



Officials Respond to Nearly Tragic Joplin Shooting

JEFFERSON CITY — The recent string of school shootings hit home for Missourians this month with the terrifying and nearly tragic shooting at a Joplin middle school on Oct. 9. In the wake of this year's deadly shootings in Pennsylvania, Wisconsin and Colorado, and the shooting in Joplin, officials are examining state and local procedures to prevent such incidents from happening again, and to respond as quickly as possible if they do.

On Oct. 9, a 13-year-old student entered Joplin Memorial Middle School carrying an assault rifle and wearing a mask fashioned from a white T-shirt. After confronting administrators and students, the boy fired a shot into the ceiling. Fortunately, his gun jammed after the first shot, and the student fled outside, where he was ultimately arrested. The incident could have been much worse. According to news reports, the student was carrying a backpack containing military manuals and instructions on assembling homemade bombs, and his 30-round rifle magazine was approximately half full. Police have said the boy was fascinated by the 1999 Columbine shooting, in which 15 people were ruthlessly killed.

The tragedy in Littleton, Colo., has had a profound influence on far too many troubled youths, and the most recent wave of violence demands a comprehensive response. Accordingly, Gov. Blunt acted at once to break down any existing communications and administrative barriers to improve emergency procedures. On the same day of the Joplin shooting, the governor directed the Missouri Department of Public Safety and its office of Homeland Security to re-evaluate Missouri school-emergency plans to ensure our children have the safest learning environment possible. Further, the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services has partnered with the Missouri School Boards' Association (MSBA) to make available for free an Internet-based emergency planning tool to improve emergency planning and communications.

Gov. Blunt also recently participated in a live Web cast for Missouri schools, law enforcement, first responders, parents and community members. Entitled "Enhancing School Safety: A Dialog on Targeted School Violence," the program provides information on school violence with particular emphasis on planning, incident management, and post-incident response and recovery. The Web cast emphasizes the need for school officials, law enforcement and first responders to develop plans that meet each other's expectations and capabilities.

In September, the governor's Homeland Security Advisory Council established a Safe School Working Group to ensure Missouri has a seamless approach to school safety. The group is evaluating an all-hazards planning tool for schools to address safety issues. They are also examining the possibility of using Homeland Security grant money to expand the use of this tool to include preparation for a terrorist attack or hostage situation.

Safe schools cannot be taken for granted. We have to understand that it will take hard work and deliberate planning to keep our schools secure for Missouri students.

For more information or to sign up for the Internet tool for Missouri schools, visit www.schoolsprepared.org. To view the "Enhancing School Safety" Web cast, go to the Education Solutions Global Network, a service of MSBA, at www.esgn.tv.

If you have comments or questions about this week's column or any other matter involving state government, please do not hesitate to contact me. You can reach my office by phone at (866) 271-2844.

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