

Why Are Students at Risk

THE VERDICT

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PAULA TODD: Parents do want to think that their children are safe at school, as President Bush says. Today's events prove that's not necessarily true. Stu Auty is with the **Canadian Safe School Network**, a group that works to reduce youth violence. And John Muise is a former police officer who is the director of Public Safety with the Canadian Center for Abuse Awareness. They both join us on "The Verdict" here in Toronto. John, let me start with you. How can you go on television after a shooting of this magnitude and say we're all going to feel safe. We all can feel safe?

JOHN MUISE (Canadian Centre for Abuse Awareness): Well, I mean today that's incredibly difficult because, you know what, it's easy to feel vulnerable. I mean because this was such a horrific act and so many people were impacted. But the reality is, without downplaying this horrible event, it doesn't happen that often. But when it does happen, the results are catastrophic when you put a young man in possession of firearms, often automatic or semi automatic weapons, and if that young man happens to be angry or on the edges of society or suffering mental illness, all of those things in a schoolyard or in a school hallway can be a toxic and dangerous mix.

TODD: Stu, what do you think?

STU AUTY (**Canadian Safe School Network**): Well, you know, my heart goes out to the families first of all. It's just an extraordinary event. And what I take from something like this is that because of electronic communication, news of this travels instantly worldwide. This happened of course in Virginia. We're talking about it here in Canada. When Dawson College, the shooting at Dawson happened, it spread everywhere. And so the reality is that you've got kids who are anxious, who can become anxious when something like this happens. Now we don't know the downstream, the real impact of this on particularly little children, Todd, ah, Paula. But there is an impact, and that's something that we need to be cognizant of. When little kids hear about the shootings in the big schools, schools are supposed to be safe places. The images of schools are safe places because kids have to feel safe to learn. And so there is a downstream negative effect that we simply don't know the total impact of what it is.

TODD: I want to talk, John, first about the police reaction in terms of how it plays into this whole safety issue, how students in general with feel safe. It's very confusing, I think, I'm a lawyer, I'm a journalist, I've been doing this for a long time. I was glued to television today. I saw all kinds of contradictory evidence and information and statements coming from police officials, coming from university officials. I would be frightened if I was a student on that campus to go back to campus for any kind of candlelight vigil right now. Maybe there are two gunmen, maybe there was one gunman, maybe the killings are connected. Why are we allowed to know what's going on?

MUISE: Well, you know what, Paula, I think what happens in the aftermath of something so big like this is the information is coming fast and furious, and it's coming from everywhere, and people are speculating too. I mean that's natural. I think part of the aftermath of this, along with trying to figure out who this shooter was, you know, and what made him tick and why he did it, you know, one of the things that's going to have to be answered, and they're fair questions that were asked today at the news conference in the aftermath, is what happened in those ensuing two hours? What was done by the university staff and law enforcement? And I noticed that they have actually campus police there. I saw the cars. What was done in terms of safeguarding? And those are going to be legitimate questions. But right now the information is just kind of spewing at us, so it's tough.

TODD: I don't know. I don't know, Stu, I don't think the information is spewing at all. I've been sitting here for 15 hours. I would like a bit more spew. I would like to know what is really going on. What is more effective for making students feel good? Knowing that adults know what's going on, or having all kinds of confusing press conferences, and the refusal to answer some very direct questions from students?

AUTY: I think what's happening too is you've got a large institution that's trying to look after its image in part, and that's part and parcel of it. And so the release of information is sporadic. It's who's going to take care of the message. Who owns the message, and that's part of this. You know kids of course are reading the whole thing and they're very, kids are very wise. They can see what's going on. They know that, for example, that in part when the shooting first started, the lockdowns didn't occur until a couple hours later so there's misinformation that's gone out about that. You know the university is worried about that. I mean they've got to be worried about that because of liabilities. So that's all part of scene. But I agree with what John is saying. There's so much information that's come out, the chaos is extreme. I mean as soon as a gun goes off, people just get scared. They don't know what to do. And so we saw that today.

TODD: How about this? Let's talk about student safety in general. Let's stop thinking about universities or schools as individuals, because I think you're absolutely right. I'm wondering, and I would love to hear from some litigation firms in Virginia right now. Have you had phone calls yet from parents who would like to launch class action suits? Please give us a call at *The Verdict*. I am sure that is happening at this very moment. And you know what, unless we have a major independent organization that steps in the minute there is some sort of a shooting at an educational institution, you're going to see this. You're going to see universities getting lawyered up. Hey, it would be my advice.

MUISE: Well it's, you're right. It's already happening and it's happening both at the university potentially with the law enforcement that was involved, and certainly not right now, not an hour from now, not tomorrow, but down the road, families are going to be asking those same questions and they're going to be asking them in company with lawyers. I don't think there's any doubt about that. That's going to happen.

AUTY: Families are asking those questions now. I mean they are. There are, you know boards of education have lines for lawsuits, legal firms that are being paid serious amounts of money to look after incidents like this. So what really stands out to me, Paula, is that what government needs to do, government meaning people that run institutions like universities, they need to stand up to the plate, they need to put the monies forward. Governments can cut cheques, let's face it, and there's a certain area that they can cut those cheques to in schools. The general safety of schools, governments really need to put monies towards early intervention, prevention, serious supervisory capacity building where teachers can have enough supervisory capacity to in fact look after the kids that are in the school because we know, the history of situations like this is very, very clear.

TODD: I guess one of the reasons that I'm so animated about this, besides just the massiveness of the tragedy and the heartbreak of this, the senseless, senseless heartbreak of this, is that it seems that in certain circumstances, you see universities or even other authority figures putting their own self interests, their financial self-interests, perhaps even their legal self-interests in the way of getting to the kids. If I care about healing children who are struggling to deal with this right now, wouldn't it be great if somebody stood up right now, and instead of waffling and saying, I can't tell you anything, I can't tell you anything, said, hey, here's what's happening, here's what we can do.

AUTY: Do you know what the crazy part of this is? After the Dawson College shootings, that university came together, that college came together. And what we found is typically, when there's a tragedy like this, the school community all of a sudden galvanizes. They start making that place safer. The staff come together. They start paying attention to supervisory, you know, regulations, and their own responsibilities and so on. Unfortunately, tragedy sometimes is the precursor of actually doing something. Now what we know today, as I was trying to say a bit earlier, is that governments can step up to the plate here. They can provide those kinds of capacities so that we don't have to wait until the next one, Paula. You know we've had these cycles of violence in schools. You peak, you focus and you do as much as you can, but maybe you don't, and maybe you could do more, and always governments can do more.

TODD: I'm going to have to leave it right there gentlemen. Come back and talk to us. That's Stu Auty and John Muise in Toronto. And when we come back, final thoughts on today's tragedy.