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Teaching Social-Emotional Skills is Key to Prevention

By Wendy Loloff Cooper

Last Tuesday, I joined a club I never wanted to be a part of-the club of parents whose children have experienced a school shooting. As a STEM School Highlands Ranch parent, I am still in shock, incredibly grateful that my daughter is safe, grief stricken for those experiencing loss and pain and desperately wanting people to understand that we can do more to protect our children from violence at school.

While we don't yet know the motivation behind Tuesday's shooting, we do know that:

- Most gun violence is committed by people who lack mental wellness. (Sandy Hook Promise)
- 95% of attackers were current students. (FBI)
- Prior to their attack, 93% of shooters engaged in behavior that caused others concern. (FBI)
- 75% of shooters felt bullied, persecuted or threatened by others. (FBI)
- The number one protective factor to combat at-risk behaviors in youth is having a safe relationship with a caring adult. (Search Institute)

In response to school shootings, we rightly talk about common sense gun reform, installing metal detectors, changing safety procedures and addressing mental health. However, we talk about the latter as an illness to treat, rather than a capacity to develop. Social-emotional skills-the kind of skills that help kids cope, resolve conflicts and manage anger-can be taught intentionally as a mitigation strategy.

Bullying can be both prevented and addressed using these same skills. Schools can be intentionally designed to group students with a caring adult who sees them, hears them and supports them, and who can alert others to warning signs, allowing for early intervention to address potential threats. This approach promotes belonging, strengthens school communities, and shows great promise to moderate destructive behaviors.

I believe in this so strongly that for nearly a decade, the organization I lead has been investing heavily in helping dozens of schools and districts across Colorado to implement a program where teachers go beyond simply advising individual students to guiding students in safe peer groups to develop social-emotional skills and to build resilience. Teachers become advocates for their students and help them learn to advocate for themselves, and, importantly, for one another.

So, let's not stop at gun laws, metal detectors, response coordination and increasing access for mental health supports, but intentionally integrate social-emotional learning and advocacy for every student in Colorado schools now. Removing barriers to belonging, providing students with safe spaces for personal development, teaching skills like self-regulation and managing emotions, and making necessary referrals for greater support are no longer optional, but critical to preventing further tragedy.