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2023-01-18 Why Fast Fashion is Destroying Our Planet... and Your Wallets

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Recommended Citation

Roseman, Gina, "2023-01-18 Why Fast Fashion is Destroying Our Planet... and Your Wallets" (2023). *The Spectator Online*. 844.

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Are Schools in the Pacific Northwest Investing in the Safety of Their Students?

Camryn Mata, Staff Reporter

“Do I have my textbooks? Laptop? Pencils? Paper?”

Every morning students fill their backpacks with school supplies and prepare for the day. The most daunting task ahead may be an essay or math test—their greatest concern being perhaps a late assignment or who to ask to prom. But now, after the recent increase in school shootings and gun violence on school campuses, a new fear threatens the lives of students across the country.

Washington state was not spared as it suffered two school shootings last year at Eisenhower High School in Yakima and Ingraham High School in Seattle.

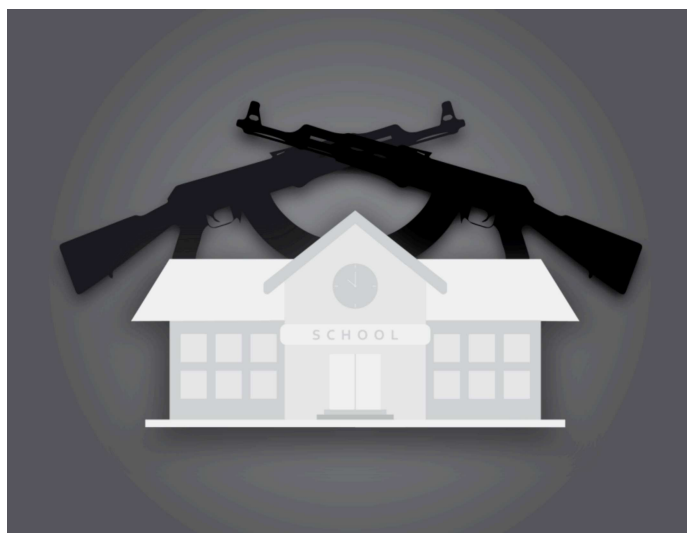
In January 2023 alone, the K-12 Shooting Database recorded 24 gun-related incidents that left 17 individuals fatally-wounded or injured in addition to the 39 mass shootings that have occurred in the first three weeks of the year. This number is already almost half of the 51 total recorded cases last year, according to EducationWeek.

The deadliest of these occurred at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas, May 24. Two teachers and 19 children were killed and 16 were injured after a gunman entered the school through an unlocked door on the western side of the school. Because of law enforcement’s failure to enter the building for 45 minutes, Uvalde parents and students sought accountability and improvement of safety procedures and measures during a meeting with school district leaders.

Jasmine Cazares, whose younger sister died during the shooting, spoke to the board members about how they are going to ensure she and her fellow students would be safe going to school in the future.

“I am going to be a senior; how am I supposed to come back to this school?” Cazares asked in the meeting. “What are you guys going to do to make sure I do not have to watch my friends die [and] wait 77 minutes bleeding out on my classroom floor just like my little sister did?”

Shawn Dwight Tolbert, 16-year-old student, and a group of fellow peers were reported hanging out in the Zaepfel Stadium parking lot outside Eisenhower High School after school, March 15, 2022. Witnesses reported a group of four individuals making “monkey noises” in the parking lot, which caught the attention of Tolbert’s group. During an altercation between Tolbert and an unnamed 18-



Natalie Schorr

year-old student, the 15-year-old assailant, who was revealed to be Tolbert's cousin, pulled out a gun and fatally shot Tolbert and wounded the unnamed student. The Yakima School District held a memorial for Tolbert in the parking lot outside of Yakima's Online School building, Mar. 16.

During the trial, prosecutors, community leaders and attendants discussed how the situation could have been worse, as the assailant had a history of assault charges and had been caught unlawfully carrying a weapon. Judge Ruth Reukauf commented on the severe impact the shooting had on the entire community, raising fears that their children are not safe at school.

"There has to be an expectation, and it has been challenged in recent years, that our students can be on a school ground safely and not have to worry about guns being brought into the mix," Reukauf said. "There should be an absolute expectation of safety."

Ebenezer Haile, a 17 year-old student, was in the bathroom with a small group of friends when 14-year-old Treyvaun French pulled out a gun he brought to school, Nov. 8. A fight broke out within the group, leading them outside and into the hallway. Haile was reported taunting French to shoot him. He was then fatally shot five times. A GoFundMe page was created by Haile's family to raise funds to rebuild their lives after the tragedy.

Within a week of the tragedy, Ingraham students along with neighboring school districts participated in a walk out and convened at city hall, Nov. 14. KIRO7 reported the demands of the students, which included hiring more mental health counselors, increased security, anti-racism training and updated safe storage laws.

"We need Ingraham to change what they are doing," one anonymous student said. "Obviously, they are doing things wrong considering how this happened and the aftermath of it as well."

These students and community leaders have initiated a conversation about what K-12 schools are doing to protect their students. The Robbs Elementary, Eisenhower High and Ingraham High school shootings are bringing awareness to the strengths and weaknesses behind school preventive measures and possible solutions school leaders can implement. Two school administrators and one anonymous source detailed what security and safety precautions are in place, along with trainings and behavioral evaluations that are conducted by law enforcement and school counselors.

The Hermiston School District is one of the largest school districts in Oregon, consisting of five elementary schools, two middle schools and one high school. With a combined student body of 5,508, district leaders invest in a number of resources and trainings to accommodate their district. One resource is the SafeOregon tip line, where individuals can anonymously report any potential threat of violence that may occur on school grounds. The tips are forwarded to law enforcement and school leaders. Every school in the district has automated doors that lock if administration believes there is a threat on campus. Daniel Greenbough, the director of student services in the Hermiston School District, says these security measures help administration and law enforcement quickly assess a situation before anyone gets hurt.

"The mentality we go into is not 'if,' but it's 'when,'" Greenbough said. "We always take the approach that we are going to have this hammered down as best we can knowing that there are always going to be all kinds of factors that play into any one given situation."

However, one area of concern within the district is the lack of resource officers within a given area. The school district is divided into three areas including the high school. Although each area has between 1,500 and 2,250 students, there is only one resource officer assigned to each area. Resource Officer in Hermiston Derrick Williams asserts that each resource officer has received training for various situations pertaining to school campuses.

"Most of [the students] feel comfortable coming to me," Williams said. "I feel in the last year-and-a-half, I have built a pretty good relationship with the kids here. It is nice that I know where a problem may be, and I know a lot of the staff and the students."

For school districts like Dayton School District, whose entire K-12 student body is less than 500, school security has not been as heavily invested in compared to Hermiston District. Interim Superintendent of Dayton School District Rich Stewart says since the school does not have the funds to invest in security measures, there is little to no infrastructure to stop an intruder from entering the building. While this is a major problem for the safety of the students, Stewart says he is trying to work with district and community leaders to push forward levies to address this weak area.

"It is partly because when you live in a small community, you don't think anything can happen like that," Stewart said. "What we are doing right now is trying to raise the sense of urgency and awareness around the fact that campus is not secured."

What the Dayton School District lacks in security measures, they make up for it by planning drills with administration and law enforcement. Every year, the district schedules two active shooter drills and one shelter-in-place drill. The district simulates a situation where an intruder has entered the campus, and administration helps students exit the building and make their way to a safe area. Afterwards, the teachers and officers present have a one hour debriefing on what went right or wrong.

According to Criminal Justice Professor Brooke Gialopsos, educating and advising school administrators and law enforcement on these procedures is an appropriate step in increasing survivability in these situations. Gialopsos visits various schools to inform school officials and administrators about different response programs such as ALICE and ALERRT.

“It does not cost money to teach people how to survive,” Gialopsos said. “[School districts] who believe [a shooting] is not going to happen are probably right, but that doesn’t mean they can’t prepare for it given all these [events] that are happening.”

According to an anonymous Washington school administrator, safety starts with counseling resources and disciplinary actions for students who are considered a threat to themselves or others.

“With a threat assessment, there is a protocol of explicit questions to ask students, parents and witnesses and [another] protocol to go over [the answers] to determine whether or not a student is at risk of being a threat to themselves or others,” the anonymous administrator said.

The administrator’s preventative methods don’t end with threat assessments, however, as they emphasize stopping violence at its source rather than once it has become a threat or when students feel unsafe. The goal in their school district is to create a positive culture and climate in which students feel connected and comfortable with one another, teachers and faculty.

School faculty and students are trying to grapple with both the fear and tragedy that this uptick in mass shootings has caused nationwide. While politicians and legislators remain divided on how to approach a solution, the violence of mass shootings continues to threaten the school days of students everywhere.