



## Position Paper

# Breaking the Code of Silence: The Role of Anonymous Reporting in School Safety Programs

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## Executive Summary

With the proliferation of school violence across the nation, legislators and school administrators are contemplating school safety plans that require massive long-term expenditures in capital improvements, including the installation of security cameras, metal detectors and the hiring of additional security personnel. Whether or not this approach will make schools safer is a matter of debate and remains to be seen; however, those with the power to regulate must weigh these capital expenditures carefully, especially in the face of increasing public awareness of school violence. Additionally, given current state and local budget constraints, how can programs aimed at eliminating school violence, especially those that require technology, realistically be implemented and funded?

Schools need solutions that are affordable, effective, and make the required connections between students and faculty. Through relatively inexpensive programs such as response to intervention models and anonymous reporting systems, schools can afford preventive solutions that will connect all members of a school's community and thus enhance their overall level of school security.

### Students are Critical to School Safety

When the United States Departments of Health and Human Services, Education, and Justice released "The Report to the President on Issues Raised by the Virginia Tech Tragedy" in June 2007, they noted five key findings that educational administrators should review in order to prevent a similar incident. A common thread among these five findings—the effective flow of accurate information—emerged as a critical variable in creating and sustaining an environment of safety in any school community. This is important to note in a school setting, especially as data from years of internal school security threat assessments<sup>i</sup> suggest the following:

- The most effective intelligence in schools comes from the students themselves; and
- The foundation of any threat assessment done on students is reconnecting disenfranchised students.

Without a doubt students are typically outstanding sources of information for what is happening in their schools. Recently the United States Secret Service Safe School Initiative & Threat Assessment Study revealed that in four out of five school shootings, the attackers boasted about their plan to other students beforehand<sup>ii</sup>. Unfortunately, leveraging this information has proven to be quite difficult. A 'code of silence' exists that gives adolescents a pervasive sense that telling adults that they or another student is either in pain or may pose a threat to others will violate an unwritten, but powerful principle and will therefore subject the student to reprisal. Breaking this 'code of silence' will allow school officials to tap into the best source of information on a school campus — the students themselves — and proactively identify troubled students and avoid potentially catastrophic events.

State officials have called for students to come forward and break this 'code of silence.' A recent response to a school safety report issued by the National Association of Attorneys General<sup>iii</sup>, Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott encouraged Texas students to anonymously report alarming behavior to authorities. AG Abbott encouraged all school districts to implement a Campus Crime Stoppers program, a type of anonymous reporting program that typically allows students to

anonymously report perceived campus threats. Under Texas law, the identity of any person who provides information to the Crime Stoppers program is protected.

### **But how effective are Campus Crime Stopper programs?**

Data received from the 2006 Texas Campus Crime Stopper programs show a measurable impact to campus safety and security programs in Texas. For the 2005-2006 school year, 1,615 cases were administratively disciplined, which led to \$29,760 in narcotics seized and 235 weapons recovered<sup>iv</sup>:

#### **2006 Texas Campus Crime Stopper Program Statistics**

- 1,615 suspects arrested
- 2,732 cases cleared
- 1,615 administratively disciplined
- \$168,121 value of property recovered
- \$29,760 value of narcotics seized
- 235 weapons seized

Any programmatic school safety effort that results in the recovery of 235 weapons and almost \$30,000 in narcotics is clearly making a positive difference in the lives and general welfare of students. However, the numbers of incidents reported suggest that the medium through which campus crime stopper tipsters pass their information does not seem to be optimized for today's digitally-savvy students.

### **Houston ISD: a Brief Case Study**

Consider Houston Independent School District (HISD), the largest school district in Texas and the seventh largest district in the nation. With almost 300 schools in an ethnically diverse and growing area of the country, HISD takes a preventive and very forward-thinking approach to school safety by providing its students, educators and parents with programs such as violence and drug-use prevention strategies, bullying prevention sessions, anonymous reporting/campus crime stopper programs, and conflict resolution/peer mediation programs.

The district's campus crime stopper program has been in place since at least 1997 and has produced measurable results. In a report entitled *Statistical Summary of Cases Solved/Rewards Paid as of July 2007*, HISD notes that its Campus Crime Stopper program – a main component of its anonymous reporting program – has solved 1,109 crimes to date. Among those crimes are total weapons (168), narcotics (793), Arson (15), theft (27), bomb threats (6), and total other crimes (100). While this may look like significant progress, there seems to be a disconnect between would-be anonymous tipsters and those actually adjudicating incidents in schools. In a *New York Times* article<sup>v</sup> detailing apparent disconnects between statistics recorded by police departments and those actually reported by school districts, it was reported that during school years 1999-2000 and 2002-2003, the Houston Police Department (who oversees 80 middle and high schools in HISD) reported 3,091 school-related assaults into their database. During this same period, HISD listed only 761 schoolhouse assaults on its disciplinary summaries that they sent to the state agency in Austin. Compare those numbers with HISD's *Statistical Summary* report. Assaults are listed under the 100 "other" crimes and are much fewer in number – 5 assaults by bodily injury and 3 assaults by threat. This means that in ten school years the HISD campus crime stopper program reported approximately ¼ of one percent of total assault incidents that the Houston Police Department recorded for only two school years in only 80 out of 300 schools. These numbers suggest that the medium through

which campus crime stopper tipsters pass their information does not seem to be one with which they readily identify. Because improving the frequency and flow of communications between students and faculty must be at the core of the district's school safety program, the program will certainly require a communications mechanism that both faculty and students alike can identify with and be comfortable using.

### **Reaching the "i-Generation" through Anonymous Reporting**

Over the course of the past ten years technology has changed the lives of the vast majority of Americans. Mobile phones, e-mail, and text messages have become a part of daily life and are being widely used by students. According to statistics released by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, there are over 26 million students (aged 9-18) using cell phones and children as young as 9 years old readily text<sup>vi</sup>. With so many mobile phone users, it stands to reason that anonymous tip lines should be more effective than they have been. Clearly this new generation of students, or at least the students in the surveyed group, do not identify with a tip lines as an effective means of "breaking the code of silence." This means that in order to eliminate future threats, school administrators must develop anonymous reporting mechanisms that foster and maintain channels where students can directly communicate with counselors if they themselves are having problems or are witness to other types of behavior that require an adult's attention.

Though anonymous tip lines work well in a municipal or community setting, schools are different environments that have different dynamics. Looking at the categories of offenses reported by campus crime stopper programs, the types of crimes reported are not necessarily representative of the types of issues that students face daily, and based on the United States Secret Service Safe Schools Initiative and Virginia Tech Summary reports, are not at all representative of the issues that lead students to commit violent crimes. A 2007 survey whose sample set included 70,000 American students<sup>vii</sup> in 52 schools across 12 states revealed that during the 2006-07 school year, 5,992 total incidents were reported by students ranging from the most common — stress, bullying and depression — to other significant types of problems, including family problems, fighting, peer pressure, drugs, cheating, cutting/self-injury, suicide, pregnancy, eating disorders, alcohol usage, dropping out, threats and weapons. When ranked by order of importance, stress, bullying and depression ranked one, two and three respectively in a list of incidents as reported by elementary, middle and high school students. Out of all students surveyed, 8 out of 10 students indicated they are more likely to reach out and communicate problems with administrators, counselors and law enforcement in schools using anonymous online messaging services.

This information is significant because the students surveyed readily identify with a means other than a tip line to report problems. No tip line operator can know or understand the unique school environment like that of its staff and security personnel. Students surveyed are looking for guidance and prefer to anonymously reach out to adults in their school to discuss issues that they or their classmates face. Tip lines do not create a continuous dialogue between a student and counselor or other adult where more detailed information about a specific student or inappropriate activities can be discovered. Besides, with thousands of students in a school district, identifying 'at-risk' students and adjudicating incidents with no dialogue from students can be almost impossible for short staffed counselors and administrators who are responding reactively to problems as they occur. Having the ability to "talk back" to a student mitigates this risk by allowing the staff member or security officer to immediately ask the who, what, why, when and where and even request and receive a reporting student's identity when life threatening messages are sent.

Because of the powerful and pervasive 'code of silence,' children are often reluctant to admit their own problems and concerns to an adult. The idea of sitting in the lobby of the principal's office to report a problem is anathema to today's generation of students. Besides, for every student who is likely to meet a counselor in person, there are many more who don't have the courage to discuss their problems out 'in the open' because of peer pressure, fear of retribution or simply embarrassment.

There are anonymous online messaging services in the private sector that allow students to initiate contact with school administrators in a comfortable and safe manner, and have proven more effective than anonymous tip lines. Consider the data recently released by AnComm's 'Talk About It' anonymous reporting system for the 2007-2008 school year:

#### **2007-2008 Online Anonymous Reporting System Program Statistics**

- 90,538 students logged in from 18 states
- 18,501 individual users
- **22,434** incidents reported
- 256 suicide interventions
- 1,369 bullying incidents adjudicated
- 210 gang interventions adjudicated
- 105 weapon violations reported/adjudicated

With over 22,434 incidents adjudicated in 2007 alone, these numbers suggest that those reporting incidents in schools clearly identify with a Web and Text based anonymous reporting medium. Additionally, data received from school administrators using Web and Text based anonymous reporting systems indicate that they are an effective deterrent against violence. Schools are seeing a reduction in bullying, suspensions and fights because the students know that the anonymous reporting systems are in place. Students know that if they commit acts of bullying on the bus, or anywhere on or off school grounds, students will readily report them.

#### **The Way Forward**

Anonymous reporting systems are clearly vital components of a campus security program. In fact, Texas schools seeking compliance with *TEC § 37.108* (Senate Bill 11) for the 2008 school year will have to report the presence of an anonymous reporting system as part of their audit submission to the Texas School Safety Center. Before implementing an anonymous reporting system, schools need to consider the issues affecting student behavior and the mechanisms that are in place for students to report those issues. The types of incidents reported and the sheer volume of responses must be weighed before moving forward with any decision to implement.

Cost is an issue as well. An average sized district of five schools can implement a Web-based anonymous reporting system for an amount equal to the average size of a campus crime stopper grant. Districts are also eligible to utilize federal Title IV, Title I funds as well as Department of Justice Grants to cover the cost of implementation, thus avoiding any impact to school operational budgets.

Whichever system districts choose, it is absolutely paramount that schools choose preventive solutions that will connect all members of a school's community. At the minimum, schools should



ANONYMOUS HELP FOR STUDENTS

seek to implement solutions that stress collaboration and facilitate effective communication among school intervention programs, organizational personnel, and any relevant technologies.

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For more information on Web-based anonymous reporting systems, please call AnComm at (866) 926-2666.

## Facts and Figures

- 62% of students in grades 6-8 said that they had been cyber bullied by another student at school. (Kowalski et al., 2005)
- 1 in 3 teens has experienced online harassment. (Pew Internet & American Life Project)
- Incidents of crime are reported at 96% of high schools, 94% of middle schools, and 74% of primary schools. (Crime, Violence, Discipline and Safety in U.S. Public Schools: Findings from the School Survey on Crime and Safety: 2003-04, National Center for Education Statistics, 2006)
- 6.5% of students surveyed reported that they had carried a weapon on school property within the last thirty days, while 18% said they carried a weapon anywhere during the past month. (2005 Youth Risk Behavior Survey Results, Center for Disease Control, 2006)
- The percentage of public schools experiencing one or more violent incidents increased between the 1999-2000 and 2003-04 school years, from 71% to 81%. (Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2006, U.S. Departments of Education and Justice, 2006)
- Bullying is widespread in American schools, with more than 16% of U.S. school children saying they had been bullied by other students during a single semester. (National Institutes of Health)
- 29% of students in grades 9-12 reported that someone had offered, sold, or given them illegal drugs on school property in the previous year. (U.S. Department of Justice)
- 8 out of 10 students indicated they are more likely to reach out and communicate problems with administrators, counselors and law enforcement in schools using anonymous online messaging services. (AnComm)
- During the 2006-07 school year, 5,992 total incidents were reported by students ranging from the most common — stress, bullying and depression — to other significant types of problems, including: family problems, fighting, peer pressure, drugs, cheating, cutting/self-injury, suicide, pregnancy, eating disorders, alcohol usage, dropping out, threats and weapons. (AnComm)
- Stress, bullying and depression ranked one, two and three respectively in a list of incidents as reported by elementary, middle and high school students.

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*List of References*

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- <sup>i</sup> See <http://www.school-safety-intervention.org/taxonomy/term/8/9> and <http://www.safeschools.org/svcs.html>.
- <sup>ii</sup> United States Secret Service and United States Department of Education, "*The Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the Prevention of School Attacks in the United States.*" Washington, DC; 2007.
- <sup>iii</sup> National Association of Attorneys General, "*2007 National Association of Attorneys General Task Force on School and Campus Safety.*" Washington, DC; September 2007.
- <sup>iv</sup> Texas Crime Stoppers Web Site: <http://www.thetexascrimestoppers.org/>
- <sup>v</sup> Dillon, S. (2003, November 7). "School violence data under a cloud in Houston." *The New York Times*. Retrieved , September 5, 2007, from <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?sec=health&res=9B05EFDA1539F934A35752C1A9659C8B63#>
- <sup>vi</sup> Pew Internet and American Life site: [http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/247/report\\_display.asp](http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/247/report_display.asp)
- <sup>vii</sup> AnComm, 2007. As reported by students enrolled in schools using AnComm's 'Talk About It' anonymous online messaging service. The annual AnComm 'Talk About It' Report sample includes more than 70,000 students enrolled in 52 schools across 12 states.