Sitting on the classroom floor—as the children would have been instructed to sit—Bill Gleason could feel the fear, the sense of waiting for the inevitable.

A bunch of cops had volunteered to be “bad guys.” They stalked the halls of the vacant school, carrying airsoft rifles—little more than toys, really, but whose plastic projectiles pack a real sting when they hit the skin.

Gleason, security director for Pennsylvania’s City of Lancaster School District and a former police officer himself, could hear the intruders shouting as they methodically entered a series of darkened classrooms where other “students”—school security personnel, more police, and school board members—were huddled in corners in a typical school response to an armed intruder. Gleason could hear his colleagues in those classrooms wince as they were hit.

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“Man, I did not like the feeling of just sitting there,” Gleason recalls.

The instructors were training school leaders in a relatively new and controversial response to intruders called ALICE (Alert, Lockdown, Inform, Counter, Evacuate). The controversial part is, of course, “counter.” If evacuating the classroom or locking down and barricading the room are not possible, staff can choose to fight back by having students and staff throw things at the shooter or even swarm him, ALICE trainers said. But first they wanted to show participants what likely would happen in a typical lockdown.

“If you’re an armed gunman, and you make your way into a school and the kids are all lined up sitting neatly on the floor in the corner, you can’t miss,” Gleason says.

All-hazards approach

Since the shootings in Newtown, Conn., last December that killed 20 elementary school children and six staff members, districts across the country have been beefing up school secu-
rity in a variety of ways: holding training drills like the one in Lancaster, investing in surveillance equipment and tighter entrance security, hiring more school resource officers (SROs), and in some cases, arming school staff themselves.

"Schools need to do everything they reasonably can, knowing they can't do everything," says Ronald Stephens, executive director of the National School Safety Center, who urges school districts to spend their limited school security dollars wisely. "Much of what they can do is a function of budget, it's a function of time, it's a function of training." And while academic success is a priority, "if we don't address safety issues, we're certainly not going to be able to accommodate the academic success we want our children to have."

Most importantly, addressing school safety doesn't mean simply responding to the latest horrific shooting but in taking what Stephens and others call an "all-hazards" approach that considers the best responses to a variety of emergencies.

"Preparing to defend yourself against what happened in Newtown has a very low likelihood of increasing school safety," says Patrice McCarthy, deputy director and general counsel of the Connecticut Association of Boards of Education (CABE). "You need to look at all the safety factors—tornadoes, hurricanes, the whole natural disaster list."

That doesn't mean districts don't prepare for a Newtown- or a Columbine-like shooting; of course they do. But they have to put these and other school shootings in perspective and understand where the threats are more likely to come from. There have been about 600 violence-related student deaths in public and private schools in the past 20 years, according to statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. That's an average of about 30 deaths from homicide or suicide a year for a population of more than 60 million.

"It tells you schools continue to be one of the safest places our young people can be," Stephens says, "although after a Sandy Hook shooting, it's hard for people to embrace that."

The importance of culture and climate
What school leaders do need to embrace is the importance of
school culture and climate. They need to ask themselves: How does it feel to be a student attending our schools? Do students feel supported? Do they feel that they are valued and belong there? Does the school have a sufficient number of school counselors, social workers, and psychologists who can address emotional and mental health needs?

School shootings may be rare, but bullying isn’t. A recent survey of 20,000 students in grades three through 12 by Hazelton and Clemson University found that 16 percent were bullied regularly (two or three times a month or more often), and that 51 percent of the bullied students reported that they had been bullied for six months or longer. The 2006 study, “Where We Learn,” the first in a series of reports on school climate by NSBA’s Council of Urban Boards of Education said, that half of the students in public schools it surveyed reported they saw others being bullied at least once a month.

Everyday heroes

She sounded a little like a favorite aunt or some other caring relative, gently calming the distraught young man after he’d had a bad day at school. But this was during the school day, not afterward, and Antoinette Tuff, the bookkeeper at Ronald McNair Discovery Learning Center, was no relation to 20-year-old Michael Hill.

Moments earlier, Hill had burst onto the grounds of the 870-student elementary school in Decatur, Ga., carrying an AK-47-style rifle and nearly 500 rounds of ammunition. You can tell from the “pops” on the 911 tape that he had already fired at least three.

When he entered Tuff’s office, he was still highly agitated and ready to end it all, whatever that might mean.

Somehow, with the help of an equally poised 911 dispatcher listening in, Tuff talked the gunman down—as calmly and as quietly as if the two were sipping sodas in her living room. She told him that she had gone through rough times in her own life, too, and that she would pray for him.

“It’s gonna be all right, sweetie,” Tuff told Hill after convincing him to lie on his stomach with his hands behind his back, “I just want you to know that I love you, though, OK? And I’m proud of you, and it’s a good thing that you’ve just given yourself up, and don’t worry about it. We all go through some things in life.”

Only after police stormed the office and handcuffed Hill did Tuff’s real emotions come out. She said, not surprisingly, that the past few minutes were the most terrifying of her life.

Because of the mostly audible 911 tape and Hill’s incredible courage, her actions on Aug. 20 made national headlines. But through the years, there have been many other examples of school personnel acting in extraordinary ways to protect children and other staff in emergencies. Here are two others:

**SRO on the job**

Eleven days after Tuff talked Hill out of perpetrating a mass shooting at Ronald McNair Discovery Center, a gunman came onto the campus of Carver High School in Winston-Salem, N.C., when students were outside for a fire drill.

Eighteen-year-old Christopher Lamont Richardson Jr. apparently wasn’t planning any kind of a mass shooting. Armed with a small-caliber handgun, he just wanted to get back at a 15-year-old student who was said to have beaten him up over the summer. It took Richardson just 10 seconds to fire four rounds, according to Darrell Walker, assistant superintendent for operations for the Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools.

In an instant, school resource officer Tim Wilson was on the shooter.

“He ran and jumped him,” Walker says. “He knocked the kid to the ground.”

Because of Wilson’s actions, the gunman wasn’t able to fire another shot. The victim’s injuries were not life-threatening. It was about as perfect a response as one could hope for in a situation that puts a premium on courage and quick-thinking.

Although not as dramatic as Wilson’s actions, the incident also highlighted security improvements the district has made in recent months. During the crisis, a new emergency alert went out to teachers, administrators, and parents via phone calls, emails, and text messages. Carver High also was one of several schools that had been outfitted with a security mapping system that identifies the location of the incident and the staging areas for students, parents, the media, and emergency personnel. In the coming months, Walker says, all schools in the district will be similarly “mapped.”

“If there were an active shooter, then anyone would be able to see the location,” Walker says.

**Gym teacher pins armed student**

An algebra teacher and two students were killed in a Moses Lake, Minn., middle school in 1996 when 14-year-old Barry Dale Loukaitis entered the school in Wild West-style clothing, armed with a hunting rifle and two handguns. Loukaitis had already killed the victims when gym teacher Jon Lane heard the noise and entered the room, thinking it was from a science experiment gone awry.

“Mr. Lane is able to engage the shooter in conversation,” says Ronald Stephens, executive director of the National School Safety Center. “He actually negotiates the release to safety of two or three kids [accompanying them outside]. And when he comes back the third time, the shooter says, Mr. Lane, I want you to put the barrel of this gun in your mouth; I’m taking you hostage.”

What Loukaitis probably didn’t know was that Lane had been a champion wrestler.

“And he goes up and he approaches Mr. Loukaitis as though he is going to put the barrel of that gun in his mouth and grabs the rifle barrel with one hand and the stock with the other.”

“He pins Barry Loukaitis to the ground,” Stephens says. “And that’s how that hostage situation ended.”
Seung-Hui Cho, the Virginia Tech senior who killed 32 people in 2007 in the worst college shooting in the country, had unaddressed mental health problems in middle school and high school, although he did receive some therapy. The Newtown shooter, 20-year-old Adam Lanza, returned to his former elementary school for his crime after killing his mother minutes earlier in her home.

"He chose a school. He didn't choose a shopping center," says David Osher, an authority on school climate at the American Institutes for Research. "He didn't choose any school. He chose a school he had gone to. It's not unlikely that that was not a random event."

Schools are natural places to conduct mental health screening, because, while not everyone joins a church or Little League, most everyone goes to school. But Osher says the emphasis on improving school response to mental health, so pronounced after Columbine, took a back seat during the early 2000s. That's when No Child Left Behind caused schools to cut counselors and other support staff in an effort to address the law's specific academic goals.

"It's not that people weren't concerned about [mental health in schools]," Osher says. "But it wasn't a priority. Newtown raised these issues again."

**Rethinking security measures**

The shootings also have prompted school districts to rethink some of their security procedures. The ALICE training that Gleason and his colleagues from other southeastern Pennsylvania school districts were practicing originated with police SWAT teams.

Officials realized that the kind of armed gunman emergency they were used to dealing with—a single shooter, perhaps a student, distraught, barricading himself in a room and threatening to take his own or someone else's life—had been eclipsed by the phenomenon of the heavily armed shooter, or shooters, bent on killing as many people as possible.

For this scenario, Gleason says, what seemed like a reasonable response to the earlier scenario—putting the school on lockdown and waiting for the SWAT team—was inadequate for this new kind of killer. Now police had to go in immediately, whether they had backup or not.

The "run, hide, fight" principle of the training "is not linear," Gleason says. That is, staff members don't necessarily follow these principles in order but pick the right response for each situation.

"Run" or "hide" doesn't meet much resistance from educators or parents. But "fight" surely can, Gleason says.

"When it comes to elementary kids, we're really not pushing too much on the fighting," Gleason says. "It's more like run around, scream, throw things, do whatever, try to get out. You get to high school level, if the guy starts coming through the door—and this is where people have a real hard time with this, especially parents ... if you can swarm the guy, swarm him. Your chances of getting injured or shot are much less if you swarm the guy than if you just sit there."

Some other districts have begun arming staff members. The Cutter-Morning Star School District, like others in rural Arkansas, had been arming some staff members well before Sandy Hook, says Superintendent Nancy Anderson. In August, a state licensing board ruled that Cutter-Morning Star and 12 other districts had to discontinue the practice, but the next month a split board reversed that decision, leading Anderson to rejoice.

Later, Anderson explained that her district, which has been forced to lay off teachers because of a lack of funds, could not afford the $50,000 it would take to hire an SRO. Still, police response time to the 650-student district outside of Little Rock is at best seven minutes, Anderson says, and "a lot can happen in seven minutes."

Parents are comfortable with the district's decision, Anderson says. The only complaints came after the first licensing board vote, when some residents were dismayed that the district might have to drop the practice.

"Even here in Garland County, we have seven districts, and in every one things are different, things are handled differently, things are run differently," Anderson says. "And what works for me here at Cutter very well could not work for Little Rock. It should be a district and a community decision."

Other districts are investing in new security technology. In September, the 17,500-student Ventura Unified School District was set to become the first California district whose school surveillance cameras could be accessed by police in an emergency. The district was able to avoid violating privacy laws by creating a district sub-department, the Law Enforcement Unit, which will help share the information and ensure that the surveillance tapes remain district property.

Police "will only turn the feed on during a disaster, or during an emergency," school board President John Walker says. The feeds will allow police to coordinate activities with police officers in the field or on the site."

"Honestly, I don't think it was one event" that led to the security upgrade," Walker says. "It was an accumulation of everything that's happening, including Sandy Hook."

No school, mall, or public building can be made 100 percent safe. Given this reality, it is most important for school leaders to keep the conversation open with teachers, administrators, police, parents, public officials—everyone who will be called on to respond in some way.

"Safety and security needs to be an ongoing concern," says CABE's McCarthy. "It shouldn't be, 'Oh, well, there was a tragedy somewhere this week, so now we have to pay attention to it.' It's not something you can do once, and say, 'OK, we're all set.' Superintendents change. Principals change. Police chiefs change. That's why it's important to keep revisiting it."

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