



# The First 30 Seconds:

The Window of Opportunity to Save Lives in School Emergency Situations



Generously shared with CPI by  
**MICHAEL DORN**  
[safehavensinternational.org](http://safehavensinternational.org)





# All campus employees can take immediate life-saving action.

A foreseeable and preventable mass casualty loss of human life can take place in the first minute of a school emergency event.

This is much more likely to happen if you have not specifically empowered, trained, and drilled the message that all campus employees can take immediate life-saving action without first contacting a supervisor.

This is what I commonly refer to as “permission to live.” As we shall see, 95 students and staff died in the Our Lady of Angels School arson fire as a result of this type of gap in 1958. Mass casualty losses have occurred in other acts of violence in K-12 schools in a similar manner in more recent times. These types of deaths should be reasonably addressed through modern approaches to school emergency protocols,

staff development, and modification of school drill processes.

Many fatal campus situations involve critical delays in the implementation of life-saving action steps like room clear, evacuation, lockdown, sheltering from severe weather, reverse evacuation, or other critical protective actions. Structured simulations that include having employees respond in real-time fashion to a variety of video and audio scenarios have been most revealing. More than 5,000 of these simulations have been conducted by our analysts during school security assessments for public and nonpublic schools of all sizes across the US in recent years. During these simulations, our analysts have used a control video to inform test subjects what they are expected to do while using standard scoring tools to help us quantify how effective responses are.

# These simulations have shown that most school employees are not prepared to respond.

## **THE OBSERVATIONS OF THESE SCENARIOS HAVE BEEN STARTLING.**

For example, these simulations have revealed that school employees who have not been provided any active shooter training usually perform much better than those who have been provided options-based active shooter training that includes throwing objects at or attacking an active shooter as a last resort.

Participants who have completed this type of training often do not know what to do for more common situations, and with troubling frequency, opt to attack when it is clearly more dangerous to do so. For example, a number of test subjects who have completed different types of options-based active shooter training react to video scenarios depicting a student who is threatening suicide with a gun by throwing objects at or attacking the subject. They also often attack when a hostage situation is depicted. In real life, these responses could prompt a student to commit suicide or could cause a hostage taker to kill hostages. In most states, this could lead to criminal charges being filed against the employee and would

almost assuredly result in civil action and public outrage.

These simulations also reveal that school employees who are presented with scenarios where a lockdown should be implemented but that do not involve someone firing a gun forget to implement a lockdown more than 70% of the time. These simulations have shown that most school employees are not prepared to respond to people depicted as brandishing but not firing a gun, wielding a large knife, metal crow bar, claw hammer, or other weapon.

For these reasons, school emergency preparedness training and drills should not focus primarily on active shooter incidents and should require staff to demonstrate that they know how to respond to a wide variety of scenarios without advance warning as to what scenario they will be presented with. Extensive research, testing, evaluation, and post-incident reviews of ten active shooter incidents we have conducted indicate that the use of a broad array of scenarios will better prepare school staff for any type of situation they encounter.





## CRISIS RESPONSE PLANNING CHECKLIST

These cases demonstrate the need for plans, training, and drills to empower school employees.

### THE NEED FOR PLANS, TRAINING, AND DRILLS

The assessments and actual events I have been asked to conduct post-incident evaluations for have demonstrated how fast catastrophic plan failure can occur in schools that have spent vast sums of money, time, and energy on emergency planning but have not properly empowered, trained, and otherwise prepared school employees to make life-and-death decisions with limited information and immense time pressure.

I have now provided post-incident assistance for 10 active shooter and targeted school shootings in US and Canadian K-12 schools. These cases all demonstrate the need for plans, training, and drills to emphasize empowerment of school employees to act on their own. In most of these cases, there was not time for the office to make an announcement to direct employees to take protective actions. In the most recent case, school staff and students only had sixteen seconds to react to the attacker. Because the training and drill processes at the school emphasized the all-hazards approach and empowerment of staff to act independently, the heavily armed attacker was not able to achieve

the mass casualty loss of life that he planned for several months to cause.

In the 1958 school fire, no staff member pulled the fire alarm for an estimated five minutes after the fire was discovered. Precious time, and even more importantly, precious lives were lost while staff attempted to locate the school's principal. As with the majority of schools today, fire drills at the school were always initiated by an administrator pulling the fire alarm rather than by having rank-and-file employees pull the alarm after prompting by an administrator.

When we look at the research on how the human brain works under stress, it becomes clear that the staff members in the school were inadvertently conditioned not to evacuate until the principal pulled the alarm. Some teachers even ordered students who were begging to evacuate to kneel and pray the Rosary. These types of extreme stress reactions are common when ineffective drill processes are used to prepare students and staff.

If your school lockdowns are initiated by a school administrator simply making an announcement to lockdown, lockdown failure in an actual event is more likely.

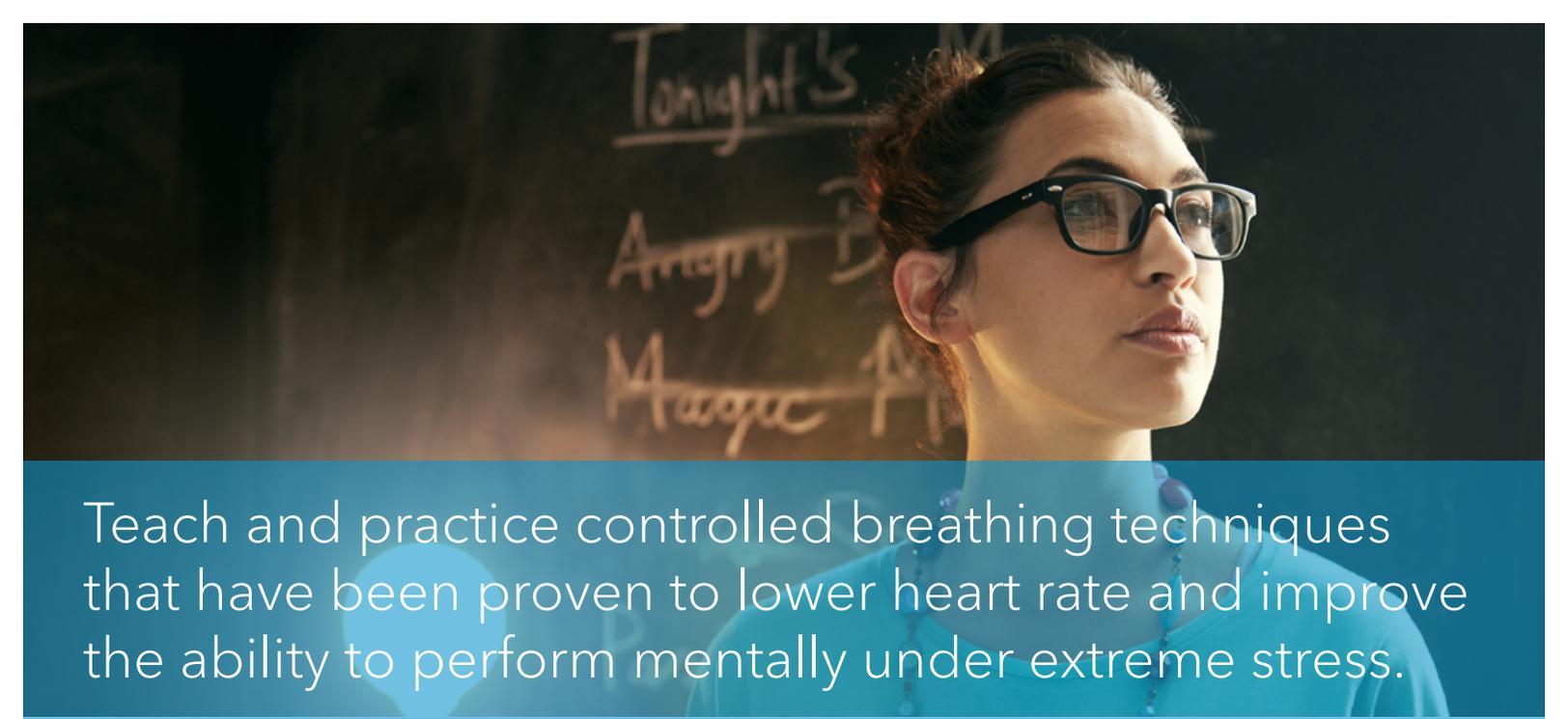
# The use of a broad array of scenarios will better prepare school staff for any type of situation they encounter.

## MARKERS FOR MISSED CHANCES

Based on reviews of a number of actual incidents as well as more than 5,000 structured simulations with campus employees from across the nation, our analysts have identified some common indicators that line-level campus employees are more likely to miss the chance to save human lives:

- Fire, lockdown, severe weather, and other drills are conducted in a “top-down” fashion rather than in a manner that requires individual staff members to respond to a scenario by implementing protective actions such as a lockdown, fire evacuation, or severe weather sheltering and notifying the main office.
- All-hazards emergency plans that have been purchased or copied—“a plan in a can.” These can be very difficult to defend in court and fail often because they do not address local conditions and resources adequately. If you can buy it, it will probably fail.
- Web-based school emergency planning components for line-level campus staff: These have a very high fail rate because they do not work the way the human brain functions under stress. As Dr. Gary Klien points out, extensive research by the US military demonstrated that the human brain can often perform faster than a software system for pattern matching, recognition, and life-and-death decision making.
- One-page or two-page emergency plan components: These also have a high fail rate because they do not provide an adequate base of experience for life-and-death decision making.
- Attempting to use one plan component for a wide variety of school staff: This is because a teacher, principal, school bus driver, custodian, and food service worker all perform different action steps in the same emergency event.





Teach and practice controlled breathing techniques that have been proven to lower heart rate and improve the ability to perform mentally under extreme stress.

### **STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS**

Success strategies that are based on research, evaluation, and assessment include:

- **Role-specific emergency plan components:** Planning components tailored to various primary categories of campus employee such as cabinet officials, building administrators, front office staff, teachers, custodians, food service personnel, and school bus drivers.
- **Empowerment initiatives:** Implementing staff development approaches that emphasize the empowerment of employees to take immediate life-saving action.
- **The regular use of mental simulation:** Practicing activities that help staff see the situation, simulate the actions they would take in the first thirty seconds, and succeed in their resolution.
- **Breath control:** Training and practice in controlled breathing techniques that have been proven to lower heart rate and improve the ability to perform mentally under extreme stress.

- **All-staff drills:** Designing drills that require all staff to be prepared to make life-and-death decisions without advance knowledge of the type of scenario and drill that will be conducted.

### **DRILLS SHOULD BE INITIATED BY PROVIDING A RANDOMLY SELECTED EMPLOYEE WITH A SPECIFIC SCENARIO.**

Once provided with the scenario, the employee should decide without assistance which protective action(s) they should implement and what notifications they should make. The employee should not know in advance what type of drill will be conducted so they must choose appropriate options based on their school's all-hazard emergency plans. Care should be taken not to present scenarios that could frighten young students within earshot. Proper notifications should be made in advance. For example, if the scenario will involve fire and the appropriate response will be for the employee to pull the nearest fire alarm pull station, the school's alarm company should be notified if the school has a system that automatically notifies the alarm company.



## A life-and-death matter.

Granting and instilling permission to live for staff faced with an immediate life-and-death situation is relatively inexpensive and easy to accomplish compared with many things that schools currently do to prepare for emergency situations. It also happens to be a life-and-death matter. This approach to school emergency preparedness is grounded in research, extensive testing, and post-incident evaluations of more than 300 school events ranging from deaths from medical emergencies to tornado strikes and active shooter incidents.



### **ABOUT MICHAEL DORN**

Michael Dorn serves as the Executive Director of Safe Havens International, a nonprofit school safety center. Throughout his 34 years of work in the field of school safety, Michael has assisted with school security assessments for K-12 schools in 47 states, Canada, Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean. The author of 27 books on school safety and emergency preparedness, Michael also coauthored the IS360 active shooter training program for the 2013 White House School Safety Initiative. Michael regularly keynotes professional conferences in the US and abroad and serves as an expert witness on complex school safety cases. Michael has also been featured as a school safety expert on 20/20, CNN, Anderson Cooper, Hannity, Fox, Tokyo Broadcasting, the BBC, NPR, ABC, NBC, MSNBC, Al Jazeera America, Univision, and many other news programs. A graduate of the FBI National Academy, Michael also completed a Georgia State University fellowship to travel to Israel to learn antiterrorism concepts from the Israel National Police, Israel Defense Forces, and Israeli intelligence services. Michael welcomes your questions and feedback.

### **CONNECT WITH MICHAEL**

[safehavensinternational.org](http://safehavensinternational.org) | 404.557.2068

### **ABOUT CPI**

CPI equips organizations with training and resources on preventing and de-escalating difficult behavior. *Nonviolent Crisis Intervention*® training helps you reduce risk and injuries, improve staff retention, comply with legislative mandates, and more. With training tailored to your organization's unique needs, you can implement classroom management techniques that improve school safety and help students stay orderly, focused, and productive.

### **CONNECT WITH CPI**

[crisisprevention.com](http://crisisprevention.com) | [@CPI\\_Training](https://twitter.com/CPI_Training)