

## Blog #4

# Role of School Counselors in an Age of Violence and Terrorism

We live in a world where violence and terrorism are center stage, both in the United States and around the world. The magnitude and frequency of violent and terrorist events can disrupt our lives and dispel our sense of safety with no clear resolution in sight. The fact that these phenomena permeate and threaten the stability of our very existence has enormous implications for our schools and how we educate our youth.

Blog #3 focused on the role of values in a CBA and stated that our world is filled with conflicting, and sometimes irreconcilable, value and belief systems that contribute to a volatile and unstable world. This Blog (#4) is a reflection on the role of school counselors in an age of violence and terrorism, and what counselors can do to address these critical issues. Education can be a powerful force in reducing violence and terrorism. School counselors have a significant role to play in helping students develop their ability to critically understand the nature of these phenomena, how they are related to value and belief systems, and what can be done to make the world a safer and more peaceful place to live.

### Definitions

Violence, for the purpose of this Blog, is defined as any action which results in harm to others. Such actions can be planned (e.g., the massacres of children in Newtown or the nightclub massacre in Orlando), or it can be spontaneous (e.g., some cases of domestic violence or road rage that erupt in the heat of the moment). The result is the same, people are hurt or killed or become oppressed (in the sense that their human rights are violated or their guaranteed freedoms are taken away against their will). Terrorism is violence in the extreme, consisting of intentional acts to instill fear, intimidate, manipulate or control others, and harm or destroy anyone who does not agree with them.

Violence comes in many forms. It is easier to recognize violent tendencies in individuals, or in radical groups, who make no effort to hide their core beliefs or vision of the world which they want to establish and control. It is more difficult to recognize and respond to the more subtle forms of violence and terrorism which permeate our lives on a daily basis. For example, personal and institutionalized bigotry, racism, sexism and xenophobia are all forms of violence because they harm people by restricting their rights and rendering them second-class citizens. Sometimes the harm is physical and can result in injury or death. All the time they have a negative effect on people's sense of self and aspirations by denying them the freedom to fulfill their aspirations and share in the benefits of a free and democratic society.

Terrorism is generally perceived in terms of attacks where people are injured or die. But terrorism is more nuanced than that. Any effort to deny others their freedom to participate in decisions that affect their lives and/or any efforts to thwart their ability to achieve their full potential constitute a form of terrorism. The practice of instilling fear in people's minds and hearts in order to sway their opinions, make them afraid to act, and accept beliefs that are based on lies rather than reasoned thinking are all forms of terrorism. As a society, we must come to realize that our acceptance of all these forms of violence and terrorism can no longer be tolerated if we are to survive as a democratic nation.

Violence and terrorism, in all their forms, must be viewed as morally corrupt, ethically ill-advised and spiritually bankrupt. Values and beliefs that promote and instill fear rather than hope, divisiveness rather than unity, manipulation and deceit rather than truth and transparency, and self-interest at the expense of the common good must be viewed as potential seeds of destruction of a free and democratic society and inconsistent with the notion of a great nation.

### **Role of School Counselors**

School counselors play a significant role in supporting students' learning and development. Content area teachers focus primarily on students' knowledge acquisition, cognitive development and academic achievement. School counselors focus on three primary areas of student development: a) social-emotional learning, the ability to effectively manage emotions, be goal-oriented and responsible individuals engaged in meaningful relationships, b) metacognitive awareness and skill development, the ability to reflect on one's own thinking and learning processes in order to improve them, and c) behavior, tendencies and patterns of actions and responses to stimuli.

These three areas are central to the role of school counselors and are essential in helping students understand and effectively address violence and terrorism. Violence and terrorism are powerful forces that affect students' learning outcomes and emotional development. They affect students' ability to construct meaningful world views and seek pathways that ensure the basic human needs for safety, personal fulfillment and community.

In addition to focusing on these areas, school counselors are trained to help students maximize their potential for learning by guiding the development of their knowledge, skills, attitudes, beliefs and habits of mind so they can stay focused on and benefit from their learning opportunities and experiences. School counselors, therefore, are in a unique position to offer assistance and guide students as they deal with the phenomena of violence and terrorism.

These three areas (social emotional learning, metacognition, behavior) are critical to students' development, achievement and well-being. They are as important, if not more important to success in school and life as acquiring content knowledge and passing exams based on cognitive development. How students approach these three areas can make the difference between students' ability to learn how to learn, plan for their future success, and cope with the myriad challenges of growing up and being prepared to survive and be successful in the postsecondary world.

### **What School Counselors Can Do**

Violence and terrorism are not going to go away, or only affect other people. Nor can they simply be ignored and swept under the rug. Learning about violence and terrorism, how it affects

us and how we can become part of the solution all need to be part of the learning opportunities we provide to students.

School counselors are already addressing issues related to violence and terrorism by delivering lessons on topics such as conflict resolution, bullying prevention, and respect for self and others. They help students be prepared to address these phenomena by encouraging them to develop their critical thinking and problem solving skills, and develop their world view and belief systems to be inclusive and honor diversity.

School counselors conduct small group and one-on-one counseling interventions to address specific learning and behavioral problems, and are involved in the school's office discipline referral (ODR) processes. These activities need to be continued and reinforced. In addition, the graphic below highlights six areas school counselors can focus on to proactively help students understand and effectively respond to violence and terrorism.



### Comprehend

Phenomena such as violence and terrorism need to be understood before they can be resolved. School counselors' self-knowledge about these issues is important. They need to be aware of how violence and terrorism affects them personally, what thoughts go through their minds, how they feel and in what ways they think they can respond to violent and terrorist acts. This will help them gain deeper insights into what their students may be experiencing as they are confronted with such events.

Knowledge about the sources, beliefs, activities and consequences of these phenomena are critical. A helpful exercise to help school counselors comprehend the nature and impact of these phenomena is for them to enter into dialog with their colleagues and members of the school community. The results of their discussions can be documented and shared with others.

For example, they can document how they define violent and terrorist acts, along with where they see evidence of violence or terrorist tendencies in their midst. This can help focus on areas that may require immediate attention. They can make a list of local-to-worldwide incidents they

feel students should be made aware of and be given opportunities to discuss. Another list could identify strategies and practices that have proven successful in combating violence and terrorism. Or, a list can identify early warning signs for these phenomena to increase their capacity to recognize the signs as they appear and respond to immediately. The importance of such lists is to bring into focus and gain consensus on what people think and feel needs to be done.

### **Plan**

Planning is essential to any effort to address violent and terrorist activity. This involves a complete planning cycle beginning with needs (nature and scope of problem) and capabilities assessments (extent to which counselors, their school and district are capable of delivering an effective response). Expected results need to be defined with action steps identified that are required to achieve each result. Once the plan is developed it needs to be implemented, with ongoing monitoring and corrective action performed as needed. Finally the impact of implementing the plan needs to be evaluated so the evaluation results can be used to revise existing or develop new plans.

School counseling is a program that is focused both on prevention and intervention activities. From this perspective, school counselors, and the district, should have a prevention-based plan that will help reduce or eliminate the threat of violence and terrorism. When incidents do occur, counselors and the district should already have planned what types of interventions will be needed to address and resolve emerging crises. A critical component of these plans is that the indicators of successful implementation will be well-defined and the protocols for accurate measures well-established when the plan is being developed.

The collection, analysis and use of data to plan and respond are of critical importance. Data can be used to determine need, select appropriate interventions, and evaluate impact. School counselors should be involved in data collection, analysis and use to identify areas where violence and terrorism can be found, and help lead data discussions regarding appropriate prevention and intervention activities.

### **Collaborate**

Collaboration is another key component of any response to violence and terrorism. These issues deeply affect everyone from individuals to whole societies to world citizens. These issues are not confined to the realm of school counseling. Everybody has a role to play. It is a basic tenet of a CBA that the results we expect can best be achieved through a community of dialog, reflection and collaboration. We need to talk among ourselves regarding the nature of the problems and the best ways to address them.

Locally, this can be accomplished through dialog among the various constituencies in the school community (e.g., counselors, teachers, students, parents/guardians, school leaders, community partners). School counselors, teachers and other professional support personnel need to establish dialogic interactions that will keep dealing with violence and terrorism as a necessary focus. Students need to be invited into the dialog so they can reveal what they are thinking and feeling, and can articulate which activities and interventions are helping them the most. Home-school connections need to be reinforced so that parents/guardians know what their children are learning in school and have ongoing opportunities to participate in the dialog. This can be accomplished by newsletters, at PTO meetings and via other communication vehicles that allow parents to

know how they can help reinforce their children's learning at home. Tips on helping kids cope with these issues can be very useful to families.

### **Counsel**

Many of the problems related to violence and terrorism can be direct or indirect and require one-on-one or small group interactions between students and the school counselor. In such instances, counselors are responding to highly personalized issues that are affecting students' sense of well-being, emotional stability and executive functioning.

These can be deeply personal (e.g., a student being bullied or raped) or part of a pattern (e.g., behavioral problems requiring ODR's). It can be the impact of an event in your own community and involving people you know (e.g., Newtown or Orlando or Dallas). When family members such as parents/guardians or friends are killed, the scars left from such events do not simply fade away. School counselors are often on the front line in having to provide answers when there are none, and to provide comfort and support which seems inadequate to help others come to terms with and heal the wounded hearts, minds and psyche of those devastated by such events.

### **Instruct**

As noted above, school counseling programs focus on both prevention and intervention. An important aspect of the school counselor's role is to instruct students, to teach them school counseling content which consists of key concepts and vocabulary, appropriate strategies and practices, and the importance of developing a sense of self-worth and self-efficacy. Instruction can be delivered at many levels (e.g., whole class, group, one-on-one, both as a prevention-focused curriculum and as interventions to address emerging problems in students' learning and lives. In particular, the issues of violence and terrorism need to be addressed in some form following major events (e.g., Newtown, Orlando and Dallas) when students cannot escape from knowing about and having an emotional response to the events.

Student projects, especially in the higher grades, can help students delve more deeply into these areas. They can be asked to conduct research, then document and share their results with others through a variety of media. They can be asked to reflect on what they have learned from their project and how they think it will help them in their lives and help others with whom they share their findings.

It should be decided what concepts and vocabulary need to be defined and discussed so that students have a language set to reflect upon and dialog about these phenomena. Self-reflective exercises should be encouraged in which students are asked to identify what they know and describe how they feel and what they feel can be done. They can be asked to describe incidents in which they have witnessed or been involved in destructive acts (e.g., bullying incident, fights), how they responded and were impacted, and what they would do differently next time.

Displays promoting conflict resolution, community-building, empathy, and respect for self and others can be placed on bulletin boards and walls. Contests for writing or posters can be held to help make students aware and find creative ways to express their thoughts and feelings, with students involved in providing feedback to their peers about the impact of their efforts.

### Advocate

Advocacy has a dual focus. It requires the ability and willingness to identify activities and practices that are not in the best interest of students, and to initiate action to begin addressing the problems. It also requires the ability and willingness to identify and reinforce practices that equitably supports the growth and development of all students. This can involve the rights of an individual (e.g., a student requiring special accommodations but who is being denied them) or groups of students (e.g., equity and access being unfairly restricted or denied for particular ethnic groups). Advocacy requires action. It is not enough to simply acknowledge that problems exist. School counselors are responsible for identifying the problems and making those who are in decision-making positions aware of the problems and possible solutions so appropriate action can be taken to resolve the issues.

Violence is in our midst on a daily basis. Terrorism, at least the type that involves people being senselessly killed, is a more distant threat. School counselors need to be strong advocates for the delivery of prevention and intervention-focused activities that relate to violence and terrorism. This can be accomplished by being observant and watching for signs of thinking and behavioral patterns that can disrupt students' learning or have destructive influences in their lives.

School counseling is an all-student initiative. Comprehensive school counseling programs are for every child. Counselors are guardians of the rights of students and families in the educational process. They should not be afraid to speak up and take action that will ensure equity and fairness, and help remedy harmful situations.

### Contribution of a CBA

Blog #3 (Role of Values in a CBA) was written in response to the Orlando nightclub massacre. Reflecting on that event, I realized that the same terms that are foundational to a CBA (e.g., names of constructs, sub-constructs, student results in "A Vision to Live By") could be used to describe and gain insights into the thinking and behavior patterns of a broad spectrum of individuals (e.g., from those who embody democratic principles to those manifesting a terrorist mindset). The differences between these two types of individuals are found in the value and belief systems that inform their thinking and actions.

For example, motivation is one of the four CBA constructs. The expected educational outcome is that students will be highly-motivated. This construct can be used to gain deep insights into a student's thinking and behavior regardless of the value and belief system. A student can be said to be highly motivated to embody values and principles of a democratic society with acute concerns for social justice and the common good. Students could also be said to be highly motivated if their value and belief system lead them to become suicide bombers.

How should we view the role of counselors in relation to value and belief systems? First, school counselors need to be clear on their own values and beliefs. Second, counselors need to recognize that everything, including educational processes, is value-laden. The values inform and shape how the educational processes are understood and delivered. The question is not whether to teach or not teach values, but how to address value-related issues as part of their role. Third, high value is placed on school counselors helping students become critical thinkers and problem solvers capable of evaluating and making their own decisions regarding the value and belief systems that affect their learning and lives.

It is important to help students explore and understand the differences between positive educational values in a democratic society and the mindset of violent and terrorist individuals and groups. It is important for students to explore ways to transcend the highly polarized discourse that renders us incapable and/or unwilling to find common ground on which to build consensus on how to resolve the impasse.

Another function of a CBA is to provide a set of filters through which we can observe students' thinking and behaviors, and evaluate them in terms of the value and belief systems that inform them. In order to be able to make sense of why they think and act in certain ways, students must be able to critically look at the values and beliefs that have the most powerful influences on their learning and lives. The CBA constructs and sub-constructs provide a useful set of filters for school counselors, and other educators as well.

For example, the Orlando nightclub massacre illustrates this function of a CBA. One thing we can count on hearing after senseless acts of violence and terrorism is the question, "What was their motivation?" We all want to know the reasons why the act was committed and the conditions under which the decision was made. Counselors and students can reflect on the motivation of a terrorist, ask questions about their intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, and explore their view of self-determination.

They can consider how terrorists envision their possible selves (e.g., being a martyr, defending their faith, overcoming oppression). By contrast, counselors and students can discuss motivation from the perspective of living in a democratic society and the possible selves they envision. What is important is that students have the opportunity to reflect and engage in dialog about how these phenomena affect them, and what steps they and their peers can take to respond.

Self-knowledge is another construct that can help counselors and students explore and understand violent and terrorist events. Metacognition deals with the individual's ability to reflect on his/her own thinking and behavior. How do violent and terrorist people understand the internal processes that inform and manage their behavior? What can be learned about their metacognitive understanding of themselves that can help counselors look for signs of imbalance and misperceptions in students? Attributional styles, how these people explain the causes for the conditions in which they find themselves, provide critical insights into their mindset and what compels them to act in certain ways. Students can be engaged in dialog about how their understanding of themselves differs from a terrorist and what effective strategies for thinking and behaving they feel they need to learn or improve in order to better cope and respond to these phenomena.

Throughout history humans have exhibited a propensity for resorting to violence to solve problems and strive to exert power over each other. Education can be one of the most powerful forces we have to counteract this tendency by helping students understand the need for constructive rather than destructive solutions to problems.

We must begin by accepting that we live in a violent world where terrorist events are increasing, and where polarization is rendering us ineffectual in our ability to respond. We have a major problem when we have those who advocate for value and belief systems that absolve their followers from any responsibility for a culture of violence or the deaths of innocent victims (e.g., the gun lobby).

We have a major problem in attempts to suppress voters or restrict women's reproductive rights, not because of democratic principles but because of a desire of some to claim the full benefits of a democratic society for themselves while restricting access to those benefits for others. Some of our political discourse has been devolving from patriotic conversation into vitriolic exhortations. Instilling fear rather than hope and promoting hatred rather than unity, become the weapons of mass seduction that lure people into its lair of simplistic promises unsubstantiated by workable ideas, and promises of a speedy salvation from all their woes.

A CBA encourages a critically aware citizenry who are sensitized to the damaging effects of violence and terrorism in all its forms, and act to do something about it. It will take a community of dialog, reflection and collaboration to ensure a safe future. What we need is to evolve as a culture of decency and interdependence, not to continually devolve into a culture of intolerance, fear, hate and violence fueled by polarizing ideologies. It is time to say enough is enough. It is time to act. Democracy is a grand experiment with great promise to help the world set all people free so they can live in an equitable and fair world united in peace. But democracy is an experiment that is ongoing and can still fail if people do not act.

We do not want history to judge us as a voyeuristic society that was more content to sit by and watch the violence that surrounds us than to do something about it. Acts of violence and terrorism are not a TV show or movie we can turn off when it is over. It is something that must be addressed and everyone has a role to play.

School counselors have a critical role in helping students through their educational journey. Because school counselors focus on social-emotional learning, metacognition and behavioral needs, they are instrumental in helping students become proficient, self-regulating and responsible learners who are able to cope with and help resolve our greatest problems. By helping students achieve the CBA student results aligned with a set of values that honor democratic principles, school counselors are not only helping save the world from violence and terrorism, but are helping to save us from ourselves.