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Security Theater

Reclaiming school safety from the illusion of protection

By Rick J. Kaufman, APR, Executive Director of Community Relations and Emergency Management for Bloomington Public Schools



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School shootings represent the deepest fears of educators, families, and communities. Though statistically rare, they leave a long shadow over the nation's schools and drive an understandable urgency to "do something" in response.

Illusion of Safety

In that urgency, however, many schools are steered toward high-cost security products that offer visible reassurance but limited evidence of preventing a mass-casualty event. This phenomenon — widely referred to as "security theater," a term advanced by Dr. Kenneth Trump of National School Safety and Security Services — continues to influence policy discussions, vendor marketing, and district decision-making across the country.

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Cameras, door sensors, access control systems, and related technologies are not inherently ineffective. Many of these tools serve important day-to-day safety and operational functions. The challenge arises when they are marketed and purchased as stand-alone solutions to school shootings. After a high-profile tragedy, vendors know school leaders face enormous external pressure to demonstrate immediate action. This creates a market dynamic where perceived safety often outweighs measurable impact, and where multi-million-dollar investments in hardware eclipse investments in the human-centered practices that actually disrupt pathways to violence.

A Market in Question

The scope of school security spending continues to expand as new technologies enter the market, including AI-based weapons detection systems. Recent analyses estimate the U.S. school security technology sector at



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roughly \$2.7 billion annually, with additional spending on school resource officers and private security pushing total national security expenditures well into the multi-billion dollar range each year. Within that landscape, AI weapons detection has emerged as a fast-growing niche, driven more by public pressure than by demonstrated effectiveness.

The global market for AI gun-detection systems is valued around \$187 million in 2024 and is projected to reach nearly \$700 million by 2032 as districts explore these tools. Some school systems have invested heavily, with individual district contracts ranging from several hundred thousand dollars per year to multi-year commitments exceeding \$1 million. Yet early deployments have produced inconsistent results, including missed detections, false positives, and recent federal scrutiny of marketing claims made by major vendors. This reinforces a central challenge in school safety. While billions are spent on physical and technological systems — many of them promising innovation — the evidence shows a significant share still delivers limited preventive impact relative to cost.

The issue is not that technology has no place in school safety. It absolutely does. Controlled entry points, reliable

communication systems, well-placed surveillance cameras, and effective access control procedures contribute to a secure environment. The problem lies in how these tools are prioritized, promoted, and funded. Visible hardware tends to dominate the conversation because it is tangible, easy to explain to anxious parents, and politically attractive. District leaders can point to cameras and scanners as proof they are taking action. What the public cannot easily see are the quieter systems that do far more to prevent violence: multidisciplinary behavioral threat assessment teams, strong mental health supports, effective communication protocols, and well-trained staff who know how to identify and respond to concerning behaviors.

The broader school security marketplace also shapes how districts perceive and prioritize safety measures. A wide range of associations, nonprofits, and industry partners promote emerging technologies and security innovations, often with the shared goal of improving school safety. Many of these organizations include representatives from technology companies, research firms, or service providers, which naturally positions them to highlight solutions aligned with their areas of expertise. This does not diminish the value

they may bring to the conversation, but it does mean districts should recognize the role of commercial interests in shaping narratives about what constitutes effective school safety.

When policy discussions or recommended practices originate from groups with industry ties, the emphasis may lean toward technological solutions that are highly visible and rapidly evolving, even when the supporting evidence is still limited. For school district leaders, the key is to remain thoughtful and discerning, ensuring decisions are grounded in research, operational needs, and the district's broader prevention and well-being strategies, not just the momentum of the marketplace.

A related concern emerges when policy decisions or funding structures reinforce this imbalance. Many school safety vendors, including those led by ex-military or former law enforcement professionals, bring valuable security expertise but may have limited experience with the daily realities of school operations. As a result, some products are developed or marketed for schools without meaningful input from the people who best understand how learning environments function: principals, teachers, student support staff, and the school-based security professionals who manage safety on the ground. When state and federal grants prioritize or restrict funding to physical equipment, often in response to vendor-driven solutions, districts have fewer opportunities to invest in the prevention strategies that research consistently shows are most effective. The result is a landscape where hardware is well funded while essential human-centered systems remain underdeveloped or unsupported.

Where Safety Actually Happens

The contrast between where funds go and what actually works could not be more striking. After decades of research, multidisciplinary investigations, federal analyses, and case studies of school violence, a clear pattern has emerged. Individuals who carry out targeted attacks almost always display concerning behaviors before the act. They plan. They communicate intent directly or indirectly. They leak information to peers. They exhibit escalating distress, grievance, isolation, or fixation. These warning signs are observable when schools have trained adults who know what to look for and when structures exist to respond effectively. That is the heart of behavioral threat assessment and management.

A well-functioning threat assessment team identifies concerning behavior, evaluates context, analyzes the student's pathway toward violence, and intervenes with supports that reduces risk and guides the student toward help. This isn't profiling; it is prevention grounded in behavioral evidence. When done well, it is one of the strongest tools schools have to stop violence long before a weapon is ever brought onto campus.

The same can be said for mental health infrastructure. Students facing significant stress, trauma, or crisis often display changes in behavior long before their challenges

become dangerous. When schools have accessible counseling, crisis support, and community partnerships, they catch students who might otherwise fall through the cracks. Prevention is strengthened even further when all staff understand what concerning behavior looks like and how to report it. The best school safety cultures emerge from connection, not fear. Students "see something, say something" when they trust adults. Staff respond effectively when they are trained and empowered to intervene early, communicate clearly, and work collaboratively across disciplines. When these human-centered systems function well, they not only reduce the likelihood of violence but also strengthen the overall well-being and resilience of the school community. None of this is visible like a new camera system, yet it forms the backbone of safety.

Security theater persists because fear is powerful. After a tragedy, leaders want to show immediate action. Communities demand visible solutions. Vendors capitalize on urgency. The political climate rewards tangible investments more than complex, human-centered systems. Security hardware offers the illusion of control. Prevention practices require patience, expertise, and sustained commitment. But the illusion cannot become the strategy.

A Call for Balance

Schools deserve a balanced, evidence-driven approach to safety. That balance must begin with clarity about what strengthens prevention and what addresses only symptoms. Facilities, technology, preparedness, mental health supports, and strong relationships all have a place in a comprehensive school safety framework. Yet that framework collapses when billions are spent reinforcing physical environments while the human systems that prevent violence remain underfunded.

Real safety is built through evidence-informed investment, transparent decision-making, and a commitment to the work that is less visible but far more consequential. Behavioral threat assessment teams, robust mental health supports, and staff training are not glamorous. They stop tragedies. Technology may help schools respond in the moment, but people prevent violence.

The challenge for today's school leaders is to move beyond the appearance of safety and invest in the systems that genuinely protect students and staff. The stakes demand nothing less.

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