

Excerpt

Thirteen Minutes: Death of an American High School

By David W. Guth (Page Publishing, 2022)

It has become more common for school officials to openly discuss safety issues with students and to practice emergency lockdown drills. This is very much in line with the nation's post 9/11 mantra of "see something, say something." In more extreme cases, some schools have been transformed into fortresses with metal detectors at the entrances. However, some object to these security precautions on the grounds that they create an atmosphere of fear. There is also a movement toward more formalized threat assessment.

Gun advocates often favor an "arm the lunch lady" approach, which allows teachers and staff to carry firearms for self-defense. After the shooting at Marjorie Stoneham Douglas High School, the Florida legislature authorized teachers and citizens – referred to as "safety guardians" – to carry guns in school once they passed background checks, psychological exams and a six-week training course. The law said these "safety guardians" could earn \$30,000 a year, less than the salary of a School Resource Officer.¹

A more common preventive measure has been the employment of armed security guards – euphemistically known as "School Resource Officers" – to roam the halls with a smiling face that provides a limited sense of security. Sometimes these SROs are law enforcement officers assigned to a particular school. At other times, these SROs are retired military or law enforcement officers picking up a few extra bucks. This does not suggest that these are not competent and dedicated individuals. But let's just say that SROs are not likely to be the lead characters on hour-long network television crime dramas.

The Price County School District introduced school resource officers to Banfield High School and the county's three middle schools in the fall of 2018, months after the shootings at Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. However, the decision to add the SROs was controversial. There were basically two sides: the "we've got to protect our kids" camp and the "don't turn our schools into a fortress" group. The debate was muddied by the actions of officers in Las Vegas and Parkland who froze during their shooting incidents and were subsequently fired for failing to take action. Eventually, the Price County school board did what school boards most often do: It hired the SROs in an effort to mitigate potential legal liability. However, they also recognized that introducing armed security into the school environment could, itself, create its own liability.

There are a variety of ways SROs function in schools around the nation. Typically, they are hired under an interagency agreement between school boards and local law enforcement. Sometimes, sworn police officers or sheriff's deputies are assigned to schools. Otherwise, the SROs are trained auxiliary officers under either school or law

¹ "Meet some of the everyday people training to take down school shooters" (13 June 2018). CBS News. Online: www.cbsnews.com. (Accessed 15 December 2019)

enforcement supervision. Qualification includes some kind of certification, depending on state and local laws. SROs are often commissioned police officers with additional SRO-specific training. Obviously, good communication skills, an ability to effectively deal with others – especially school students – and knowledge of local, state and federal laws are critical. While it is the kind of a job that attracts retired police officers and ex-military, it is also attractive to police wannabes, who, for some reason, could not be hired as a commissioned law enforcement officer.

At first, both the Price City Police Chief and Price County Sheriff were against the introduction of SROs into the local schools. Neither of them wanted to add new responsibilities and, perhaps most importantly, new expenditures to what they saw as their woefully inadequate budgets. And then there was the vision of a potential Barney Fife-like character stumbling and bumbling around the school with a loaded weapon. (For the record, Mayberry Sheriff Andy Taylor required Deputy Fife to keep a single bullet in his shirt pocket.) After negotiating with the school board over qualifications and salary, it was decided that Price County SROs would be on the school board's payroll and under Sheriff Kibler's supervision.

The SRO at Raymond E. Banfield High School is Ralph Edward Nichols, 36, a Price County native. He graduated from BHS in May 2002 and, in the wake of the 9/11 terror attacks, joined the U.S. Marines. As a corporal, Nichols participated in the second battle of Fallujah, Iraq, in late 2004. After that horrible experience, he left active service in 2006 and served the remaining four years of his military obligation in the USMC Reserves. It was upon his return to civilian life that Nichols attended a nearby community college and earned an associate degree in criminology. It was there he met his wife, Margaret. After graduation, they moved to Carbondale, Illinois, the home of Southern Illinois University, to join the campus police force. After nearly 10 years on the job, Ralph and Margaret moved with their two daughters back to Price County to take the newly created SRO position and to be closer to both of their families.

Having worked in a college environment, Nichols was comfortable in his new role. He saw the role of the SRO being less about police work and more about being a security guard and an ex-officio student counselor. He'd walk the halls, lock and unlock doors, occasionally give safety lectures and be a calming presence in any large school gathering. Yes, he would occasionally deal with drug, alcohol and vandalism incidents. There also would be an occasional fight or shouting match among students. But for him, the best part was his interaction with students. Nichols would often think to himself that being a school monitor was a much nicer lifestyle than taking fire from Islamic militants or scuffling with patrons in a bar fight. However, Ralph read the papers and followed the news. He knew what kind of world in which he was living. And, in the wake of a contentious 2020 national election and an ongoing global pandemic, Ralph Nichols realized that even a safe haven such as a Midwestern high school could devolve into chaos in the blink of an eye.