

# CHICAGO SUN-TIMES

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## Beslan has lesson for U.S. schools

**I**t is beyond your worst nightmare: Armed terrorists invade your school and seize 1,000 children and parents. The police response is slow and indecisive. After two days, you are only able to stand by and watch as the children suffer inside and the scene descends into chaos and death. After the smoke clears, hundreds of men, women and children lie dead or wounded in the school ruins.

The horrible attack on opening day at a middle school in Beslan, Russia, is a wakeup call to the rest of the world. Terrorists don't distinguish between soft and hard targets; anybody — even our children — could be next. The question is: Are we doing enough to make sure our schools are safe?

Let's face it: Despite the 9/11 attacks, the student shootings at Columbine, the Oklahoma City bombing, students are returning to schools that are inadequately prepared against a terrorist attack. There is a massive need to improve efforts, both educational and financial. While money has been allocated to obvious targets such as bridges, tunnels and factories, not enough has come to the security of our schools. Last year, only \$38 million was allocated to homeland security in schools. This year, it's \$8 million less. And with the usual

government pressure for higher test scores and lower budgets, school safety is being squeezed out. John Kotnor, president of the National Association of School Resource Officers, said in a recent interview, "When it comes to school safety we are constantly asking, is it an agenda item? When school budget cuts continue, unfortunately, school safety goes down the drain with it."

A NASRO survey found that over 75 percent of schools said they weren't prepared to respond to attacks, while over half the schools don't have specific guide-

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lines to follow if there is a change in the national terror alert. Another report, by the America Prepared campaign, shows a number of school districts have made little or no specific planning for a terrorist attack.

Any school that wants to be prepared must address these issues: All staff and all parents should know the emergency plans. There should be repeated drills and a

school's planning should include responses to all possible threats and terror targets — a dirty bomb might need an evacuation, but a chemical or biological attack would require a lockdown. Also, a national terror alert system should be connected to every public school.

Does the school have an emergency communication system that will not only alert the local law enforcement, but can inform the parents of every child? Is every classroom fitted with a phone or communication device? Are all the staff trained to handle emergencies? Does the principal have a portable register that can be moved to a secure location? Does the school nurse have enough medical supplies for specific students' needs in case of a lockdown? And does the school have enough food and water that it can survive without outside contact for 48 hours?

Even if all these criteria are reached, plans need to be constantly updated if they are to remain effective. School safety planning is an ongoing process, not a one-time event. We must make sure that another tragedy like Beslan can never happen.

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