A Raptor Whitepaper

Lessons Learned from a 2021 Middle School Shooting

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Foreword

Two students and one adult were shot during the Rigby Middle School (RMS) shooting in May 2021. The Idaho School Safety and Security (ISSS) program completed an after-action review, which included interviewing key staff and first responders about what happened that day.

"The response to the Rigby Middle School attack demonstrated the effectiveness of a planned, coordinated, trained, and exercised emergency operations plan," the ISSS report states. "As with any incident, there will always be lessons to be learned."

Below we summarize some of the findings from their analysis and discuss best practices that Raptor has learned through our partnerships with K-12 safety experts and over 35,000 schools across the country.

Schools should consider these recommendations to strategically improve their safety initiatives.

Read ISSS's full *post-incident review report here*.

Lesson One:
Have a Method to Gather Information and Assess Threats

"Research indicates that in most cases of school violence, students are aware of concerning behaviors before school officials are," according to the report. This was the case at RMS.

Several students saw the attacker make concerning posts on social media, and one student saw a drawing the attacker created that depicted a gun and a school. Some students also noticed the attacker's appearance and level of social engagement changed. *While these students were concerned, they did not share their insight with school staff until after the shooting.*

School safety is a 24/7 operation. A major component of time is spent 'left of the X,' meaning that the school is focused on prevention, intervention, and diversion of catastrophic events. "If we can get out in front of things, identify a particular grievance, and stop a potential attack before it happens, we save all of those lives," stated Chief Frank Kitzerow, retired Police Chief and Certified School Specialist at Palm Beach County School District, in *a recent episode* of Raptor's podcast, School Safety Today.

Schools must have a method of gathering information about concerning behavior, like leveraging confidential tip lines and ensuring students, staff, and the community are aware of its importance and how to use it. Schools may also consider monitoring social media for threats.

It's important schools also have a multi-disciplinary threat assessment team that will respond to and thoroughly vet every threat. Craig Miller, retired Chief of Police for the Dallas ISD Police Department, shared on *an episode of School Safety Today* that threats are what keep him up at night. These threats, he said, are what lead to the potential of an active shooter. Chief Miller also reminds us that it's not just large schools that receive threats. All schools, regardless of size or location, need to be ready to respond to threats and emergencies.

➡ **Learn more about working "left of the X" in our podcast, *Navigating School Safety and Emergencies.***

Lesson Two:
Collaborate with Local Public Safety for Better Response Efforts

The district and their local law enforcement have an established relationship and commitment to their school resource officer (SRO) program. "This commitment," according to the report, "had several collateral benefits on the day of the incident at RMS."

Several of the officers who responded on scene were previously SROs at the district. They were familiar with the school emergency operations plan (EOP), district operations, and everyone's roles and responsibilities. The SROs were also *integrated into the district's EOP development and training*, and they conducted exercises with students and staff. This resulted in an aligned response by all staff, students, and public safety groups.

The district, through its Joint Reserve Deputy program, also cross-trained and certified designated school staff on law enforcement standards. "This cross-training and coordinated exercises are of tremendous benefit and are conducive to an effective, coordinated response," the report claims.

We know that school safety cannot be done in a silo. Schools need to *collaborate with local emergency responders*, community organizations, public safety groups, and their students, staff, and community members to better think through each scenario and understand what threats the school faces while you are developing your EOP.

"The more people you bring to the table, the more comprehensive your plan is going to be," Dr. CJ Huff, former Superintendent of Joplin Schools in Missouri, shared in a *Raptor webinar* while recalling how the district's relationship with their local organizations drastically helped when an EF-5 tornado—the classification for a tornado with at least 200 mph winds— tore through their schools.

Learn more about building a school emergency response team in our *on-demand webinar.*

Lesson Three:
Implement Standardized Response Protocols

The district had adopted, trained, and exercised a response protocol for several years prior to the RMS shooting. Their protocol allowed staff to make decisions based on their immediate circumstances. Staff could choose to lockdown or evacuate based on what they believed would keep their students safer.

During the RMS incident—and unaware that the attacker moved outside—one classroom decided to evacuate. As they ran outside, the attacker shot at them.

If using an options-based response protocol, schools must include situational awareness and tactical decision-making training. This includes giving staff a solid framework that will empower them to make good decisions and keep their students safe. For all response protocols, schools must also ensure everyone in their school is thoroughly trained and confidently knows what to do in any situation. This begins with conducting and learning from drills.

Dr. Jaclyn Schildkraut, Associate Professor of Criminal Justice at the State University of New York Oswego, stated in *a Raptor webinar*, "In an actual emergency, things are very stressful, and the first thing that goes is our cognitive functioning. Our minds go blank and our bodies do what they're trained to do… it's like we go on autopilot."

The more students, staff, and your community members practice through drills and exercises, the more they can get into the habit of automatically and correctly responding to the incident. It's also important to involve first responders in your drills and ask them for feedback on how you can improve. "If the district is committed to safety and takes the time to interact with law enforcement, it will certainly benefit them long term," Chief Miller stated.

Schools can leverage a drill management system to configure, manage, and track all drills. The *most powerful system* automatically collects performance data to show what is working and how you can improve your protocols. Reports enable you to demonstrate compliance with state and district drill mandates.

Learn how to run effective drills and improve emergency response in our *on-demand webinar.*

Lesson Four:
Ensure Clear Communication

"The first areas to lockdown during the RMS incident were classrooms within the immediate area of the attack. Nearby staff secured their areas and attempted to contact the front office so the front office could initiate lockdown procedures, as this was the established protocol at the time," the report details.

The report details how the notifications over the school's PA system was difficult to remember and relay to the school. Even more alarming, there were many areas within RMS—including portable classrooms—that were unaware of the active shooting and did not know to lockdown.

The communication issues expanded to other campuses. A nearby high school, for example, was directed to "lock-out," but staff were confused by the notification and instead locked down the school. The high school then did not answer their phones—as that was their protocol—so communication was severely delayed.

All staff should be empowered and trained to initiate emergency alerts. One method is to use _a mobile panic button_ that enables staff to initiate emergencies from wherever they are located. This would _instantly and clearly alert other staff_—both on and off campus—about the type of emergency and what action they need to take to keep everyone safe. The clear alerts would eliminate confusing notifications or messages.

The most powerful panic button systems are customized to your emergency response protocols and enable users to directly call or text 9-1-1 and automatically share critical details—such as caller name and precise location on campus—with dispatchers. The panic button system should also enable staff, first responders, and incident commanders to communicate through group messaging and access district protocols and building floor plans.

The report found response to wounded individuals was delayed, as "officers unfamiliar with the building had difficulty moving to make contact because of the lack of orienting markers inside the building." This highlights the importance of clearly labeling rooms and having _simple, yet detailed school maps._

⊙ **Learn best practices for emergency response in our _Guide to K-12 Emergency Management: Proven Strategies to Protect Your School_**

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Lesson Five:
Have a Robust Reunification Plan

The district, according to the report, had a reunification plan prior to the RMS incident. Several factors that day caused the district to deviate from their original plan, but they were able to leverage the core concept of their plan to guide their reunification process.

A critical component of reunification is knowing the status and location of your students and staff. "Although a process was in place at RMS to update the classroom roll sheets, the process was unevenly applied, and staff members reported needing to update the roll sheets by hand to begin the reunification process," the report highlights as a lesson learned.

An *accountability solution*—one that is ideally integrated with the panic button system—enables teachers and staff to quickly account for anyone, whether that be a student in their class, a student that isn't on their roster, another staff member, or a visitor. They can do this all on their mobile phones or tablets, giving other teachers, staff, first responders, and incident commanders instant access to real-time student data, status, and location.

When a guardian checks into the reunification site, the greeter can quickly confirm that the student's status and location, and therefore, know to continue the reunification process or escort the guardian to a private waiting area for further information.

It's also imperative that personnel can accurately confirm the guardians ID, check for sex offender status and custodial restrictions, and capture their signature at reunification. This eliminates inaccuracy, reduces liability, and ensures students are only reunified with approved guardians.

The report also shows the importance of having adequate resources. RMS staff were assigned major roles in the reunification process; however, many were unable to participate in the process directly after the attack. Fortunately, the district had back-up staff from the district office to help at the reunification site. Schools should designate back-up staff during the EOP development.

➡ **Learn key considerations for an effective reunification after a school crisis in our *on-demand webinar.***

Lesson Six:
Consider Additional Mental Health Support

Returning to school after a violent attack is challenging. Many students and staff will be traumatized from the crisis and will need additional support. The mental health support needed—for both students and staff—may be more than the district's capacity.

As mentioned earlier, schools need relationships with local organizations, including those that can provide mental health assistance. These mental health agencies should be part of the school's crisis planning team.

It's important that schools support both students and staff. After the incident at RMS, the district delayed school and used a day to communicate the facts of the shooting to all its staff members, introduce mental health resources and options, and develop a plan to return to the classrooms.

RMS also leveraged counselors from other schools and had many parents and community members volunteer at the school after the crisis. Schools need to monitor the levels of volunteers throughout the first weeks of recovery and follow a variety of research-supported strategies to support students and staff. For RMS, one of these strategies was bringing therapy dogs to the school.

It's also critical to know precisely who is volunteering. This requires an efficient method to recruit, screen, approve, and track each volunteer. Schools should use *a volunteer management system* that provides an integrated, customizable online volunteer application, full criminal background checks, volunteer hour tracking, event management, and robust reporting.

The district also created a community-based recovery team for long-term needs. The group—comprised of local law enforcement, victim's services agencies, county emergency management, and school staff—was focused on summer when students and staff may be without mental health resources. "These local recovery initiatives broadened the network of services available and leveraged awareness to reach underserved populations affected by the incident," the report concluded.

Learn more in our podcast, *Addressing Student Mental Health and Emergency Preparedness.*

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Lesson Seven:
Plan to Reopen Safely

The report recommends, "Evidence of the attack should be repaired or cleaned before resuming school, but this task may cause additional trauma for individuals. Second, even damage not directly related to the incident may have a traumatizing effect on students."

The district's maintenance staff repaired all visible damage. They fixed not only bullet holes from the attack, but also pre-existing holes throughout the building. By the time school reopened, there was no physical evidence that the shooting even took place. The report recommends schools, while developing their EOP, plan for third-party restoration services instead of using their staff.

The report also highlights how the school distributed personal items to students while the campus was closed. As they wanted to prevent access to the school, staff escorted the student's guardian throughout the building to pick up whatever personal items the student left behind. A _visitor management system_ can be used to screen and track the restoration contractors, as well as the guardians who came to campus. This process should be part of the EOP and thoroughly discussed during planning.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, _The "I Love U Guys" Foundation®_ created the Standard Distribution Method™ (SDM) to meet schools' needs for distributing critical resources to students, such as homework, learning devices, and meals. This process can also be leveraged to distribute personal items after crises or whenever schools are closed.

To track distribution efforts and create a record for reference, schools can adapt their reunification solution—_just like Texas City ISD did_—to align with the SDM and support the resource distribution efforts.

⊙→ **Learn more about screening and tracking visitors in our _Guide to K-12 Visitor Management: Best Practices for Year-Round Safety_**

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"We have Raptor Visitor Management, Raptor Volunteer Management, and Raptor Emergency Management. Raptor really is priceless. Honestly, it has given us freedom, peace of mind, and the ability to communicate more accurately with one another. Raptor is part of our everyday operations."

West Aurora School District 129, IL

About the Author

Raptor is driven by our mission to protect every child, every school, every day.

Founded in 2002, Raptor has partnered with over **35,000 K-12 U.S. schools** to provide integrated visitor, volunteer, and emergency management software that fulfills a **broad range of school safety requirements.**

Raptor also provides **contactless COVID-19 health screenings** and contact tracing reports that are helping schools reopen and keep students, staff, and visitors *safe.*

Learn more about the Raptor School Safety Suite on our website, *raptortech.com*

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