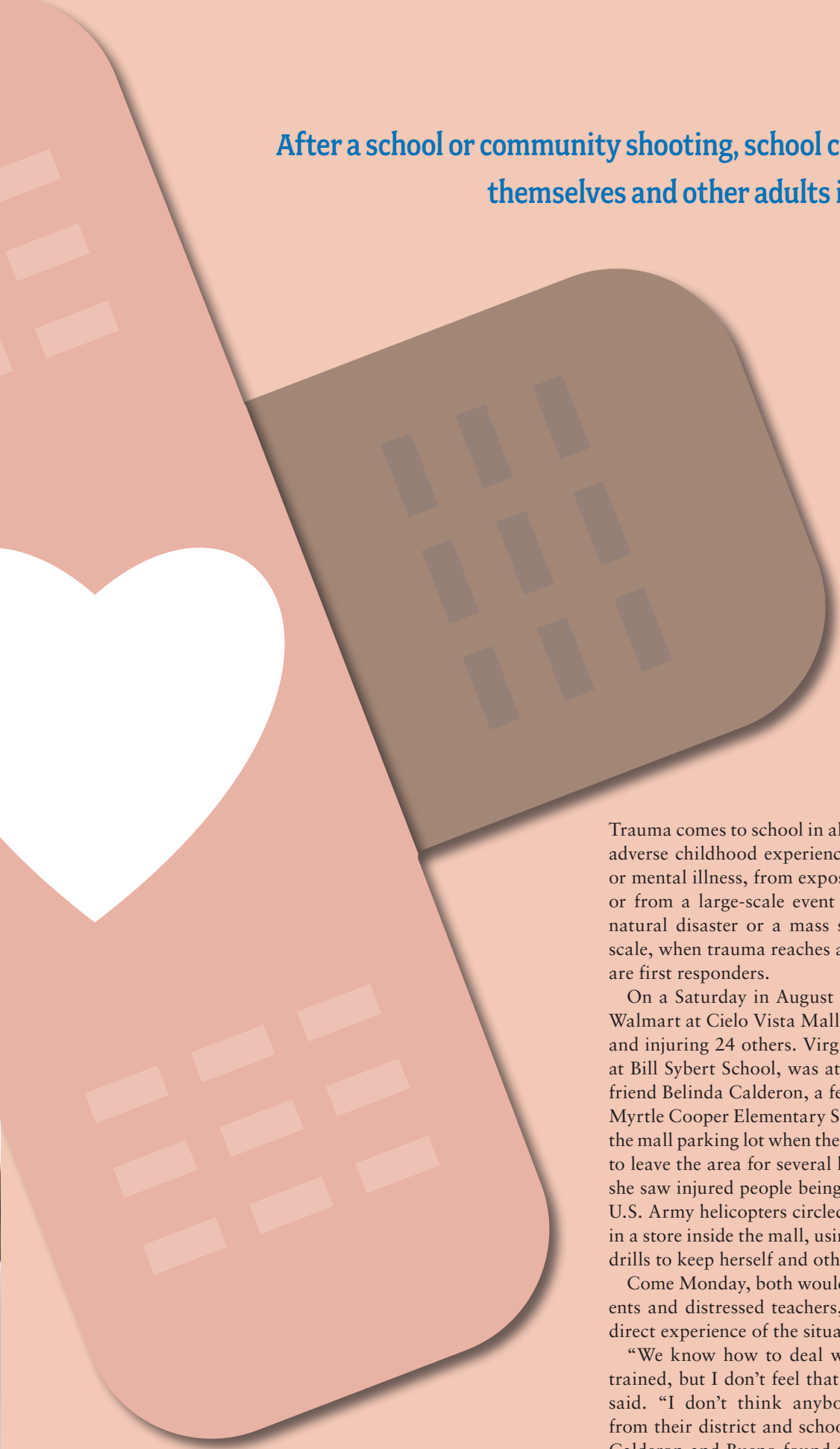


RESILIENCE IN THE AFTERMATH



An illustration on the left side of the page shows a hand in a light pinkish-red color. The hand is holding a white heart in its palm. On the back of the hand, there is a large, brown, rectangular bandage with several smaller, lighter brown rectangular patches on it. The background is a solid light orange color.

After a school or community shooting, school counselors need to help themselves and other adults in the school heal first.

BY KATY O'GRADY

Trauma comes to school in all shapes and sizes. It may stem from adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) such as parental divorce or mental illness, from exposure to violence or substance abuse, or from a large-scale event with widespread impact such as a natural disaster or a mass shooting. No matter the source or scale, when trauma reaches a school building, school counselors are first responders.

On a Saturday in August 2019, a gunman opened fire in the Walmart at Cielo Vista Mall in El Paso, Texas, killing 22 people and injuring 24 others. Virginia Bueno, a K–5 school counselor at Bill Sybert School, was at the mall that morning to meet her friend Belinda Calderon, a fellow El Paso school counselor from Myrtle Cooper Elementary School. Calderon had just pulled into the mall parking lot when the shooting started and wasn't allowed to leave the area for several hours. Routed behind the Walmart, she saw injured people being evacuated on shopping carts while U.S. Army helicopters circled overhead. Bueno was in lockdown in a store inside the mall, using her experience with school safety drills to keep herself and other shoppers safe.

Come Monday, both would face tearful students, anxious parents and distressed teachers, while still dealing with their own direct experience of the situation.

“We know how to deal with loss and grief, and we've been trained, but I don't feel that we were prepared for this,” Bueno said. “I don't think anybody was.” Despite strong support from their district and school counselors at other schools, both Calderon and Bueno found themselves and their schools taking reactive steps rather than drawing on proactive preparation.

“This event was horrific,” Calderon said. “It showed us that the teachers need more training” in helping students with all kinds of trauma. One of her first actions was visiting every classroom to tell students, “Look guys, we have cameras, we have panic buttons, we have this, we have that.” You could see their level of anxiety come down.”

Unlike in El Paso, where school counselors were able to reassure students and parents that school was still a safe place, those at Marjory Stoneman Douglas (MSD) High School in Parkland, Fla., had trauma come within their walls in February 2018. Seventeen students died, and 17 more were injured in that school shooting.

Among the many programs Broward County implemented in the wake of the Parkland shooting was hiring eight district support counselors in summer 2018. This group included Rachel Kusher, who is housed at MSD, where she works directly with the students who were injured during the shooting and their siblings and families. She also provides social/emotional learning for the entire student population. Christine Ross, a lifelong Broward resident, is another support counselor serving feeder elementary schools in the MSD zone.

Recovering, Adults First

“It is so important to start with the adults first, because, let’s be real, if the adults are not okay, the children are not going to be okay,” Ross said. “By supporting our teachers and staff, we are in turn assisting all of the children they come into contact with.” Calderon shares this perspective. “You need to look at your own state of

“We know how to deal with loss and grief, and we’ve been trained, but I don’t feel that we were prepared for this...”

CRISIS RESOURCES: BE PREPARED

These resources and organizations can guide school counselors in a crisis situation and help create a proactive plan to address crises when they arise.

Resources from ASCA

ASCA U: Trauma and Crisis Management Specialist

www.schoolcounselor.org/ASCAU

POSITION STATEMENTS

- **The School Counselor and Safe Schools and Crisis Response**
- **The School Counselor and Prevention of School-Related Gun Violence**

www.schoolcounselor.org/

[positionstatements](http://www.schoolcounselor.org/positionstatements)

WEBINARS ON DEMAND

- **Supporting Students After Crisis and Loss**
- **Counseling Kids in Crisis Effective Crisis/Trauma Response**
- **Infusing a Caring Climate into Your School**

www.schoolcounselor.org/ASCAonAir

ASCA Toolkit

Crisis Planning and Response

www.schoolcounselor.org/COVID

Other Resources

National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement

The National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement provides training, technical assistance and consultation for schools and communities preparing for or recovering from crises, using an interdisciplinary team of medical, mental health and school professionals. Resources include the book “How to Prepare for and Respond to Crisis.” www.schoolcrisiscenter.org/

Coalition to Support Grieving Students

ASCA is a partner in this national organization that offers video modules and summaries for school personnel who are assisting students in times of grief. <https://grievingstudents.org/>

Center for Mind-Body Medicine

<https://cmbm.org/>

Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral

Therapy <https://tfcbt.org/>

Sandy Hook Promise Start with Hello

www.sandyhookpromise.org/startwithhello

mind first,” she said. “Sometimes you’re not the best person to be in the front of your school dealing with this when you haven’t processed it well.” Calderon spent the day after the shooting calling all the teachers from her school who had family working in law enforcement who would have been on the scene, checking on whether they felt ready to see students the next day.

Broward County Public Schools set up a resiliency center for the whole Parkland community – adults, school staff and children – with licensed clinicians and extended hours. The employee assistance program (EAP) sent representatives to all of the schools in the MSD zone to provide support and set up self-care stations for school staff. Ross also worked with the EAP to hold wellness days at the schools she services.

An immediate partner to Broward County after the incident was the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement. The center’s director, David Schonfeld, M.D., and consultant Thomas Demaria, Ph.D., visited the high school numerous times to meet with school counselors, administrators and teachers. They offered evening parent sessions addressing the effects of trauma on teens and post-traumatic growth.

Other programs introduced at MSD and across Broward County included mind-body medicine, trauma-focused cognitive behavioral counseling and mental health first aid. These not only aided in recovery but continue to build student and staff resilience.

Mind-body medicine emphasizes stress reduction using evidence-based approaches including meditation, biofeedback, guided imagery and self-expression. The Center for Mind-Body Medicine began working with Broward County schools not long after the shooting and has offered workshops for staff and community members. Ross is currently pursuing certification in the program to further support her staff, again focusing on making sure adults are ready to assist students. A student ambassador club and peer counseling program visit classrooms and help train other students in grounding techniques and mindfulness.

Kusher, Ross and five other support counselors in the MSD zone have been

trained as brokers for trauma-focused cognitive behavioral counseling. In this role, they use a defined process to screen for trauma, then refer identified students to one of the 50 specialist clinicians in the district, several of whom are on the MSD campus at the school's wellness center.

Like the broker program, training in mental health first aid prepares adults to identify students experiencing difficulties and refer them for assistance. Broward County offers youth mental health first aid training to all school employees, including cafeteria workers, bus drivers, teachers and office staff. Ross is a certified trainer in the program. "Just like you have CPR in a medical emergency, this is the first response in a mental health emergency – noticing the signs or symptoms of people who may be experiencing some kind of mental health distress and getting them the professional help they need," Ross said. One motivation for this program is research findings that suicide risks increase for those who experience a major trauma. Broward County has also added the "Start with Hello" program from Sandy Hook Promise, which includes K-12 programs to address social isolation.

In both Parkland and El Paso, small groups have been a core component of recovery. Bueno formed a group with students who were highly affected and used a donation of books to create lessons exploring students' fears. "They were scared to be in school; they felt like the shooters were going to come to school," Bueno said. After four weeks of lessons, the students appeared less anxious, as did their parents.

Ross leads several elementary small groups on anxiety, which has increased "especially in regard to the code red drills and things that keep bringing certain feelings up," she said.

Where School Counselors Turn

Schools in the MSD zone were a highly stressful environment in the first year after the shooting. "We were basically reliving the tragedy over and over in the work we were doing as trauma support," Ross said. She, Kusher and their colleagues set up an accountability group chat to cope with the stress. Every Friday, one of the supervisors would text the

PRINCIPAL RECOVERY NETWORK

BY GREG WAPLES

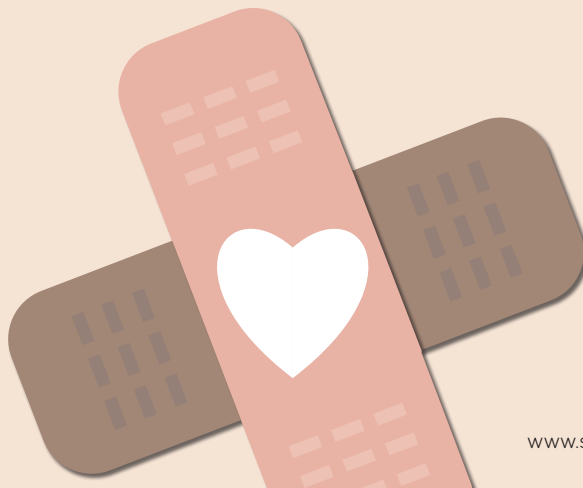
In April 2019, the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) launched the Principal Recovery Network (PRN), a national network of current and former school leaders who have experienced gun violence tragedies in their buildings. The PRN seeks to assist principals in the immediate aftermath of a crisis and well beyond. PRN members reach out directly to their colleagues after a shooting has taken place to provide much-needed support, share the combined wisdom of their experience with the larger principal community through various outlets, assist schools during recovery and advocate for national school safety enhancements and violence prevention programs.

Through two in-person convenings hosted by NASSP in 2019 and 2020, the PRN has discussed the challenges of restoring a learning focus after a shooting and the fine line of commemorations that can either advance healing or reopen emotional wounds. Conversations have also revolved around the need for additional mental health services for schools, both to prevent violent incidents and to help schools recover from them. Of particular note has been principals' emphasis on the mental health needs of school counselors, teachers and other adults who might experience trauma following a shooting, including the principals themselves.

Turning conversation into action, the PRN hosted its first-ever public event in February 2020, speaking directly to members of Congress and their staffs in meetings and at a briefing on Capitol Hill. PRN members shared emotional stories about the tragic shootings that unfolded in their buildings, and they inspired attendees as they described the heroism displayed by students, educators and first responders on the day of the incident, as well as the resilience of their communities in the weeks, months and years that followed. The list of legislative priorities brought before Congress at the event included a significant federal investment in school-based mental health professionals and services, implementing trauma-informed care practices in schools and funding for Project SERV grants, which provide an immediate lifeline to many schools shattered by gun violence.

For more on the PRN and its members, visit www.nassp.org/prn.

GREG WAPLES IS SENIOR MANAGER, STATE ENGAGEMENT AND OUTREACH, NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SECONDARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS. HE CAN BE REACHED AT WAPLES@NASSP.ORG.



“They were scared to be in school; they felt like the shooters were going to come to school...”

group a self-care check-in, and each would report what they had done to take care of themselves. Ross urges school counselors to “find at least one person to hold you accountable, maybe another school counselor who understands what you go through day in and day out.”

In El Paso, Bueno had nightmares despite turning off the television news. What helped her most was talking with coworkers and a group of counselor friends from her training program. “Calling them and telling them when I’m not feeling really good, it helps, it really does,” Bueno said.

Calderon also found that communication was a lifeline. “Just talking to somebody can release so much stress, and then you’re ready to go in there and deal with the kids. Sometimes it’s recognizing that you’re not ready for that and that you need assistance.” She notes that school counselors need to know their own hot buttons, specific things they find difficult to deal with. “At that point, you collaborate, and you ask for help,” she said. Ross emphasizes taking time to separate from work to unplug and recharge, and Calderon goes running every night to relieve stress.

High-Profile Means High Anxiety

The massive amounts of media attention devoted to both El Paso and Parkland further increased the pressure on the school counselors. Kusher described days with media lining the streets outside the high school, books written about the shooting and its aftermath and information about students on the internet and social media. She does make a point of reading the books about the MSD shooting, “because

I know my kids are reading it and my teachers are reading it, and some of them are contributing to these books, so I like to be in the know.” But both Kusher and Ross have made a point of keeping their politics and perspectives to themselves.

“There is a big political and a big media side to it. As long as I continue to always put the students first and support our children, I’m usually able to block out the majority of the outside opinions and everything else going on,” Ross said. Kusher specifically addressed social media. “I don’t post on Facebook or Instagram my feelings about all these things, because I don’t want anyone to ever be like ‘Oh, I can’t talk to her because she’s part of this agenda or this organization, and I’m part of this one, which has an opposing view.’”

In El Paso, the media presence and coverage contributed to confusion around the facts of the event and increased anxiety for students and parents. “Everything around the news was nothing but the shooting. It gets to a point where you have to pick up the phone and tell parents, ‘Enough. No more. We know what’s happened, we don’t need to keep reliving it every single day,’” Calderon said.

A More Resilient Future

What school counselors can do for students, staff and communities in times of crisis requires recognition of the school counselor role. “Making sure school districts and administrators know the role of the school counselor is a huge key component,” Kusher said. The Broward County district is in the process of changing from what she describes as “very traditional guidance counselors” and updating the school counselor job description that has been unchanged since the 1970s. The new description not only addresses the school counselor’s responsibilities but also identifies duties that should not fall under the job description, Ross said.

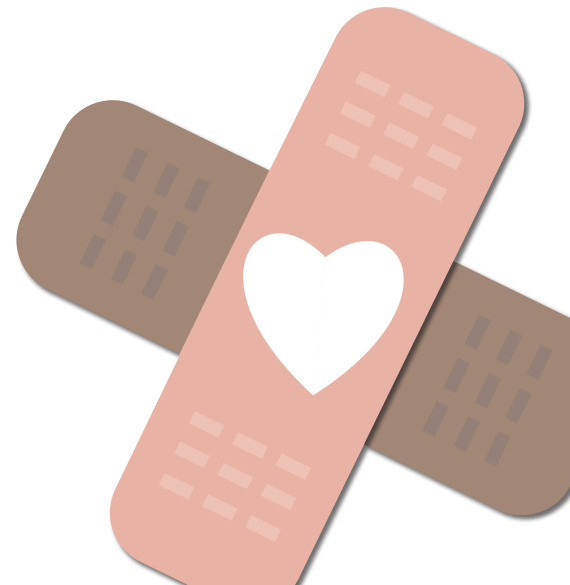
Kusher encourages school counselors to embrace accountability in their work by using data to show administrators and districts, “I’ve worked with these students and these classes this entire quarter, and look, their grades went from this to that. I don’t just sit at my desk and change schedules and observe parent/

teacher conferences. I am an integral part of school improvement itself, and I can run a school counseling program.”

Bueno also sees a role for school counselors in pushing schools and districts to have a crisis plan for traumatic events just as they do for a student death. “If a student passes away, right away the team comes together. We already know exactly what to do.” In the wake of the shooting, she would have liked for the entire school staff to have met prior to the students returning to school to go over things they needed to be on the lookout for in students and in themselves and what to do if they had concerns.

With a large student-to-school-counselor ratio (about 775:1), Calderon sees the need to prepare teachers to respond to trauma. She has observed that teachers may not make connections between student behavior or academic struggles and students’ experiences outside of school. “Teachers are the faces the kids see every day, right in the front, and teachers have to have that comfort level to be able to handle some of these situations,” she said. Calderon emphasizes training teachers

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on the various types of trauma and their effects and ways to build relationships with students and initiate conversations about traumatic events. In particular, she would like to see schools actively develop a plan to address all types of trauma, rather than being reactive.

More social/emotional learning for students should be a priority. “Social/emotional learning is a way to be proactive for possible future trauma. People having the ability within to be resilient and be in touch with their emotions – that’s a benefit when anything traumatic happens,” Kusher said. She has been working at MSD to incorporate social/emotional learning into the everyday curriculum.

As Broward County recognizes the impact school counselors make, Ross is seeing results with students. In 2019, the team of district support counselors was able to do classroom lessons focused on grit and suicide prevention in 121 personalization periods at MSD. “They were the uncomfortable conversations that had to be had, but we got great feedback. Some kids came forward with concerns, so I know that was moving in the right direction,” Ross said.

Rather than focusing on the traumatic event, school counselors in both states advocate for working with students to build their social/emotional resources. As Kusher said, school counselors can teach students how to deal with their stress and move forward. 

Katy O’Grady is a freelance writer from Fairfax, Va. She last wrote for *ASCA School Counselor* about the evolution of the school counseling profession.

