-12 responding to a federal survey reported carrying a weapon "such as a gun, knife, or club" on school property in the previous 30 days," and 4.2 percent of students ages 12-18 reported "having access to a loaded gun, without adult permission."

## **Say Something**

Beyond physical safety measures, Zelsdorf wants schools to encourage students to tell adults if they think their peers may have a weapon or may be intent on harming others. And she wants them to make that process easy, accessible, and as routine and well known as what they practice in routine safety drills. Los Angeles Unified has a safety tip hotline, but Zelsdorf said she wasn't aware of it.

She's heard rumors some students may have known their classmate had a gun at school that day, but middle students can be intimidated about reporting their peers, she said.

“The culture at the school is that kids are very afraid to tell on each other,” Zelsdorf said. “None of them wanted to say that there was a gun.”

Her concerns fit within a larger school safety conversation that has unfolded since the 2012 shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn. Some family members of that shooting’s victims started Sandy Hook Promise, an advocacy organization that pushes for gun violence prevention. Its “Say Something” program brings training and workshops to schools to teach students the importance of reporting safety concerns—the group cites a federal report that shows mass shooters often “leak” their intentions by telling friends and family members of their plans in advance. The organization recently launched a free threat-reporting system it is rolling out in partnership with school districts.

And the Stop School Violence Act, which President Donald Trump signed into law as part of a spending bill after the Parkland shootings, includes funds for reporting systems, threat assessment, and training students about the importance of violence prevention.

Los Angeles Unified announced plans March 1 to form a school safety task force that includes parents, teachers, and support staff. And Los Angeles City Attorney Mike Feuer said he plans to form a blue ribbon panel that will hold a series of public hearings before releasing a report over the summer, the district said in a letter to parents. LAUSD also reminded parents of existing safety procedures and called on them to ensure their firearms are securely stored away from children.

## **Teaching Through Trauma**

After the incident at Salvador Castro Middle School, LAUSD held an emergency meeting with the school’s staff. The district brought in an emergency response team including counselors, who met with students who’d been affected, said Pia Escudero, the district’s director of mental health.

LAUSD has a network of 50 student-wellness centers located throughout the district that provide health care and mental health care to students, she said. The wellness center at Belmont High School, which shares a campus with Salvador Castro, has seen a surge of referrals from students who’d been in the school that day and from students in other schools in the area, Escudero said. For some, the school safety concerns triggered memories of previous incidents in their own lives.

“Mostly, our children are exposed to community violence,” she said. “If they have experience with violence, it happens in the neighborhood.”

Mental-health experts say exposure to traumatic experiences can affect children’s brain development and life trajectories, but the influence of concerned and supportive adults can help counteract those effects.

Zelsdorf wants all teachers to have more training in how to support students who’ve experienced trauma, including the more normalized trauma many of her students have experienced outside of school. “It should be as regular as training for CPR,” she said.

When she returned to school, her classes had been moved to a new room, but the desks were arranged the same as they had been.

As he found a new seat, one of her students said he wanted to sit in the back of the room, so he “wouldn’t get shot.” It was a reminder of how the experience had affected him.

Returning to the classroom was difficult—both for the students and for their teacher, Zelsdorf said. And healing from such an experience is not something she knows how to model for the children she teaches.

“It was definitely scary to be back in the classroom,” she said. “You want to be able to keep them safe, but I couldn’t have done anything to make the gun not go off in the classroom.”

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**Response from a teacher who assisted after the incident to a reader who questioned the report:**

*“I’m the teacher from next door who helped the student wounded in the wrist.*

*We are just as in the dark as you are. We were told by L.A.P.D. that the gun, a 9mm semi-automatic, unintentionally discharged in the girl's backpack. For such a thing to happen, a round had to be in the chamber, and the safety had to be off. The gun could have also been cocked, which would make such a thing possible. I don't know the make of the pistol. Perhaps the girl had her hand in the backpack and pulled the trigger. We don't know.*

*The student has not been seen since her arrest, and won't be, as she was expelled from the entire District. We cant "ask her" anything.*

*We don't know the type of ammunition. If it was, for example, a Glaser safety slug, the shrapnel that struck Ms. Zelsdorf would be perfectly reasonable.*

*As for the wounds to the other two students, they were extremely minor and we have no idea what caused them. No panes of glass were struck by the bullet. However, 20-plus students getting up and running out as fast as possible could have launched all manner of things into the air. All the kids said was that they were struck on the head by "something."*

*I share your frustration and am puzzled by a lot of it. You now know what I know, and I was there.”*