The echoes of the tragedy in Uvalde, Texas are reverberating in schools, boardrooms, kitchen tables, police stations and city halls. The situation is eerily familiar. We've been here before. Tragically we are on the same, familiar ground as after Columbine, Sandy Hook, and Parkland.

Following every high-profile incident there is a period of focus and intense pressure to take actions to make schools safer. We have the will to act but lack any meaningful consensus on which actions will work. All this conversation is takings place against the backdrop of the incident at Robb Elementary that we don't even fully understand yet.

Schools are operationally complex. The complexity may not be obvious unless you think about the context. Your local high school is a not only an instructional facility, but is also a community center, a workout gym, a preforming arts theater, art studio, manufacturing plant, sports venue, chemical laboratory, warehouse, transportation hub, banquet hall, day care center, and four times a year a polling place. Many large high schools have more residents than whole towns. Add to that, every hour a bell rings and the whole population gets up and moves to a different task, area, and context. All this activity takes place every weekday, every week for 9 months out of the year. Complex may be an understatement.

Security experts, many with law enforcement and or military background, are offering recommendations for changes in school security practices. However, the strategies employed to secure a warehouse, a concert hall, a retail shop, a military base, or an airport don't fit the multiple operational necessities and realities of schools. Without this school contextualization, borrowed strategies fit poorly. These suggestions often require staffing or financial resources that schools simply don't have or they require processes that are so intrusive on educational practice that they are unsustainable or both. The predictable result is wasted money, empty effort, and abandoned initiatives leaving schools less secure rather than more.

The promise of federal and state money for school safety has encouraged another voice in the conversation. Schools have seen a massive increase in aggressive marketing by providers of safety equipment, technology, and services. When there is the opportunity for a funding infusion, to the best salesman belong the spoils, regardless of the efficacy of the solution. When the community shouts, "do something" vendors respond, "here's something" and school officials are stuck in the middle.

With all the public focus on school safety educators have an unprecedented opportunity to lead the process. As we engage with our school communities, policy makers, parents, first responders, and outside experts we can identify changes that meet our school's circumstances, vulnerabilities, and operational reality. No one understands our facilities, operations, and objectives the way we do and no one else bears the burden of in loco parentis responsibility for all the students in our care. School officials bring valuable knowledge and context to the conversation and must not be automatically overruled by "security experts".

High-quality planning always considers "assessment before treatment". The first task is to identify the threats that exist in your environment and your current vulnerability to them. Once vulnerabilities have been identified, research and propose workable solutions, and then identify the potential obstacles. Finance will not be the only limiting factor. Time and effort are also limited resources, and education must remain the primary mission. Since no one can do everything at once, work to prioritize the identified vulnerabilities for remediation.

Newly identified vulnerabilities don't always require new solutions. Often, the broader education community has already identified highly effective practices. Known effective practices, consistently implemented, are the best strategy to improve your school's safety and security profile. New equipment and technology may help solve a specific problem, but it is consistent use of proven effective practice applied with fidelity that will be the key to a safer and more secure educational environment.

School climate and culture is foundational for effective school safety and will impact all aspects of your safety and security efforts. Prevention should always be the goal, but reality dictates that a robust response capability is a requirement for schools, as well. With that understanding the following are some crucial questions on the critical elements of your school's safety and security profile.

- **School Climate and Culture:**
  Does my school community, (students, staff, parents, administrators', and board members) understand the shared responsibility to create a safe environment for learning? School safety is too big of a responsibility for just the principal, or the police it is truly a shared community responsibility.

- **Well Publicized Confidential Reporting:**
  Does my school provide and use a well-publicized confidential reporting system easily available to the entire school community? The system should be curated with tips reviewed and information moved to the appropriate location in a timely fashion to be acted upon. The state provides Idaho schools with a free resource. The See, Tell, Now! tip line program.

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- **Effective Communications:**
  Do I have the tools and processes in place to convey information from the people who have it to the people who need to act on it? This incorporates both emergency notification procedures, equipment, processes, and strategies for rapid, effective communication of threats and vulnerabilities.

- **Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management**
  Does my school community have the research-based tools to recognize, notify, assess, and manage behaviors of concern within the student body and do we have the community connections for threatening individuals outside the school?

- **Building Perimeter Control**
  Does the school facility provide the means to prevent unauthorized access? Is it possible for individuals to gain access to the students or facility without being appropriately identified and vetted?

- **Common response training**
  Does everyone from administrator to duty aide know their responsibilities in an emergency? Everyone in the school setting should be trained to accomplish the initial responses to emergencies they encounter to keep themselves and those around them safe. To address this need Idaho provides and maintains the [Idaho Standard Command Responses for Schools (ISCRS) program.](#)

- **A well-developed and generally deployed multi-hazard Emergency Operations Plan (EOP)**
  Have we developed a plan for managing emergency situations within the school setting and does everyone have an appropriate level of knowledge of their role in the plan? Also, does the plan work with our local emergency responders to ensure cooperation and ensure that everyone knows their tasks and responsibilities?

As school officials, educators, policy makers, and their communities work together to address the concerns that Uvalde has rekindled, a focus on meaningful, effective, and sustainable improvement in a school's safety and security posture is the goal. Activities and resources targeted to identified vulnerabilities in the listed areas will help to accomplish that end.