

Idaho safeguards schools; why not students, too?

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Idaho regularly inspects its public school and college buildings to ensure they're safe from fires and other hazards.

But when was the last time any Idaho student was injured or threatened in a school fire?

That same child is more likely to be bullied.

He has a greater chance of facing an unsafe learning environment.

And sadly - based on the experience of Littleton, Colo., Newtown, Conn., and Roseburg, Ore. - he faces a risk of violence.

Yet Idaho has no systematic system for assessing school building safety and security vulnerabilities. What little it knows was gleaned from a 2014 survey that looked at 10 percent of Idaho's 750 school buildings. Consultants Brian Armes and Guy Bliesner discovered the following:

- Anyone who looked like he belonged in a school - a man dressed as a professional or a maintenance worker - could pass unchallenged for 10 minutes.
- In 19 schools, nobody asked a visiting stranger for identification.
- And 96 percent of the time, Armes and Bliesner could enter a school through unauthorized points of access.
- Video surveillance was obsolete 44 percent of the time. Public address systems were vulnerable to electrical power failures.

Writing for Campus Safety Magazine, Robin Hattersly Gray surmised: "There is no way to sugarcoat these findings. ... To put it gently, they are cause for significant concern. To put it bluntly, they are downright scary."

Even scarier, however, is the fact that for the remaining 90 percent of Idaho's schools, the state does not know what it does not know.

For instance, what would Armes and Bliesner find at Lewiston High School, a nearly 90-year-old campus filled with nooks and crannies among 10 buildings and multiple points of access?

Which brings us to one of the unheralded success stories of the 2016 Idaho Legislature.

For a modest investment of \$570,000, lawmakers established an Office of School Safety and Security - within the existing structure of Idaho's Division of Building Safety.

At the community level, this means inspectors will periodically review public and higher education buildings for potential security and safety vulnerabilities - and recommend remedies.

For educators, it means there will be a resource for training and technical assistance - or something as basic as a person to consult about how best to respond to potential threats.

For the state as a whole, it means a yearly scorecard to assess how much progress is being made.

And for law enforcement, educators, parents and politicians, it means engaging in a common lexicon of security rather than talking past each other. Toward that end, it established a 13-member School Safety and Security Advisory Board, which will draft safety and security standards.

Idaho is drawing on the sad experience of Columbine High School, Sandy Hook Elementary and Umpqua Community College - rather than waiting for a crisis to occur within its own backyard.

For that, the credit belongs to two-term state Rep. Wendy Horman. The Idaho Falls Republican and former school board member sponsored the measure and steered it to passage - no small feat in a political environment that is reluctant to take on new responsibilities.

But this came down to a choice between merely safeguarding buildings or also protecting the people working and learning within them.

This time, Idaho got its priorities straight. - M.T.