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The Devil's Roulette Wheel

Prosecutors call school shootings “The Devil’s Roulette Wheel.” You never know where the bouncing ball will land, only that a tragedy will result. Blunt, I know. But there is nothing subtle about a shooting at a school.

From leafy suburbs like Sandy Hook or Columbine to a one-room Amish schoolhouse in rural Lancaster County, the sad commentary is that school shootings can happen anywhere. And when they do, it is a nightmare. This is why district attorneys and their law enforcement partners often take the lead in their communities to prevent these tragedies from happening in the first place but also be prepared should one occur.

The Chester County District Attorney’s office is actively engaged with our police departments, community leaders, and schools to prepare and protect our children from harm. As kids go back to school around Pennsylvania, now is a good time to talk about some of the steps that we all can take to respond to and even prevent school shootings. I could write for weeks about this topic, so I will stick to three simple points:

1. **Law Enforcement Preparation.** In Chester County, we saw the nationwide increase in school shootings and decided to prepare immediately. Six years ago, we worked with our SWAT personnel and police chiefs to come up with a uniform county-wide response to a school shooter, covering all 46 law enforcement agencies in Chester County. That response is simple – the first police officer on the scene immediately enters the school and

neutralizes the threat. The second officer does the same thing. We do not wait for back-up or SWAT; every second that goes by is a chance to save a life or lose a life. After Chester County established this response protocol, we then trained every police officer in the County on how to respond, including lectures, live practice, and video recording and review of their performance. We are ready.

2. **School Preparation.** Schools also need to prepare for a shooting event. In Chester County, we review the physical lay-out of schools and suggest changes to minimize any potential security risks. Basic steps like having a single entry and exit point, with all other external doors secured, is a simple but effective deterrent. Schools must also practice active shooter drills, just like they practice fire drills. The “run-hide-fight” strategy must be ingrained for kids. Some parents worry that such preparations traumatize kids. What we have seen is that training empowers students and keeps them calm in an actual crisis. Of course, for the school districts that can afford it, a trained police officer in every school is the best safety net that exists.
3. **Prevention.** The public may not realize it, but law enforcement prevents a large percentage of school shootings before they happen. Our goal is to prevent them all. Parents and teachers can help us with this goal with a little knowledge about the evolution of school shooters.

Based on our experience and studies, school shooters go through five distinct phases. Phase 1 is where the potential shooter is merely thinking or fantasizing about a school shooting. Phase 2 is the planning stage, where the shooter may be sketching out how to carry out a shooting. In Phase 3, the potential shooter is engaged in preparation for the shooting: acquiring firearms and ammunition, reviewing approaches and escape routes, etc. Phase 4 is the approach stage, where the shooter is literally heading to the school. Phase 5 is implementation, the part that we never want to hear about, but saw unfold 22 times in the United States as of July 2019.

The good news is that school shootings can still be prevented. During Phases 1-4, there are opportunities for parents, teachers, friends, and the police to spot active shooter evolution behavior and intervene. A potential shooter may verbalize or post on social media their plans. Somebody who has gathered the blue prints to a school or keeps a list of students they hate is exhibiting red flags. Any student who is acquiring weapons or ammunition for no apparent reason obviously

is a serious concern. These are just a few examples, but the key is to understand the evolution and spot the behavior.

It's the simple "see something, say something" principle. Everyone needs to listen, watch, and be ready to report when we see evidence of these phases. All law enforcement and schools would rather people catch this behavior early and divert the shooter into treatment, rather than deal with the tragedy of an actual shooting.

Pennsylvania prosecutors and police pray every day during the school year that they will not have to face the horror of a school shooting. If the worst happens, we are prepared to respond. Even more importantly, we take steps to prevent such shootings. We owe a duty to our children to make sure that they can go to school and learn in safety. It takes all of us working together to achieve that goal. And saying a prayer can't hurt.

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Approved for release:

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