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COMMENTARY FEB 26

Arming teachers and building police stations: a desperate Texas is trying everything to keep our kids safe



James Ragland, Columnist/Editorial Writer

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Look no further than Westlake and Argyle -- two wealthy suburbs of Fort Worth just 15 minutes apart -- to get a glimpse of the different approaches school districts are taking to keep students

safe.

One is building a police substation on campus; the other has been arming teachers for the past four years. But this is more than a tale of contrasting security programs. It's a reflection of the struggle school districts across the nation are facing in the wake of a series of mass shootings, including the massacre this month at a Florida high school.

It's also another shameful example of the huge social ills -- from poverty to mental illness and learning disabilities -- that teachers and school administrators are being asked to deal with on a daily basis while trying to educate our children. We live in a sick and troubled society where our schools and churches must be treated as potential killing fields.

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DALLAS POLICE

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No single tactic -- installing metal detectors, planting a cop at the front door, arming teachers with guns -- is guaranteed to keep a campus free of rampages like the ones we've seen in Columbine, Sandy Hook and Parkland, Fla.

"The solution is not just placing an officer on campus or arming teachers," said Michael Wilson, the police chief of Keller, which provides police service to the nearby town of Westlake. "The solution is a multifaceted approach."

When Wilson and school officials at Westlake Academy Charter School began talking about how best to secure that campus, they realized they would need more cops or guards because it's designed like a corporate campus with multiple open buildings.

"In securing a location, you're talking about presence, which is not about placing an officer everywhere to be seen because that's not possible," he said. "You can't hire enough officers to do that."

They settled on a substation, which will beef up police at the school and in the northern part of Keller.

"We'll have multiple officers able to use that platform to build stronger relationships," Wilson said.



support tougher gun laws

"A uniform or an armed presence won't ensure that bad things won't happen," Wilson said. "The town, the school and the community realize that we all play a role and have a responsibility."

Argyle, just 10 miles up the road, took on that responsibility a different way. A sign on campus makes that clear: "Please be aware that the staff at Argyle [ISD] are armed and may use whatever force is necessary to protect our students."

The district started its own school marshal program shortly after the Texas Legislature passed legislation introduced in 2013 by State Rep. Jason Villalba, R-Dallas, who'd told me right after last month's school shooting in Italy, Texas, that he wanted to expand the program.

Argyle officials said that the 2012 massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, Conn., prompted the school board to allow some teachers, after undergoing extensive weapons training, to carry weapons on campus.

One teaching assistant, Theresa Locastro, 44, [told the Los Angeles Times](#) that Argyle's decision to arm its teachers "set an example for various schools that we mean business."



Keller, TX: This Unbelievable, Tiny Company Is Disrupting A \$91 Billion Industry



"I know there's a lot of controversy," she said, "and people who don't want to arm them."

She hopes more guns on campus will deter shooters like the gunman in Florida. "Hopefully," she said, "it will make them think twice."



And yet, what we also saw in Parkland was how chaos and fear can grip even those armed, licensed and trained to deal with potential threats.

■



week former student NIKOIAS CRUZ opened fire with a AR-15 rifle at the MARJORY STONEMAN DOUGLAS HIGH SCHOOL killing 17 people. (Joe Raedle/Getty Images)

The Broward County sheriff's deputy, Scot Peterson, who was faulted for failing to enter the school when the gunfire erupted and later called a coward by Trump, pushed back on Monday. He said through his attorney, Joseph DiRuzzo III, that there was nothing more he could do to keep 17 students from being killed.

No matter how that shakes out, you've got to wonder how we'll second-guess the decisions of a teacher, possibly armed with a small handgun, standing against a crazed gunman with an AR-15 assault weapon.

Wilson, like other law enforcement types I talked to, said the devil is in the details. Ongoing training is key.

"When you look at how police officers respond, how much training goes in just for a police officer to be able to operate independently -- the psychological testing, physical testing, hundreds of hours of training -- you look at all of that," he said.

Still, even if you can check all of those boxes, there's a chance for things to go haywire. When cops arrive on the scene, Wilson said, "How do they [armed school employees] identify themselves so you don't have a bigger tragedy?"

In Argyle, at least, they haven't faced that dilemma yet. Here's hoping they never have to.

If we take a step back, what we can see is that these are desperate times, because we are taking desperate measures. You can agree or disagree with the plans in either Argyle or Westlake. But can you blame them for trying something to keep their children safe? Wilson's a smart cop. He knows the risks. He knows the costs.

"Unfortunately," he said, "there are no easy answers."

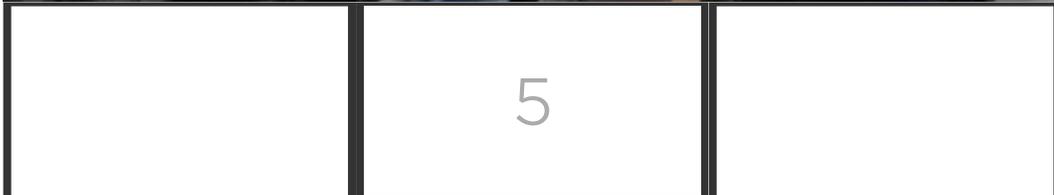
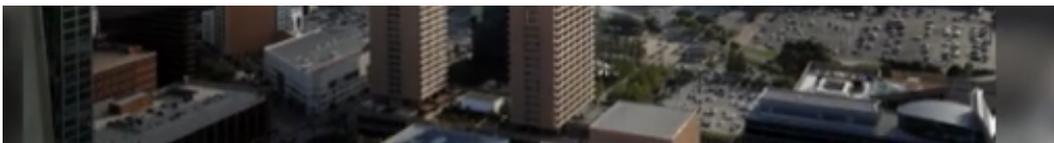
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