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In Support of Lockdown

Options-based active shooter training is a high-risk and high-liability proposition in a K-12 school setting. Effectively implemented lockdowns do not create target-rich environments.

by Kenneth S. Trump

Key Points

At Issue: Options-based training is not an appropriate response to an active shooter situation in K-12 schools.

Why It Doesn't Work: School-age children do not possess the intellectual and emotional capacity to fight off an attacker at a moment's notice and self-evacuation creates a target-rich environment.

Another Option: Lockdown is the best way to respond to an active shooter in a school setting.

Options and empowerment. Who could possibly be opposed to having options and being empowered?

When considering school active shooter responses, training students and school staff to make a split-second pick from three or more options may make them feel empowered at that moment. But it could actually get them killed if they pick the more risky option on the list of choices they have been instructed to choose.

Well-intended school administrators and their public safety agency partners who advocate options-based school active shooter training may also find themselves facing increased liability risks for making policy decisions based upon emotions rather than on well-researched, proven best practices for comprehensive school safety planning. These could include well-designed School Resource Officer (SRO) programs, reasonably diversified lockdown drills, police-controlled evacuations, threat assessment protocols, student intervention and prevention supports and a culture that promotes student reporting of threats and plots.

Not the Industry Standard

School shootings over the past two decades have generated increased fear and high levels of ambiguity and uncertainty. Media coverage fuels the fears. The increased anxiety and public discourse adds pressure upon school and public safety leaders to show they are taking action to make schools safer. This pressure often leads to a "do something, do anything, do it fast, and do it differently" mentality that typically does make for good school safety policy.

One of the many strategies fitting this reactive modality is options-based active shooter programs that have appeared in K-12 schools over the past decade. Such models typically are represented under the names of Run, Hide, Fight or ALICE (Alert, Lockdown, Inform, Counter, Evacuate) Training, although there are a number of other program names. Whether the words include avoid, defend, deny, evade, resist, or combinations of other words, the general gist is that traditional lockdowns do not work or are not enough for today's K-12 school settings.

Run, Hide, Fight is a program that originated in Houston. In fact, the city lists the program on its web site as their registered trademark. A video produced by the city with funding from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security spread like wildfire several years ago. The Department of Homeland Security, along with many other homeland security state agencies, subsequently pointed to the program as their model for active shooter responses.

The Houston model, however, was designed for the workplace, not for schools. In a July 9, 2014, *Emergency Management* article in govtech.com, the chief policy officer for the Houston Mayor's office stated that the

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"fight" component of Run, Hide, Fight video is not a component that is transferable to school settings.

Furthermore, the former director of the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Safe and Healthy Students, David Esquith, was attributed in a Sept. 27, 2015, *Charleston* (W.Va.) *Gazette-Mail* news story as saying his department does not recommend students fight shooters, even as a last resort and even if they are of high-school age.

This backing away from the "fight" or "counter" components of options-based training has not deterred advocates who point to a handful of governmental and non-profit reports suggesting that options-based training be considered by schools.

However, a closer look at the various state and federal government guides, such as the federal government's 2013 multi-agency guide for creating school emergency plans or the more recent *Final Report of the Federal Commission on School Safety*, finds disclaimers that the contents of their reports are simply examples to consider, that plans need to be determined and tailored locally, and that the models highlighted are not endorsed or prescribed. While options-based advocates and training marketers sometimes imply government sanctioning of these training programs for schools, the fine print suggests otherwise.

Advocates and trainers for the options-based training also often imply or state that options-based training is now the recognized industry standard. Some may say they have trained representatives from a few thousand school districts to back their claims. This does not necessarily mean that all of the trainee's school districts have adopted options-based training. It just means employees from their organizations attended the training.

With nearly 100,000 public schools, plus thousands more private and charter schools, in the United States, it is a long reach to suggest that the options-based active shooter training model has either been adopted by all of those school districts or that these models are now the industry standard.

The Devil's in the Details

Numerous experienced national school security experts and school psychologists have challenged the efficacy of teaching children and educators to throw items and attack, or as options-based advocates prefer to more softly call it "counter," heavily armed gunmen. These professionals point to age and development variables, such as brain research, indicating that the executive function and self-regulation processes that guide tasks such as focusing and juggling multiple tasks effectively, do not fully develop in a person until an age in the mid-20s.

Advocates for special-needs students have also raised serious questions about options-based active shooter training for children who are physically challenged, emotionally disturbed, medically fragile, or have learning disabilities.

School leaders also function *in loco parentis* where they are responsible for supervising children, unlike the workplace business environments for which options-based models like Run, Hide, Fight were first created for adults who are legally responsible for themselves.

School security experts have numerous examples where the implementation of options-based training has been dangerously flawed. For example, in one Midwest elementary school where our team was conducting a school security and emergency preparedness assessment, a second-grade teacher, following an options-based training she recently received, indicated she hid a hammer in her classroom to knock out a window so her two-dozen students could self-evacuate if an active shooter was in the school. When we asked what training she had or what protocols she had been given to determine when to leave a safe locked down room to self-evacuate, a counselor at the table replied, "It's a guessing game." Furthermore, the teacher said she had never thought through her plan of trying to push two dozen children through a broken window with shards of glass or what they would do once they got outside.

Most alarming was the response from the city police supervisor who taught the options-based training to the above school employees when he was asked what he advised educators to do when using this model with special needs children. "I didn't tell them anything. That's their problem to figure out," he replied. His answer, along with the answers of the school personnel, would likely not bode well in front of parents of injured or dead children. They also would likely not hold up well in a deposition or trial.

Research Is Weak

Academic research on the use of options-based active shooter training in K-12 school settings is minimal and weak, at best. Advocates for these programs point to various governmental publications and descriptive data on active shooter trends and incidents in general. School-specific data, however, is often one small piece of these overall reports.

The conclusions supporting options-based training, however, are frequently generalized to pre-K-12 school settings. For example, advocates supporting options-based active shooter training in K-12 schools often pointed to a 2013 FBI report on active shooter incidents in the United States between 2000 and 2013 based on data from a Texas University researcher to justify their call for teaching options-based active shooter training in K-12 schools. The author of a January 2014 FBI article cited 104 overall active shooter events (school and non-school) in which only six (29%) of 21 active shooter events in K-12 schools between 2000 and 2012 involved the shooters being subdued by citizens. This means that in more than two-thirds (71%) of the cases shooters were ***not*** subdued by citizens. These small number of

cases and low percentages fail to reasonably support an argument for K-12 schools to adopt a policy calling for the teaching of school staff and children to attack or subdue heavily armed gunmen.

More importantly, independent research on the implementation and efficacy of options-based training in K-12 school settings, including the potential psychological and traumatic impact of such drills on children, is nearly non-existent.

A 2018 article published in the *Journal of School Violence* presented a study justifying multi-option responses over traditional lockdowns. After a careful review of the study, however, I found it light on methodology rigor and heavy on descriptive components of options-based training provided by the ALICE Training Institute, an Ohio-based active shooter response training company.

The study, *One Size Does Not Fit All: Traditional Lockdown Versus Multioption Responses to School Shootings*, focuses on school shootings in its title and recommendations. But study participants included employees from libraries, hospitals, insurance organizations, private companies, and state government employees, along with some school personnel, former military, and law enforcement. Law enforcement made up more than half of the participants. Educators made up only a portion of the non-law enforcement participants.

The study also did not include any children—a major variable in a real school shooting context.

An end-section on competing interests stated that of the three study authors, two are certified ALICE instructors and the third is employed as a national trainer for the ALICE Training Institute. Participants were a sample of enrollees in an ALICE Instructor Certification Course. The ALICE Training Institute was also identified as assisting in the data collection for the study and controlling the curriculum content and delivery.

Given the limitations, shortcomings, and risks for bias in this specific study, which is reported as the only known study with this focus, the findings should be taken with a grain of salt. Truly independent research is warranted. A need for research on the psychological implications of options-based training and traditional lockdowns is also sorely needed.

Lockdowns Work

Traditional lockdowns have more than two decades of examples behind them showing that they work in getting students and staff away from harm's way. For example, a police animation of the 2018 Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School attack in Parkland, Florida, shows more deaths and injuries on the third floor where individuals attempted to self-evacuate than on the second floor where students followed the traditional best practices of locking down inside the classroom and moving out of the line of sight of the doorway. Additionally, in a November 15, 2017, story in The 74, an online education news site, the Tehama County, California assistant sheriff credited the staff of Rancho Tehama Elementary for their "monumental" action of locking down when a gunman with a semiautomatic weapon entered the building and tried to get into classrooms, but could not do so because he was locked out. The gunman, who was involved in a shooting rampage that killed five people and injured others throughout the nearby town, left the building after being frustrated that the classroom doors were locked, according to a related *New York Times* story. He later committed suicide when engaged by police who stopped him in the stolen vehicle he was driving.

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Unlike models promoting children and educators run or self-evacuate, effectively implemented lockdowns do not create target rich environments in hallways, stairwells, or outside of school campuses when masses are attempting to flee a scene of a heavily armed gunman. They often do not call for education organizations to expose themselves, their staff, and their students to the safety and liability risks associated with options-based training of attacking or "countering" gunmen and self-evacuating into harm's way.

Options-based active shooter training is not the industry standard for K-12 schools. Many schools reject these models with little hesitation. For those school board members and superintendents currently using or considering options-based training, our advice to them is simple: Get a written opinion from your insurance carrier and your school attorney advising whether they support your decision to adopt a policy and/or practice of teaching children and educators to attack heavily armed gunmen, and to self-evacuate (run) into a target rich environment for an active shooter.

Such documentation might be helpful when school leaders have to "counter" future litigation resulting from such practices. BR