

EDITORIAL

Police, schools respond properly

Local police and school officials faced a frightening situation last week. They handled it swiftly and well.

Although threats of school shootings tend to proliferate right after an actual tragedy, officials obviously need to assume that a threat presents a potential danger to students and staff, and act accordingly.

Baker City’s episode started only one day after 19 students and two teachers were shot and killed at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas, on May 24.

On the afternoon of May 25, around the time classes let out in Baker City schools, Lance Woodward, the Baker City Police Department’s school resource officer, learned from staff at Baker High School that a teacher had overheard a student talking about a threat that another student had allegedly made, a threat that referenced the Uvalde shooting. The second student, a male, had been recently expelled from BHS, Police Chief Ty Duby said.

This might seem to be a situation when canceling classes for the following day, or instituting a lockdown, was warranted. But Duby said he decided instead to interview the expelled student, at his home, before school started on May 26. Duby also assigned unmarked police cars to park near the student’s home early that morning, to ensure he didn’t leave unnoticed.

Duby’s decision was sensible. It ensured that police would know where the student was. And because he was the only potential threat police knew about at the time, there was no reason to frighten students and staff or interfere with classes.

Duby said the student denied to police that he had made the alleged threat. Police also talked to the student’s parents. After the conversations, Duby said he was convinced the threat, if the student made it, was not serious.

But the situation changed later on May 26. Woodward learned about social media posts from Baker Middle School students that referred to a threat about a school shooting. At first it appeared these threats were not related to the expelled BHS student, Duby said.

Based on evidence of a possible second threat, Mark Witty, superintendent of the Baker School District, decided around noon on May 26 to institute a lockdown in all district schools. This, too, was a reasonable decision.

A lockdown is a precaution in which all exterior doors are locked, and students and staff remain inside, with classes continuing. Moreover, a police officer was stationed outside the entrance to each school. A lockdown is quite different from a lockdown, the protocol for cases when there is an active shooter or other direct threat. During a lockdown, students are told to be quiet and hide, and all interior doors are locked, and lights turned off.

The May 26 lockdown ended after about an hour, after police determined that the social media posts from BMS referred not to a separate threat, but to the alleged threat by the BHS student.

But that wasn’t the last of the day’s challenges for police.

Late in the afternoon, after most students had gone home, Woodward learned of yet another threat. This one was actually unrelated to the alleged threat by the expelled BHS student. In the later case, a 12-year-old boy attending BMS made a threat about a shooting at the middle school. Police talked to the student at school and, later, at his home. Police cited the student for first-degree disorderly conduct, a Class A misdemeanor.

The expelled BHS student, meanwhile, has not been charged, Duby said. He said police haven’t been able to confirm the student made a threat, in part because the teacher who overheard the second-hand conversation couldn’t identify the student who supposedly heard the expelled student make the threat.

Students certainly ought to be punished when police can confirm that they made statements, serious or not, that frighten students, staff and parents, and interfere with school.

Regardless, it’s gratifying to see how quickly, and decisively, police and school officials responded on May 26.

Police also should continue to keep track of the expelled student, who has a possible reason to resent the high school and allegedly has threatened a shooting.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



COLUMN

We need to address guns...and more

BY CYNTHIA ALLEN

In the aftermath of a tragedy like the elementary school massacre in Uvalde, when emotions and egos are running high, few of us have much wisdom to offer.

We have our anger, which even when justified is largely self-serving, and we have fingers to point, which we do without listening or considering where we might challenge our own priors instead of merely attacking others.

We have absurd and impossible solutions — Ban all guns! Arm all teachers! — to a morally and legally complex problem.

And yes, I’ll say it: Guns are part of the problem.

Gun ownership may be an enshrined constitutional right, but rights come with responsibilities, especially to the most vulnerable among us. And when 19 innocent children are gunned down in an elementary school (not to mention those killed on the streets or by suicide every day), it’s worth at least considering how our existing policies are not striking the right balance.

It should not be alienating to other conservatives to agree that we should restrict teenagers from purchasing high-caliber weapons, or limit the size of certain magazines, or pass red-flag laws that would keep potentially dangerous and unstable people from legally obtaining weapons.

We should have a robust debate on ways to close loopholes in background checks.

Some conservative leaders, such as Sen. John Cornyn, have made overtures in this direction. We need their leadership, and we need follow-through.

We can have a serious and sober discussion about better enforcement of existing laws, such as cracking down on straw purchases.

While most of these efforts would have had minimal impact (save the age restriction) on the mass shootings in Uvalde or Buffalo, New York, they might help around the edges at reducing gun deaths overall. And even that would be progress.

They might in some small way deter more young and troubled people from obtaining weapons that would ultimately result in self-harm or harm to others.

We won’t know until we try.

But with 400 million guns already in circulation in the U.S., limiting access to firearms isn’t a viable solution. Anyone who argues otherwise is living in a European fantasy.

And if Republicans are responsible for their failure to meaningfully engage on reasonable gun control measures, Democrats are guilty for their refusal to address the litany of other issues that contribute to a deteriorating culture. It alienates our youth, degrades trust in our institutions and makes rampant gun violence, like the horrors we’ve just experienced, ever more prevalent.

Many politicians who fought to keep schools closed and teens isolated for two years can’t figure out why juvenile mental health has plummeted but violence among the same population has increased.

They don’t understand that gun purchases surged during the COVID pandemic because faith in government was in rapid decline.

They refuse to acknowledge how fatherlessness and family breakdown exacerbate isolation and radicalization and destroy the social guardrails that keep kids from failing through the cracks.

How do we rebuild trust? Strengthen families? Address mental and emotional health?

None of these problems is easy to resolve.

They won’t be addressed by expedient political fixes and theater or hashtag campaigns and social media posts.

And they won’t be resolved if all we do is paint our ideological opponents as the enemy, without any intention of working with them to find solutions.

It’s becoming clear the attack on Robb Elementary that resulted in so much carnage was at least exacerbated by school security failures and the utterly incompetent response of local authorities. The coming weeks and months will require more than a review of what broke down on site.

We need a far deeper reckoning with what has broken down in our society that allows these tragedies to occur over and over again. Who is willing to do that?

We need wisdom that comes not from screaming but from listening.

■ Cynthia Allen joined the Fort Worth, Texas, Star-Telegram Editorial Board in 2014 after a decade of working in government and public affairs in Washington, D.C. She is a member of the Editorial Board and writes a weekly opinion column on a wide array of topics, including politics, faith and motherhood.

YOUR VIEWS

Baker City ambulance: ‘If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it’

I decided sometime back not to write any further letters to the editor or anyone else, for that fact, because I came to the conclusion it won’t change a thing. However with the current city council and for whatever their reasoning wanting to discontinue the Fire Department handling the city ambulance, I’m at somewhat of a loss. As far as I’m concerned I see no reason to challenge the old saying “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it”

We have lived in Baker City for 41 years and counting and challenge anyone to find a better small city to live in. We have had three occasions in that time to call the ambulance and have never seen better response, ability, and professional personnel. Many years ago I worked in the medical profession as a licensed Psychiatric Technician for the state of California. One particular case comes to mind when thinking of the ambulance situation. We had on the ward I was working on at the time the oldest living Down Syndrome patient know to exist at the time. He was 67 years old at the time and had seizures which were under control for years with medication. A new doctor was assigned to our ward and decided to change his seizure medicine, stating that he had been on it so long, it was time to put him on something new. Within two weeks the patient went into nonstop seizures and died within two days. Now to come back to our ambulance service, my advice to them is “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it!” What in the world are they thinking of? Leave it alone, it’s the best any city could ask for. Does someone have to die in order to prove it?

Bill Ward
Baker City

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Oregon Legislature: Legislative documents and information are available online at www.leg.state.or.us.

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Baker City Hall: 1655 First Street, P.O. Box 650, Baker City, OR 97814; 541-523-6541; fax 541-524-2049. City Council meets the second and fourth Tuesdays at 7 p.m. in Council Chambers. Councilors Jason Spriet, Kerry McQuisten, Shane Alderson, Joanna Dixon, Kenyon Damschen, Johnny Waggoner Sr. and Dean Guyer.

Baker City administration: 541-523-6541. Jonathan Cannon, city manager; Ty Duby, police chief; Sean Lee, fire chief; Michelle Owen, public works director.

Baker County Commission: Baker County Courthouse 1995 3rd St., Baker City, OR 97814; 541-523-8200. Meets the first and third Wednesdays at 9 a.m.; Bill Harvey (chair), Mark Bennett, Bruce Nichols.

Baker County departments: 541-523-8200. Travis Ash, sheriff; Noodle Perkins, roadmaster; Greg Baxter, district attorney; Alice Durlfinger, county treasurer; Stefanie Kirby, county clerk; Kerry Savage, county assessor.

Baker School District: 2090 4th Street, Baker City, OR 97814; 541-524-2260; fax 541-524-2564. Superintendent: Mark Witty. Board meets the third Tuesday of the month at 6 p.m. Council Chambers, Baker City Hall, 1655 First St.; Chris Hawkins, Andrew Bryan, Travis Cook, Jessica Dougherty, Julie Huntington.