

'I Worry Every Day': Lockdown Drills Prompt Fear, Self-Reflection After School Shooting

By Madeline Will
February 20, 2018

Every few months, the children in Kelly Myers' preschool class in Roanoke, Va., go to a corner of their classroom and hide.

Myers puts a barricade under the door knob to jam it closed and turns off the lights. Then, the children, who are 2 ½ to 3 ½ years old, sit quietly in the dark until the all-clear. Often, students start to cry.

Lockdown drills such as these are ubiquitous in schools these days, but they take on new significance in the wake of a horrific school shooting such as the one in Parkland, Fla., in which a gunman killed 17 people and wounded 15 others at a high school.

For many teachers, the realization sets in during

these drills that "if the door opens, they're coming for me and my kids," Myers said. "My responsibility is the kids and to keep them safe, and if I don't get that door closed tight enough, they're coming for me."

And as the number of school shootings ticks up year after year, teachers say the lockdown drills never lose their impact. While some teachers say they're glad that their schools prepare for the worst-case scenario, many also say the drills have become increasingly surreal and unnerving.

"I think there's something very sobering about the lockdown drill," said Paul Hankins, an 11th grade English teacher in Floyds Knobs, Ind. "If you do a fire drill or a tornado drill, they seem like they're so implausible. ... We don't come back from the fire drill and talk about how it went."

With Parkland on their minds, teachers faced with a lockdown have to ask the hard questions: How would they respond in an emergency situation? Would they take a bullet for their students, as several teachers did in Florida?

Not a 'Made-Up Scenario'

Typically, lockdown drills involve teachers closing and locking their doors, hiding their students in a corner of the classroom—or sometimes in cabinets and closets—and hunkering down until further instructions. After the 2012 Sandy Hook shooting, when a gunman fatally shot 20 elementary school children and six adult staff members, many schools increased the frequency of their lockdown drills. According to federal education data, lockdown drills were being conducted in about 95 percent of public schools in 2015-16.



A Honolulu police officer stands on the campus of Kapolei Middle School in Hawaii after a lockdown at the school on Feb. 16, days after the shooting in Parkland, Fla. The Honolulu Star-Advertiser reported someone posted on social media that they planned to "shoot up" the middle school.—Caleb Jones/AP

“Any school that goes into a lockdown drill, it’ll be on the minds of our students—this is not a made-up scenario,” Hankins said. “This is something that happens in schools.”

Indeed, in the days since the Parkland school shooting, police have fielded dozens of copycat threats, many on social media. Some of those threats have led to precautionary school lockdowns.

An ‘Ugly Blip’ in the School Day

Students’ reactions to lockdown drills vary, teachers say: Some see the drills as routine and not a cause for alarm, while others become stressed and anxious. Some students need to process their emotions afterwards with their teachers, and others have a sense of invincibility that isn’t shaken by the exercise.

Phillip Brettschneider, a middle school teacher in the California Bay Area, said the Columbine school shooting happened when he was in 4th grade and living in Wisconsin. “I can remember being absolutely terrified to return to school and having to go through a lot of counseling just to go back,” he said.

But recently, Brettschneider asked his students how they react when they see a school shooting on the news. “They said, ‘It’s not a big deal, this is just a thing that happens. Adults make it a big deal,’” he said.

Launa Hall, a 2nd grade teacher in Arlington, Va., said that in a recent lockdown drill before the Parkland shooting, half of her students understood what was happening and sat in a fearful silence, while the other half giggled, not quite grasping the gravity of the exercise.

As a teacher, Hall said she hates that she has to introduce the specter of violence in her classroom with these drills.

Lockdown drills are “a strange distraction in what is otherwise a day full of very age-appropriate curriculum and age-appropriate games and activities and learning,” she said. “It’s a really ugly blip in what is otherwise a beautiful school day for small children.”

The drills can present a particularly tricky set of challenges for teachers who have students with special needs, including physical and emotional disabilities.

According to Dusty Columbia Embury, an associate professor of special education at Eastern Kentucky University, at the beginning of the year, educators should consider: Will students with physical disabilities have enough space to hide in the classroom? How about the school library? What supports will students with behavioral disabilities need to stay calm during lockdown drills?

Embury has been advocating for years for schools to create individual emergency lockdown plans for students with disabilities.

“We definitely don’t want there to be any surprises,” Embury said.

Ashli Dreher, a high school special education teacher in Youngstown, N.Y., has a student with autism who typically has difficulty staying quiet or contained in one area. During lockdowns, Dreher gives that student headphones and an iPad, loaded with episodes of her favorite program.

Then, Dreher moves chairs in front of a designated area to create a barrier so that her students, who might not always understand what’s happening, stay in place.

The “lockdown corner” is also the classroom reading corner, so there are comfortable couches and rugs. That was an intentional decision by Dreher, who said she’s painfully aware that her students are going to be frightened of these drills.

Still, she welcomes the fact that they happen a few times every year, so students understand that this is a regular practice and would be prepared if a real lockdown occurred.

“I recognize that a school shooter could enter the building at any time, and I always think, what would be the best way to save lives?” Dreher said.

Jim Gard, a math teacher at Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, expressed similar sentiments about the importance of drills and preparation: “I am confident in saying that if we hadn’t had that training and if we hadn’t had these conversations with our kids, we would have had 117 instead of 17.”

Protecting Students at All Costs

Among those who died in the Parkland shooting were three educators whose last acts were to protect students from the gunman.

Geography teacher Scott Beigel was fatally shot after he unlocked his classroom door to usher students to safety. Assistant football coach Aaron Feis threw himself in front of students to shield them from gunfire. And Chris Hixon, the school’s athletic director and wrestling coach, was shot after he raced to the scene to help students, according to news reports.

Accounts of their heroism both inspired and sombered teachers across the country. They also prompted some difficult self-reflection and conversations, said Danielle Charron, an educational consultant who runs a teacher wellness center, Teacher Self Studio, in Denver.

“I’ve had teachers talk to me about how their own children are asking questions: If their teacher mommy or their teacher daddy is supposed to be the hero, what does that mean for them?” she said.

Other teachers have told her they suddenly feel aware of their own vulnerability, and they have felt nervous going into work in the days following the shootings. The hero narrative can be difficult for those teachers to hear, she said.

For her own part, Charron said when she was teaching, “my husband and I had the dialogue—if I ever died protecting my students, know that I was doing what I felt like I had to do,” she said.

After all, lockdown drills by design force educators to imagine what they would do in an active-shooter situation.

At the preschool where Sage Wegner teaches in Salt Lake City, there are 18 students and three teachers in the classroom. In the most recent lockdown drill, they didn’t all fit in the corner. One of Wegner’s students was in the line of sight from the hallway, so she switched places with him, putting him safely behind her.

“I was thinking, in the moment, this is what I’d have to do,” she said. “Keeping yourself safe kind of goes out the window when you’re with kids that little. ... I would use myself as a human shield for them.”

Meanwhile, some teachers say they think of what they can use in their classroom as a makeshift weapon. A few years ago, a pipe burst in Hankins’ school gym, destroying the gym floor. From the wreckage, Hankins and his colleague picked up some pieces of wood that were decorated with swirls of paint in the school’s colors.

Hankins’ colleague made picture frames out of the wood. Hankins decided to keep the board in his classroom, in case he ever needed to use it as a weapon.

“It’s ambiguous in that the kids know it’s a piece of the old gym floor,” he said, likening it to classroom decor. “It only has to become the other thing in the event that something has gone terribly wrong.”

During lockdown drills, he holds the wood in his hands, ready to strike if necessary.

“In my mind, if that door knob rattles and if that door opens, I’ve got one swing, I’ve got one chance to help myself and my kids,” he said. “And I have to think about what that looks like.”

A Lack of Clarity

One alternative to lockdown drills is multi-option response drills, which teach students a variety of ways to respond to an active shooter and escape. Those drills are more controversial, since they teach young students how to “counter” a shooter by running in zig-zag patterns, throwing objects, and screaming to distract a gunman.

While a growing number of school districts across the country have replaced or supplemented traditional lockdown drills with the multi-option response approach, lockdowns are still more common, with many experts preferring the “tried and true” method.

However, in a research paper published late last year, Cheryl Lero Jonson, an assistant professor of criminal justice at Xavier University, noted that when and where school shootings occur does not always align with how the lockdowns are practiced. The Columbine shooting happened when many students were in the cafeteria and the library. The Parkland shooting happened after a fire alarm went off at the end of the school day, which had caused many students to leave their classrooms and go into the hallways.

Multi-option response approaches appear to give individuals a higher survival rate, wrote Jonson, citing an analysis of the 2007 Virginia Tech shooting. That approach makes potential victims dynamic targets for the shooter, rather than passive, static targets, she wrote.

Still, some school safety consultants have pushed back against those drills, saying that such an approach is not supported by evidence and might put children at risk.

That lack of clarity on how to best prepare for the worst-case scenario gives many teachers a sense of anxiety.

“I worry every day when I walk into the classroom: Will what we can do to protect students be enough to save their lives?” said Dreher, the N.Y. special education teacher. “I can probably only take one bullet for one student, and then what happens to the rest of my students?”

Lockdown drills can’t be the solution to gun violence, said Hall, the Virginia elementary teacher. After all, the students at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland grew up in an age of lockdown drills.

“They’ve done everything right. They’ve been hiding in closets and being silent and doing what we asked them to do,” she said. “It didn’t work.”

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Staff Writer Evie Blad contributed to this report.

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