

## Remarks by Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff at a Securing the Schools Initiative Event

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**Secretary Chertoff:** I want to thank my colleague, and friend, Margaret Spellings, for that introduction and for the very important leading to our presentation here today. And I know that you'll also be interested in hearing Secretary Gutierrez talk about some of the elements that he's able to bring to ensuring school safety in the protection of our most valuable resources, which are our children who go to school.

I want to thank Principal King for hosting us here, and Fred Ellis for giving us a remarkable presentation about some of what this particular county is doing with respect to school safety, and also the school board members, I think who are obviously very, very supportive of this.

I think all of the members of the educational establishment here in Fairfax County understand that addressing emergencies and, God-forbid, violence in our schools requires a coordinated approach involving a lot of different elements of the community, including government, first responders, law enforcement and educational leaders. We're always working together to make schools a safe haven for our students.

We know that the history of this country, particularly recent history, is replete with some very unfortunate high-profile incidents involving either attacks in schools or natural disasters in schools. We remember the Columbine attack, the shootings at Virginia Tech earlier this year. I know people in this community remember the sniper; and I went through that myself up in Maryland with my children. We know the tornado that hit Enterprise High School tragically in Alabama earlier this year.

And we also know that the threats to our school children and our schools are not only domestic but are also international in scope. Remember back in 2004 in Beslan in Russia – actually, in Chechnya – terrorists took more than 1,200 students and teachers hostage. And the incident resulted in 331 deaths and 727 injuries. In fact, a rather disheartening statistic is that during the 16-year period from January 1990 to September 2006, there were 949 incidents of deliberate attacks on educational systems worldwide outside the United States. These incidents resulted in 813 known deaths and 2,257 injuries.

So when we consider the issue of school safety, we live in a world where both overseas and domestically we have to be concerned about the possibility of people carrying out acts of violence in our schools, whether driven by terrorist motivations or by some kind of personal, psychiatric disabilities.

So here at the Department of Homeland Security, although we're not, I think, always thought about in terms of educational resources, we actually work very closely with the Department of Education and with state and local education departments to enhance the level of security and emergency preparedness nationwide.

I'll begin with Secret Service. Most people think of the Secret Service as the agency which provides outstanding protection to the President and the Vice President and their families and other government officials. But actually, Secret Service has partnered very closely with the Department of Education since the 1990s, bringing their expertise in analyzing violence and what motivates violent behavior to the process of protecting our students and protecting our schools.

Through the Safe School Initiative, we comprehensively assessed over 25 years of school shootings and incidents; 37 incidents in particular of targeted school violence involving 41 attackers. And it looked at the characteristics and the behavior of people involved in these kinds of incidents, recognizing very importantly that often these are incidents which do have some harbingers; they don't simply erupt out of the blue, but there are some warning signs. In fact, in 81 percent of the cases studied as part of the Safe School Initiative, other people had some kind of prior notice of the possibility of an attack before that attack was carried out.

And I think that in this particular new century that we're in, where students are now communicating online and using chat rooms and e-mails and text messages, there are even more opportunities to detect and be made aware of potential threats before they actually come to pass. And that's why it's very important to know what to look for and how to respond.

As a follow-up to the Safe School Initiative, the Secret Service's National Threat Assessment Center has provided briefings and training at over 350 locations to more than 75,000 attendees. And they partnered with the Department of Education to create an interactive CD that is really a threat assessment tool and (inaudible), designed to help educators all over the country understand what kind of behavior to look for, and how to react appropriately to prevent something bad from happening before it happens.

Let me give you an example of how this has actually worked. In the fall of 2001, the threat assessment model that has been advocated through the Safe School Initiative helped avert a planned attack in New Bedford High School in Massachusetts. Students overheard the details of a potential attack and they told the teachers, and the teachers became actively involved, including notifying the New Bedford Police Department. Because of that notification, the police were able to conduct an investigation. And after a period of weeks, their suspicions were further raised when a teacher got some further advanced notice of an attack from a recent New Bedford school graduate.

Working on those tips, the police discovered a nearly completed bomb in a vacant house that was popular with the alleged plotters. An alert custodian later found a note at the school alluding to an attack and notified school officials, who notified the police, who then further escalated the investigation. Very soon thereafter, arrest warrants were obtained, students involved in the plot were arrested, and eventually pled guilty to conspiracy.

What was important about this was that the high school and the police department, through this training initiative, had a preexisting relationship. So they weren't discovering each other for the first time when the note, or the warning, came across the desk, but they actually had a foundation on which to build so they could communicate with each other and respond appropriately to prevent a tragedy.

Now of course that's – Secret Service involvement is obviously the most dramatic example of the way in which we can work together to prevent violence. But let me touch on a couple of other things we're doing to try to secure our schools.

Through our Office of Infrastructure Protection, we have issued reports on Characteristics and Common Vulnerabilities and Protective Measures for public and private schools. We've conducted over 40 Site Assistance Visits, where we work with schools to help them identify physical structures that they can reinforce in order to reduce their vulnerability. At the same time, FEMA has produced a series of manuals with safe school design tips to protect against both man-made and natural hazards.

All of our components work together to analyze the information that we get about things that happen in the domain of terrorism, so we can push out to local communities some of the lessons learned that they can put into effect to further safeguard the students.

But, you know, and this is with everything else, it ultimately boils down to individual and community preparedness. The government can analyze and get intelligence; we can push out lessons, but in the end, where the lessons actually meet the real world are in communities, schools, school boards and classrooms all across the country. And it's our position that schools ought to approach the issue of preparing for emergencies, whether natural or man-made, in the same way that we ask businesses and families to do, by understanding what the plan is, making sure the plan is communicated and exercised, by having in place the tools and the capabilities they need if in fact something does happen – and you'd have to react by either sheltering in place or evacuating – and very importantly, by communicating to the parents about what it is you're doing and what's expected of them.

If I can depart into the world of personal anecdote. We moved down to this area in 2001. We had the experience of – as did many of you here – going from 9/11 into the anthrax attacks and into the school sniper, and I can tell you in each case, the reaction that I felt, my wife felt, and everybody else I knew felt was, first and foremost: What is going on with our children, and how are they being taken care of? The ability to rely upon schools to have communicated that plan and to be prepared was frankly what allowed me to do my job in view of these emergencies, as opposed to spending my time worrying about my kids. So this kind of (inaudible) with parents is critical to this element of preparedness.

Finally, I want to specifically give a couple of commendations out. I want to thank Department of Commerce and NOAA for providing these emergency radios, NOAA emergency radios, around the country. This is a tremendous step forward because communication is often attributable to executing on a plan once you prepare. Most dramatic recent example of that is when we saw Reverse 9-1-1 in California, which allowed notifications to go out to over a quarter of a million people in order to evacuate the area where there were

potentially fires.

I also want to thank the Citizen Corps Council for their work in distributing the radios, and all the other volunteer work they do, which is a critical element of our preparedness.

Finally, I say to parents, and those who are watching, if you need guidance or advice on preparedness, whether it's in the context of schools or in the context of your family, your business, log onto our [www.ready.gov](http://www.ready.gov) website. We have Ready.kids, we have a Ready program for businesses, and we have a Ready program for individuals. It's not a complicated thing to do, but it's the first step to building a culture of preparedness which all of us can participate in.

So I want to thank my captive colleagues here for joining me. (Applause.)

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**Question:** Could you tell us specifically what makes this school safer than some other schools in the country? What have they done here right, at least in your review?

**Secretary Spellings:** Well, I would say it's a county-wide effort; a school district-wide effort, and – lots of things. They – Fred, why don't you come up here and talk about some of the specific stuff; he's, as I said, on my National Advisory Committee. But what I would say is they work at it all the time. I mean, they never take anything for granted. It's not, they have a plan and it's on the shelf. They continually update it, update the contact information. They are very, very current, and that is essential.

I mean, knowing that, you know, the principal was somebody 10 years when her phone number was X, it does us no good in the middle of an emergency. The fact that it's constantly being worked in the priority of the community and the school district, I think, is a huge thing to (inaudible).

**Mr. Ellis:** I agree. And I think the emphasis on it starts at the top. You know, our school board believes in school security, safety, emergency management. Our superintendent does, all the leadership team, and all the principals and key staff. The whole agency believes in those concepts. And we do spend a lot of time on planned development, whether it's the school-level plans or a system-wide plan. We spend time on training.

If you think about the four phases of emergency management in terms of mitigation and prevention, we do a lot of things in terms of inspections and audits and repairing things that need to get fixed and having the plan development, doing exercises, being able to prepare and then respond and then after that go around into recovery and return to normalcy. So we do spend quite a bit of effort on all those (inaudible).

**Secretary Spellings:** The other thing I would just say about Fred, his personal testimonial: He talks to educators in ways that they can understand it and use it and deal with it, and then go on about the business of educating. And, you know – and so I think that's really something terrific. You're a great leader (inaudible) – (laughter.)

**Question:** If I could just follow that up, Fairfax County of course is one of the most affluent counties in the country, and they have the resources. There's a lot of school districts in the – out there in the hinterland who don't have the resources they – that Fairfax does. What are you doing to help them come up with the same kind of standards?

**Secretary Spellings:** Well, this is a shared effort across the government, no doubt about it – the thing with NOAA Radio Initiative and all the things that Homeland Security does, our 511 planning grants. But fundamentally, this is a state and local responsibility. And law enforcement is a state and local responsibility. And so the conditions are going to vary and that's going to continue to be the case.

I would say that Fairfax is so attuned to this issue because it is, you know, essentially our nation's capital. It's a place that is heightened in terms of its awareness and so forth. So, Mike, I don't know if you want to chime in on that.

**Secretary Chertoff:** Well, I think there is a lot we can do. We've put a lot of information out. We've had the CDs. Of course there are various kinds of grant programs with security that go to urban areas and states. And so that's available, obviously, for school security.

It's not always about big dollars though. Sometimes it's about planning, which is thinking through what you're

going to do, informing people, exercising (inaudible.)

**Question:** For Secretary Chertoff, you talked about Beslan and the extent of the (inaudible) in the international history of terrorist attacks. Other countries really have ramped up efforts to – there are schools that are investing more in that. Has that been the case of this country? Are there plans to really focus more on schools?

**Secretary Chertoff:** Well, let me just echo what Secretary Spellings said. Ultimately, of course, our law enforcement responsibility to schools is a community responsibility; it's local law enforcement and state law enforcement. Nor do we want to turn schools into fortresses or armed camps. On the other hand, we have dealt with the issue of school violence in this country, not necessarily terrorism, but school violence for as long as I can remember. And what we do want to do is build capabilities, many of which require how you build schools; what the architecture is; how you control entry and exit; what you do with respect to who gets access, who doesn't get access; what you do in responding when there is an incident; how close the connection between law enforcement and local security and your school officials are.

And again, all of these don't require building large walls and having gun turrets on schools. What it does require is building relationships, thinking through what you're going to do, being aware of the information that we do put out, including the behavioral convention.

And I dare say this is in almost every area, where we talk about security. It is individual awareness and speaking up that makes a difference, whether it's in New Bedford, Massachusetts or what we saw in London earlier this summer with respect to somebody seeing something funny about a car that led – discovered to be a car bomb. When people see something and say something, that's almost always one of the key elements to resolving an incident successfully.

**Secretary Spellings:** I also just want to add that, I mean, schools are safe places. Schools are some of the safest places that kids are these days. And schools – people work really hard to cause that to be the case. But that really, you know, when we consider that 50 million people – well, children – show up at school every day, and all of the moving parts, they really are the very best places that kids can be.

**Secretary Gutierrez:** If I could add just to your point. I think it's a very good Question, how do we reach all schools and make sure that all kids are safe. The NOAA radios – we've given out about 100,000, which covers every public school in the nation. And that's important, of course, to ensure that all kids are covered. At least, we've provided the radios to all schools.

**Question:** Secretary Spellings, how do you plan to distribute the guidelines and make sure that people are actually reading and understanding them? And once schools get them, do you expect schools would do training for employees based on those? Or how do you – how do you think people will get the message?

**Secretary Spellings:** We are going to mail and make available on the Internet each of these publications to the respective constituencies. So university personnel, obviously, will get the one for them, and K-12 people the ones that are appropriate. Obviously I'll be talking about it a lot; they're available. We've been partnering with organizations, the school safety organizations, and so forth, just using every available means. We'll also have across Internet website access from both – from all of our departments.

But I do think it's – you know, as we've talked about, there's an ongoing need for people to be aware about what can be shared. As Mike talked about – Secretary Chertoff talked about, the essential nature of sharing information when you know it. And these are the rules of the road as to how school people can do that while being respectful of student privacy.

**Question:** Secretary Spellings, you said in your report to the President that you consider (inaudible) whether or not they need to be modified. There is legislation in Congress that would (inaudible) the request. And I'm wondering if you can give me some of the changes coming to these rules of the road?

**Secretary Spellings:** Well, I think – you know, first thing's first, is what I would say. I'm not sure we really know yet. I think it's important for people to understand what the current law allows. And it does allow information to be shared, particularly when the student is a dependent – a kid and not an emancipated adult. But – so, you know, before we leap into changes, let's make sure that we're maximizing all of the flexibilities and information and latitudes that the law does provide within the context of privacy.

As I said also, my friends at HHS, Secretary Leavitt, they're looking at clarifying practices around the Health

Information Privacy Act, or HIPA. And so I think when we start to communicate better, then we'll sort of see from school personnel what else may or may not be needed.

Okay, thank you. (Applause.)

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