

The Recent Tragedy in Southern Russia Thoughts for Administrators

As always, when CMI sends out guidelines because of a current event, they are just that – guidelines. Every school community has students of varying degrees of worldliness, awareness, parent support or lack of it, and so on. None of this should be taken to be “the truth,” but rather as food for thought. Please feel free to be in touch with us if you have specific concerns or questions, and we’ll be glad to help you think through what might be your most effective approach. The needs of schools will vary a great deal – just consider the differences in concerns for students in schools on military bases and those in rural farming communities and those in New York City. This is just a place to start.

Our job is all about educating students, which includes working with the whole child. In order for students to learn, they have to feel safe. This means that, in addition to providing the educational aspects, we must also be skilled at helping them sort out emotions, attitudes, and behavior.

School shootings are now something we know we’re likely to see in the news in any given year. In the United States, most school shootings are perpetrated by students. All of them are terrible. The event in Southern Russia this past week, however, brings together students’ fears about school shootings and the component of terrorism. The scope of it is almost beyond our capacity to imagine.

Prior to 9/11/01, we’d have had fewer students who might make the generalization that our schools here in the U.S. might be vulnerable to terrorism. But, because terrorism has so profoundly entered our collective psyche, and because school shootings are something in our history, there are likely to be students in some of our schools who are thinking about the possibility that a terrorist attack in the United States could focus on a school.

Thinking about school shootings is overwhelming enough, but considering how to begin to cope with the thought of a terrorist attack in a school is beyond our abilities in some ways. We can do a great deal with school climate, which may provide protection and prevent a student in your school from choosing to bring a gun to school. But none of us in school administration have any capacity to prevent a terrorist attack. The lack of control we have over that must not keep us from effectively addressing any fears our students have about this. Even if we weren’t going to do so for the emotional wellbeing of the students, we would be compelled to do so for the sake of school safety. Students with great fears are more apt to bring weapons to school for self-protection.

The focus of this guide is simply to help provide suggestions for how your school staff might handle fears of students that have come out of this recent event in Russia.

Some specific questions school staff and administrators are asking, and considerations:

Should we bring this up?

In this case, this is such a difficult question. Clearly, if the event had happened in the United States, it would be important to do so. If this happened in American, youth everywhere would want to know what the school has in place to protect them at such a time. But there is a balance somewhere between adding to the fears students already have and using a teachable moment.

Another consideration, however, is that many students who have seen the coverage of this will, without a doubt, have concerns that this could happen here. After all, no one ever doubted the safety of those in the twin towers before 9/11/01, or at least before the earlier car bomb in the

Trade Center parking garage. We know that students only learn when they feel safe. Any students you may have who are already harboring fears will be better off if they can put words to their fears and begin to see that they aren't alone, that others have fears also, and that people who care about them are willing to take time to help them voice and cope with those fears.

In this instance, one might look at how teachers are encouraged to create space and an environment within the classroom that allows students to be able to talk about what troubles them. When students feel that kind of support, and when time is taken in the school day for students to talk about current concerns, those who are fearful because of the event that happened in Russia will be more apt to approach their teachers, either during class time or free time.

It will be very helpful to prepare teachers for how to talk about this with students. When we adults feel overwhelmed or powerless in a situation (which is certainly the case when it comes to the possibility of terrorism in schools), we tend to deny ("Oh, that could never happen here."), minimize ("Oh, it happened a long way away, so you really don't have to worry about being safe here."), or redirect the conversation ("Are you going to the dance Saturday night?"). All of these responses leave students feeling isolated, vulnerable and alone, harboring their fears.

Instead of denying, minimizing or redirecting conversation, help teachers with other kinds of responses (using age-appropriate concepts and language):

- It isn't unusual for children your age to see events on television and think about what it would be like for that to happen here. One thing that is very different is that Russia has had internal strife for a long, long time, and the people who did this were not the same people who caused 9/11/01. They had different goals and they aren't angry with us in America. They wanted to target the government there in Southern Russia. (Differentiating the genesis of that particular act of terrorism from that which has happened in the U.S.)
- These things are terrible, for certain. What we know is that those people who did these things were from that same country. One way to prevent that sort of thing from happening here is to look at how we treat each other here. What do we do in our school to help students understand how important it is to accept one another? People who do these things are people who are extremely angry from feeling mistreated on some level. They've cut themselves off from the usual social empathy we feel from one person to another. How can we prevent that from happening here? (Empowering students to apply the global lesson locally.)

An opportunity this event presents is for administrators to provide parents suggestions or guidelines on how they might approach this event with their children. Depending on the age of the child, parents' reactions will range from wanting to shield their children all together from the fact that this even happened to having no concern about the amount and type of coverage their children see on television. It would also be helpful to let parents know the degree to which students are bringing this up, if that occurs, in the classroom or during free time. Feel free to copy our guidelines for parents onto the back of a letter from the school.

One last thought – we know from the different outcomes for students who were and were not exposed to coverage of the disaster on 9/11 that television coverage of these events leaves students much more vulnerable to trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder. Although it is crucial to be honest with students about what did occur, it is not necessarily helpful for students to see television coverage. We are unable to edit graphic coverage out as it comes onto the screen. There are many less traumatizing ways for students to grasp the truth and to trust that you are being honest than exposure to television coverage. Limit or eliminate their exposure.