

EDITORIAL

OPINION

Beyond school security

BY THE EDITORIAL BOARD

On April 20, the anniversary of the 1999 mass shooting at Columbine High School that marked the beginning of this era of campus massacres, a group of about 10 students at Santa Fe High School in Texas participated in a national walkout to protest school shootings. The event was in reaction to the Feb. 14 killings at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida.

The Texas students read a poem by a Parkland survivor, observed 17 minutes of silence for the 17 killed at that school, talked about how to fight for change, and posed for pictures with a sign reading, "Santa Fe High School says #NeverAgain."

Not even a month later, 10 students were killed at Santa Fe when a fellow student opened fire.

Once again, the nation's parents and children and teachers and elected leaders were left wondering when the savagery will end, and what can be done to stop #NeverAgain from happening again and again. Experts and educators are increasingly pointing to creating school environments that foster mental health and identify and treat students having problems as a crucial part of the answer.

School shootings always spur increased talk about gun control, and rightly so. More regulation is needed to ban or restrict the most dangerous weapons commonly used in mass murders and to keep all guns away from clearly dangerous people.

But student Dimitrios Pagourtzis didn't use an AR-15 or any other kind of assault rifle in Santa Fe. His weapons were a shotgun and pistol owned by his father. And while reports have surfaced since the May 18 shooting that the young man was bullied by students, teachers and coaches, there seemingly

To prevent mass shootings, administrators also need to identify and change cultures that alienate and isolate frustrated teens

were no warning signs from Pagourtzis, unlike Nikolas Cruz, the suspect in the Parkland massacre, whose behavior had alarmed family, friends and school officials long before that incident.

This rash of school shootings spurred demands that we harden campuses with technology and security drills and armed police officers. But Marjory Stoneman Douglas High had an armed police officer, fences, gates, emergency procedures and regular drills to keep students safe. Cruz found a way around them. The school went into a code red lockdown when the attack started, but Cruz knew he could reverse that by activating a fire alarm.

Santa Fe High School also has security cameras, visitor tracking systems and a districtwide connected emergency warning and announcement system. The district even has its own police department, with 12

officers trained to handle active-shooter situations. One officer was wounded in Pagourtzis' lethal attack.

While gun regulations and a reasonable level of security can reduce the frequency and severity of school shootings, both can be circumvented by a dedicated shooter. Nothing can prevent all such incidents. But if we want to reduce attacks, we need to do more to improve the emotional climate of schools, and to prevent, identify and treat mental health issues.

We need to ask questions: Is each school a place that leaves some students alienated and isolated? Are students cliquish, and do cliques lord their prominence over others? Are people made to feel "less than" because they have

no money or the wrong clothes, or only limited social skills? Is any bullying by students or adults tolerated?

When the answer to these questions is yes, experts say that means a school's culture isn't merely unkind, which is bad enough, but dangerous, because alienated, isolated young men sometimes respond with terrible violence.

When these young men do kill, the responsibility lies with them. The victims are not at fault. But what's important is preventing massacres, not assigning blame. To that end, looking at how troubled kids are treated in schools is as important as looking at alarm systems and evacuation plans.

The state of New York is working to address this issue on several fronts. It just became the first state to mandate that health classes have a mental health component, and it is introducing a social and emotional learning element to curricula. Both are intended to create healthier emotional climates and help students learn to recognize and deal with emotional issues, their own and others'.

School officials say that's a good start, but they also decry a lack of resources that can be accessed when students who may pose a risk are identified. Parents may not agree to get a child needed inpatient treatment, and even if they do, such beds are in dreadfully short supply on Long Island.

Children are forced to attend schools by the law and their parents, no matter how poorly they may be treated, or how unsafe or unhappy they may feel. So school must be the place where all students are treated respectfully and can get help when they need it.

That won't stop all school violence. But it will likely stop more of it than remote-locking devices, and it will help a lot of kids who aren't violent, as well.

