



Episode 17: Utilization of Site Assessment Data in Idaho

#REMSontheAir Podcast Intro (Recorded): [00:00:00] Welcome to the #REMSontheAir Podcast, hosted by your partners at the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Safe and Supportive Schools and its Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools Technical Assistance Center. If you're an old friend, you know us as the REMS TA Center, your national school safety center.

Join us as we chat about key topics in school and campus safety, security, and emergency management with experts and partners from the field.

Janelle Williams: Hello and welcome back. We are excited to host another #REMSontheAir Podcast. My name is Janelle Williams, Project Director for the REMS TA Center, also known as the Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools Technical Assistance Center. Today, I will be having a conversation with Guy Bliesner of the Idaho [00:01:00] School Safety and Security Program within Idaho's Office of the State Board of Education.

In collaboration with his partners, Guy has supported various efforts to enhance the quality of assessments conducted in schools throughout their state. Assessments are such an important part of the planning process. They will be used to not only develop the initial plan but also to inform updates and revisions to the plan on an ongoing basis.

There are various types of assessments to consider in the context of emergency preparedness planning, including capacity assessments, culture and time assessments, behavioral threat assessments, and site assessments. Guy has experience supporting each of those assessment types, and we are so lucky to have him here to share some of the key lessons learned.

So excited to have Guy Bliesner here today for our #REMSontheAir Podcast episode. Guy, can you tell me a little bit about [00:02:00] yourself and your role within the Idaho School Safety and Security Program?

Guy Bliesner: I am at my heart an educator. I was a high school coach and teacher for a number of years; went on as many of us do to the administrative level; and almost immediately became the health, safety, and security director in a mid-sized Idaho district.

So, I spent about 7 years in charge of a district, and then as we developed the process here in Idaho, I moved from that into the state as—initially as a pilot project using assessment as the driving process and then eventually into the program that was created by statute here in Idaho.

Janelle Williams: Awesome, and can you talk a little bit about how the program supports local education agencies with increasing their preparedness capacity?

Guy Bliesner: Sure. By statute, assessment is the driving tool we use, and we're required [00:03:00] to do a full threat and vulnerability assessment of every school receiving state dollars in the state on a 3-year rotating basis. But that is the start of the process, not the end. Once

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that assessment is done, we then work on an ongoing consulting basis with our local school districts and school boards to address the identified vulnerabilities.

So, we use a number of tools to do that. We are—we train with the BTAM [behavioral threat assessment and management] process. We—I am the communications guy—we write unified communications plans in concert with our districts. We develop EOPs, work on initial response protocol, help them develop a safety committee process that works. And that's that multidisciplinary approach with educators, first responders, parents, members of the community, so that those processes not only keep children safe, but they are [00:04:00] accepted and generally appreciated by our school's community in the area that they serve.

Janelle Williams: And would you say there is an ideal time of the year to conduct those vulnerability assessments?

Guy Bliesner: Absolutely. And it starts when kids come back to school, and it ends when children leave. We try and do an assessment based on the normal operating posture of a school.

And schools do so many different things, normal is a little bit of a slippery term. But if they are having grandparents day, I don't want to assess a school on that day because their operations are so radically different than their normal operational posture. So, we try and look at a school as they would be in the 360 days of the 380 days they're in school. We want to know what they look like as they, as they wake up, as children come to school, as they move about the school, as they go through those things that they do: recess, lunch, [00:05:00] class change, all of those things and through to the end of the day and watching as students leave and parents pick them up. So that normal operational day is what we're looking for. Without kids in a school, they're just a big brick building.

Janelle Williams: So true. And in looking at what you document within those assessment reviews, would you say you're looking at not only vulnerabilities, but are there any other areas such as capacity of systems, staff skills, materials, etcetera?

Guy Bliesner: Well, our assessment is broken down into basically three components. We are very much assessing physical security. That's the hard parts: locks, doors, systems, those kinds of things. We are very much looking at the operational platform: what they say they do. That would be their EOP, their initial response protocol, what's their threat assessment process, all of those elements. And then the last one is we look at that [00:06:00] climate and culture piece. That's—the operational platform is what you say you do. The operation—the culture piece is what we in fact observed that you do. And so, we're looking at that deviance from what you say to what you do as a vulnerability. Because, again, if you think you're doing something, but you're doing something differently, you're going to be vulnerable at that point.

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So that's the process we use. It runs in a comprehensive high school to something on the order of 800 distinct and observable points.

A part of this is taken in conversation with—on a staff of 40, I try and talk to at least half the staff. I always try and talk to a substitute because I want to know how they came in. I talk to volunteers who are in the building, and I want to know what their operational process is, their understanding of the emergency operations piece, and their role.

I talk to those student support folks: [00:07:00] counselors, nurses, psychs, speech, all of those folks who are also associated with that school but may not always be in residence there. So, we want to know what that whole school community looks like and understands and how they can respond—first of all, how they're expected to respond, and second, how they can really respond based on their understanding, training, and background. So, it's very much that kind of an approach. We're exceptionally holistic in the way we look at this.

Janelle Williams: And you answered one of the questions that I was going to pose during your response. And that was kind of looking at who you engage during the assessment process: administrators, staff, you know, as well as, it sounds like potentially, students and anyone who plays a role in supporting some aspect of the before, during, and after phases of an incident.

Guy Bliesner: Absolutely. [00:08:00] And in some cases, we will—I—you'll engage children at a level, and students, and ask them questions. But very much of what we do is, I try and be as innocuous as possible and simply listen to the conversations. See what they, see how they interact with one another. Watch supervision, and I'm—you know, we gauge supervision by looking for the number of "uninterdicted naughtinesses" we see. If I see a child do something that's inappropriate, and a student supervisor talks to that child, fixes the problem, that's not an issue for me. It means we're doing what we're supposed to do.

If I see those things going on, and they're not addressed by staff, that becomes an issue for me. So again, it's very observational in the way they operate because very often what people think they do and what you observe they do are somewhat at odds with one [00:09:00] another.

Janelle Williams: And I'm sure that training supports that as well.

Guy Bliesner: Absolutely. We will—we will have those discussions. What kind of training have you had on this issue? What kind of training have you had on reporting students who deviate from baseline behaviors? We ask a lot of questions about how that information moves. Because, again, the communications piece is a critical element in not only emergency operations, but in all operations. If you do not have good communication, if the information doesn't go from the people who have it to the people who need it, you lose command and control.

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Janelle Williams: Thinking about communication and in thinking about assessments, are faculty and staff typically aware that an assessment is going to be conducted in advance? And then following assessments, are you communicating [00:10:00] any of the findings or recommendations to support education agencies with perhaps updating portions or annexes within their emergency operations plan, for example?

Guy Bliesner: Absolutely. We start by notifying the superintendent that we will be in their—in their district over a given period of time. We ask that they notify their building administration. Because, again, I was in that situation. I don't want somebody wandering around that I don't know about. But we do request that they do not tell their staff.

I have seen—we call it the dog and pony show. I've seen people do things that are obviously not the way they normally do business because they're not comfortable doing it. So it's—we ask very much to be able to see those in a natural setting, so we ask that they don't notify their staff. Because, again, I want to see how their staff treats the chubby fellow who's wandering around vague and drooling in their [00:11:00] building, but they know don't belong.

When we do that, we do not display a credential, and we try and enter the building through other than the accepted main entrance. I want to be able to get in and wander around and see how they treat that. We call it the "intruder assessment," but it's the unknown person walking around in their building. I want to know not only how their staff treats it, I want to know how the students treat that individual, so we can gauge what the response would be if it were to take place.

Following that, we write the report. We have an exit interview with administration before we leave, giving them initial observations and initial ideas on those areas that we saw, and we follow that up with a written report. And we try and come back after they've digested that written report and reiterate that. Often, it's at an administrative meeting of the district or the elementary schools [00:12:00] in the district, depending on the size. Many of our districts in Idaho are 4, 5, 6 schools in the district. So, it's easy to get all the administrators together and then have that discussion about what did you see? Did you see it commonly building to building, or were buildings different from one another?

So, we have that process, and we use it as the beginning of the consulting process. We often tell our administrators that we are the school safety, security, risk management consulting firm they don't have to pay for. The state has already engaged us with that process.

So, we come back and help them identify—we do not prioritize for them. That's not my role. We give them the identified vulnerabilities, and we help them understand where that is. And we let them and their governance board determine where they're going to spend effort. We will point out what is kind of the low-hanging fruit, what's easy to fix, what's an operational fix,

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what's going to take some money, and [00:13:00] what's a capital outlay that's going to take some spending. And then as they go down that road, we help with that process as well.

Janelle Williams: Thank you for walking that through. As you were discussing the kind of distinctions within school districts, one thing came to mind. And that is kind of—I know it's going to vary from district to district and school to school, but what would you say are some of the most under-looked areas of a school campus or grounds, and how can site assessment help address those concerns?

Guy Bliesner: I'm an abject believer that if you don't have communication, you don't have command and control. And particularly in older facilities, older PA systems are failing, wiring may be failing, they may not be able to get replacement parts, so a PA announcement that's made in a school may or may not be heard everywhere.

The other portion is all staff members, we believe, should be able to make that PA [00:14:00] announcement if need be, and that's often not the case. And in some cases, failing PAs have been replaced with IP phones—you know, the internet-based telephone systems that give them an intercom but does not do public address. It's not heard. It's heard at the station in a school or in a classroom, but it's not heard in the hallways, in the bathrooms, in the gymnasium, and the shop and those places. So, intercom and PA. And we help our boards and our facilities people and our administrators understand that intercom is not equivalent to PA, and PA is not equivalent to intercom. So how—and the benefits and usages of each. But that lack of an immediate way to notify broadly the entire population of a school is one of those areas that we see as a failure fairly consistently.

Janelle Williams: Thank you for bringing that up. I think it aligns with [00:15:00] some of the conversations that we've had with state education agency partners recently and just looking at some of the challenges that may be experienced in managing communications and warning and looking at, kind of, the variety of systems that are available now to support that. And in some cases, the need to, as you mentioned, retrofit, you know, older buildings to really enhance, you know, that capacity to communicate and warn the school community.

Would you say that as a part of your assessments, you spend any time kind of looking at or monitoring social media?

Guy Bliesner: We have the capacity to help them monitor social media, and we will look at how that—how social media monitoring is used in the district, particularly how it's used in conjunction with the BTAM process, [00:16:00] a behavioral threat assessment of a student of concern. Note that I said "student of concern," not student, not bad student, not—it's a kid that we're worried about. But that understanding what their social media presence tells us is a

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critical element, so we work with them on those processes as well. I do want to go back to one other thing on the communications piece, however, Janelle.

I tend towards being a belt and suspenders kind of a guy. If you decide that you're going to deploy a communications emergency notification app on cell phone, that's a good thing. It doesn't replace PA. It can enhance PA, but it doesn't replace that public address system. Because if I'm in the gym, if I'm in the gym class, and we're all out on the football field running, chances are nobody has their—well, the kids, some of the kids, may have their cell phone—chances are the coach [00:17:00] doesn't. So, you know, what I'm looking for is multiple layers of redundancy in that communications piece.

Janelle Williams: Very good point. And one additional thing that I was thinking about in the context of communications, and in particular behavioral threat assessments, which you just mentioned is some concerns that may be had about information sharing. And how are you, you know, managing or kind of mitigating any concerns around information sharing, either with local law enforcement, you know, or, you know, between your program and the education agency, staff within the school, etcetera?

Guy Bliesner: Well, you know, we have both HIPAA and FERPA concerns in this. But that multidisciplinary group looking at these elements and making structured professional judgement of that group based on what they know is a critical element. And that [00:18:00] only develops as you develop the team and the team works together and begins to trust one another and that everyone on the team understands the confidentiality and the confidential nature of what they're doing. So, we provide that training.

And, you know, there are times that FERPA will be used as a “we can't share that because of FERPA.” FERPA allows for those necessary sharing of information when there is potential, serious potential, for injury. You don't just say a kid's going to be maybe bumped and that's an issue, but—And that's very much on the educator side. So that comes with understanding both HIPAA and FERPA restrictions, when they apply and when they may not, and what they apply to. So, we do training on that as we do the training for behavioral threat assessment.

The one thing I will note that BTAM as a process generally doesn't fail once the [00:19:00] kid is—once the person of concern is in the process. We've identified them, and we're doing with them. Where it often fails is the intake component. And that's a communications piece. We see deviance from baseline behavior at a classroom level. How does that information move, and who gets it so that it can be looked at in the aggregate? A student, particularly a secondary student, may be in as many as seven classes in a day. They've got seven different teachers seeing them.

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The issue is if one teacher sees deviance and reports it, that child becomes—we say, “on the radar.” If six different teachers reported in 2 days, Johnny’s not only on the radar, but he’s being addressed. So there’s that communications component of the movement of that information of who may be of concern. So, the intake piece is huge.

Janelle Williams: Yes, you’re so right. And [00:20:00] I imagine—I’d love to hear your thoughts on that about the intake piece, but also efforts to restore that student of concern back into the learning environment after an incident has been, you know investigated and addressed, if you will.

Guy Bliesner: Well, first of all, they may not need to be restored during the investigation. You don’t necessarily pull that student out of the school context. And certainly, sending them home is not always the best option because we lose optics on that student, so—and BTAM is behavioral threat assessment and management. “And management” is the critical element there. You have to manage that student ongoing.

If you just send them home, you can’t manage them. So, it’s that management piece, and the management piece may start at a fairly enhanced level. And over time, after [00:21:00] reassessment, it lowers and it lowers and it lowers, and the kid simply integrates back. Now that may require an alternate placement into a different educational—by any number of things. But, again, the goal is always to keep optics on that student and not—and serve their educational needs to the best of our ability while maintaining a safe environment for everyone in the building.

Janelle Williams: Wow. And you just shared some very important points. And I’m wondering if there are any other valuable lessons that you’ve learned just through your experience conducting assessments that you’d like to share?

Guy Bliesner: Well, the first thing is: do not spend a dime until you assess. I am an old educator at heart. It’s always assess before you treat. And particularly in the current environment, being aggressively marketed, you may have a tendency to knee [00:22:00] jerk and do something to be seen to be doing something. And that’s security theater. It’s not increasing the safety and security of a building. So that assessment component as a first step is a critical piece. And Idaho believed it was so important that it be done by an outside group, that they created the office and tasked us as such. Self-assessment is always difficult and can be a little suspect. You live in the forest, you may not see the trees, so—but assess before you treat.

Janelle Williams: Thank you so much, Guy. As always, we learn so much during our conversations with you, and we appreciate all that you do to support school safety within your state. Thank you so much for joining this #REMSontheAir Podcast episode and conversation.

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Guy Bliesner: Janelle, thank you, and it's truly my pleasure. And I will tell you, [00:23:00] we appreciate the support at the REMS level back to us at the state level and even more back to those folks who live at the district and school level. So, thank you for what you do as well.

Janelle Williams: We appreciate you, Guy. And thanks so much for tuning in today. Tweet us using the *#REMSontheAir* hashtag if you are addressing similar topics. If you have any questions related to our discussion today or want to learn more, send us your questions via email at info@remstacenter.org, or give us a call at 1-855-781-7367.

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