

# Unfortunate Outcomes for Popular Safety Programs

*Options-based active-shooter response training programs have resulted in more casualties than other methods. So why are many schools still using them?*



**Michael Dorn** has provided official post-incident assistance for more than 300 school crisis events and served as an expert witness for complex multi-million and multi-billion dollar civil actions. He is the author or co-author of dozens of books, including mostly recently “Extreme Violence — Understanding and Protecting People from Active Assailants, Hate Crimes, and Terrorist Attacks.”  
[safehavensinternational.org](http://safehavensinternational.org)

Commercial active shooter response programs as well as Run, Hide, Fight, which was developed by the U.S. government, have become popular with independent schools in recent years. It has become evident, however, that in multiple school attacks, these training approaches have resulted in what can only be described as tragic failures that have increased rather than decreased casualties.

These approaches have also resulted in unprecedented workers’ compensation expenses from training injuries. And more than 150 civil actions and letters of intent to sue have been filed following shootings at schools where these training approaches proved to be ineffective or deadly. Our nation’s second most deadly school shooting occurred in a school district that used the Run, Hide, Fight approach. While the U.S. Department of Education has reversed course and no longer advises schools to use Run, Hide, Fight, many schools are still using it.

Here’s another example from a time I served as an expert witness in a series of civil actions resulting from an active assailant case. A school district and the sheriff’s department had provided commercial active shooter response training for students and staff. Security camera footage and other evidence convinced expert witnesses retained by both plaintiff and defense counsel that the highly popular training program resulted in what I can only describe as total and catastrophic failure. The vendor who provided instructor training to the sheriff’s department routinely uses provably false information to market their training, but this did not provide any protection for the defendants in this litigation. The district and sheriff’s department recently agreed to settle all five circuit and federal court civil actions for substantial amounts.

## LIABILITY AND INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

Unlike public schools, independent schools lack the liability protection provided by tort limits and qualified governmental immunity that many states provide for government entities. The types of spine injuries, broken bones, permanent nerve

damage, and concussions that have resulted from some of these training programs can also result in major settlements and jury awards in suits against independent schools, especially if students are injured in the training.

With this background in mind, the following are among the most concerning observations regarding “multi-option” active shooter training programs:

1. They are frequently sold using misleading, false and highly emotive marketing approaches. This type of marketing should be a red flag to school leaders. Due diligence and a heavy dose of pragmatism is highly recommended in selecting an approach.
2. Controlled simulations at K-12 schools in 45 states have revealed that school employees trained in the most popular active shooter response programs perform at significantly lower levels than school employees who have not been provided with this type of training. Personnel trained in these approaches typically miss more life-saving action steps, and 25% or more of test participants have opted to “attack” when it would clearly increase danger in the scenario presented. For example, the “trained” personnel often opt to attack a hostage taker or a person depicted as brandishing but not firing a gun three-quarters of a football field away.
3. These training programs typically devote little time to when each type of option should be used and most importantly, when using them will increase rather than decrease danger.
4. Most programs emphasize people should run away from danger without teaching them that in many situations, running will significantly delay or halt evacuation when exit pathways become jammed with people.
5. Most programs focus heavily on barricading as an automatic option for lockdown. This is an extremely dangerous approach because it typically takes too long if an attacker is nearby and requires staff and students to remain in view from hallways while making considerable noise. An attacker can increase casualties if

they use smoke or chemicals to kill occupants who cannot evacuate quickly. Also, there has been only one fatal attack at a school where an attacker has breached a locked classroom door and entered a classroom to kill occupants. In that shooting, barricading would not have worked due to the speed of the attack and room configuration. While there are some situations where barricading can be appropriate, it should not be a default option for most settings with lockable doors.

6. At least two students and a dozen school employees have been shot while unsuccessfully attempting to physically confront armed individuals at public and independent schools, when doing so would clearly increase danger.
  7. Staff trained in multi-option active shooter programs also perform at lower levels than untrained employees for scenarios involving knives, crowbars, claw hammers and other weapons that are more often used to threaten and attack people than firearms.
  8. Programs that teach striking, kicking, and throwing objects at an attacker are actually categorized as deadly force training because death can result from the use of these techniques. This type of training should include proper instruction on when the use of deadly force is legal, as well as when it could be less safe to use it.
4. In staff development activities, use scripted, audio, video or role-play scenarios for the most common school situations involving weapons (not just guns). This approach may prevent developing habits, called “training scars,” which can result in death if active shooter concepts are used in situations that are not active assailant events. Telling people repeatedly that they should “only attack as a last resort” has proven to be highly unreliable, as this approach does not effectively prepare trainees to recognize situations that are not “last resort” events.
  5. Students have even greater difficulty applying this type of training. Instead, train students on emergency protective actions like evacuation, room clearing, reverse evacuation and lockdown using age- and developmentally-appropriate language.
  6. Never conduct training or drills that make people believe they are experiencing an actual emergency. This can result in trauma and/or injury. At an overseas university, for example, a faculty member jumped to his death from an upper floor during an unannounced active shooter drill.
  7. While I normally do not suggest aggressive physical contact during these types of trainings due to the significant risks involved, participants should be provided with the same types of protective gear and safety training that law enforcement officers utilize for use-of-force training if this approach is used.

### REDUCING ADVERSE OUTCOMES

The following approaches can help reduce — but will not eliminate — the chances that serious injury, death, workers’ compensation claims, and lawsuits will occur due to active assailant training:

1. Avoid training approaches focused primarily — or even worse, exclusively — on active shooter events.
2. Vet training with your school’s insurance carrier, risk management firm and legal counsel.
3. If you must engage in training focused only on active shooter events, require the training company to indemnify your school and its personnel should litigation relating to the training occur.
8. Conduct fidelity testing using a variety of all-hazards scenarios to measure how well employees can apply the training when presented with timed scenarios for which they have not had advance preparation. In this approach, a series of scripted, audio or video school crisis scenarios are presented to staff members who have been screened for potential trauma, with a set time — usually 30 seconds — to say what they would do to address each situation. Facilitators look for missed action steps, out of sequence action steps and actions that would increase rather than decrease danger. **N**



### An In-Depth Guide to Active-Shooter Attacks

In addition to what I have observed providing official post-incident assistance for 20 major K-12 school shootings in three different countries as well as analyzing thousands of video and audio school crisis simulations, my comments are informed by my involvement in developing a 600-page university textbook on extreme violence, which has taken three years of research and writing by a team of 11 subject matter experts. Due for release in January, “Extreme Violence — Understanding and Protecting People from Active Assailants, Hate Crimes, and Terrorist Attacks” will be available from Cognella at [cognella.com](http://cognella.com).

You can also find more information on this topic in the article “Put Training to the Test in Security Management Magazine” (Safe Havens International, 2018) [go.nboa.org/TestingSecurity](http://go.nboa.org/TestingSecurity).