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TOP STORY

## School is back, and so are lockdown and active shooter drills. When are they too much for kids to handle?

By Greg Sukiennik, The Berkshire Eagle  
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Students at Pittsfield High School stand out to advocate for school safety in February 2018 in response to a school shooting in Parkland, Fla  
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When is practicing readiness for a school shooting too much for kids to handle?

That question arose this week at Richmond Consolidated School, as an email to The Eagle stated — incorrectly, it turned out — that a lockdown drill was to be held. The writer asked whether parents should be informed in advance of

such drills, and whether it was too traumatic to expose kindergarteners and pre-K students to such exercises the first week of school.

But Richmond was planning a fire drill, not a lockdown drill, Richmond Superintendent Beth Choquette said.

“All students [from prekindergarten to grade 8] and all staff practice the drills. We don't use the word 'guns' with students,” Choquette said in an email. “We stress the importance of safety for all and that we use lockdowns if there was an emergency in the building or outside.”

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Lockdowns, active shooter drills and safety protocols are something all parents of school-age children are keenly aware of in the 21st century. The need for these drills was underscored this week in Georgia, where a 14-year-old male student is being charged with four counts of murder in the shooting deaths of two classmates and two teachers on Wednesday. The shooter's father has also been charged with second-degree murder.

But some parents, educators and experts in the field of children's mental health are asking: How do you prepare for the unthinkable without harming the children whose lives you're trying to save? That's a question facing school districts as the 2024-25 school year begins — and with it, active shooter drills to assure student safety.

Research into the topic, and families' lived experience, suggests that preparing for these worst-case scenarios can be traumatic for students. Several states have passed laws seeking to address such trauma, and in July, the New York Board of Regents banned elaborate active shooter simulations with actors, props and first responders.

Massachusetts is one of 10 states that does not mandate active shooter drills for schools, and its Department of Elementary and Secondary Education does not prescribe what schools must or must not do in preparing students and staff for such an emergency. Rather, the state offers best practices as recommended by school psychologists and school resource officers, and leaves decisions to local school districts working with law enforcement.

School shootings remain statistically rare. But they are horrific events that draw intense media coverage, and they produce strong emotions for children and grown-ups alike. According to Everytown for Gun Safety, 95 percent of school districts across the country conduct some form of lockdown or preparedness drill.

## PREPAREDNESS

How families are informed drills are taking place, and whether allowances are made for children who might be traumatized by practicing for a worst-case scenario, depends where your kids go to school, according to information shared with The Eagle by six county school districts.

Choquette clarified that Richmond Consolidated School conducts lockdown drills, not an active shooter drills. Those two terms refer to different things, and are not interchangeable.

A lockdown drill teaches classroom occupants to secure the room, by locking or barricading the door, turning off lights, closing window shades and moving students out of the line of sight from hallway windows. An active shooter drill is a response to a direct threat of a person with a gun in the school.

Pittsfield conducts four active shooter drills a year, Superintendent Joseph Curtis said. Lee, Lenox and North Adams officials told the Eagle they conduct lockdown drills, though North Adams is considering whether to add an active

shooter drill this year, according to Jon Slocum, the district's school safety liaison.

Berkshire Hills Regional School District, which includes W.E.B. Du Bois Middle School and Monument Mountain Regional High School, declined to specify which drills it runs.

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"We meet regularly with the Great Barrington and State Police and run drills with their collaboration," Superintendent Peter Dillon said in an email. "All of our work with our students is age appropriate. We do not disclose the details of drills as that might impact student and staff safety."

In March 2023, days after a mass school shooting in Nashville, Tenn., three Berkshire County high schools were among 30 schools threatened with shootings by phone, in a rash of "swatting" across the state. Lockdowns ensued, and students and parents were traumatized by the experience.

## LAW ENFORCEMENT ROLE

All responding school officials said they work closely with local and state police agencies. In Pittsfield, several officers are trained in the ALICE – Alert, Lockdown, Inform, Counter and Evacuate – protocol, a response that allows for different options for staff and students depending on the circumstances. That could be barricading the door, or evacuating the classroom.

"When each school does drills our school resource officers assist with those as well as needed for evacuation drills, and sometimes provide traffic control," Pittsfield Police Capt. Matthew Hill said.

Larger scale police training sessions take place in school buildings on weekends, when students are not present, Hill said.

What would it take for districts to consider active shooter drills?

“At the end of the day, the equation for schools is: Are the risks associated with including our students in simulated active shooter drills worth the rewards?” Collins said. “If presented with research that demonstrates that the reward of simulated active shooter drills involving children were worth the associated risks, I would consider bringing the idea to the crisis preparedness table for discussion.”

Slocum, who is also dean of students at Colegrove Park Elementary School in North Adams, said he’s meeting with North Adams Police to talk about taking part in a "mass casualty" exercise drill including police, fire and emergency first responders. “We haven’t done anything like this in my 11 years. So I’m going in with an open mind to hear it out and talk it through,” he said.

## STATE GUIDANCE

According to Jacqueline Reis, a spokeswoman for the [Department of Elementary and Secondary Education](#), the department is not involved in planning or implementing such drills, leaving those decisions to local school districts and law enforcement.

“We work closely with law enforcement on school safety issues,” Reis said, referring a reporter to the Massachusetts State Police for more information. State Police did not return an email seeking comment by press time Friday.

Instead, DESE offers districts a link on the emergency preparedness page of its website, to a [best practices memo](#) prepared by the National Association of School Psychologists and the National Association of School Resource Officers.

That guidance, written in 2014 and updated in 2017, advises that lockdown drills, rather than active shooter drills, should be the standard for preparation. It also warns that drills "have the potential to empower staff and save lives, but without proper caution, they can risk causing harm to participants."

Kentucky, a state that does require active shooter drills, offers specific guidance on trauma-informed training. It advises classroom instruction and discussion to make sure students are prepared in advance, and designating staff to "observe participant reactions and provide support and assistance."

Kentucky also cautions against actors and props. "There is no empirical evidence such simulations enhance learning or preparedness, and such simulations may raise anxiety and interfere with learning and problem-solving."

Colorado, which endured the 1999 Columbine school shooting, has a guide for parents and guardians on the website of its Office of School Safety. It recommends talking to children and acknowledging negative feelings.

"Some things that may help them feel safer might include knowing their teacher is there with them and knowing they have practiced responding in a way that will keep them safe," it says.

## A 'NECESSARY' PART OF SCHOOL

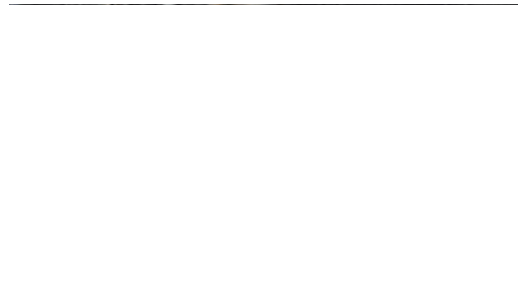
While some of the districts responding to The Eagle make accommodations for some students, none allow students to opt out entirely.

"Safety drills have become a necessary part of school safety protocols, primarily because of the increasing frequency of school-related incidents," Curtis said. "Their goal is to prepare students and staff for the unthinkable, ensuring everyone knows how to respond to a crisis to minimize harm."

Pittsfield schools inform parents the week before a drill, and teachers are expected to talk with their students about the experience, he said.

“We are responsible for the well-being of the students in our care each day of school,” Lee Superintendent Michael Richard Richard said. “Since we know that these events occur, it is incumbent upon us to ensure that our students are aware of the processes in place to keep them safe.”

In Richmond, students and teachers talk about drills and the importance of practice. “So we know what to do in a real emergency,” Choquette said. The school involves area first responders “so they can be familiar faces for our students. They have conversations with our students to ensure that they are part of the team of adults at RCS who are there to keep everyone safe.”



“The biggest thing is to make sure all students and staff know our emergency protocols and procedures without causing anxiety or trauma,” Choquette said. “We want all students and staff to feel safe in their school.”

## HOW MUCH IS TOO MUCH?

While schools weigh the pros and cons of lockdown and active shooter drills, study into whether their effectiveness outweighs any trauma they might produce remains an emerging field.

“This is not a very well-researched area,” said Amanda Nickerson, the director of the Alberti Center for Bullying Abuse Prevention at the University at Buffalo, N.Y. She has collaborated with Jaclyn Schildkraut, a criminal justice professor at SUNY Oswego, into research into the topic, as well as on a book published in 2022.

Studying student reactions to lockdown drills in greater Syracuse, N.Y., Nickerson and Schildkraut “compared anxiety levels and perception of fear and school safety and found no difference,” Nickerson said. “Which led us to

believe that maybe these drills, if done right, weren't causing overwhelming anxiety."

A 2022 survey of more than 10,000 middle and high school students in Syracuse found that students who experienced two lockdown drills felt less fearful than they did before the drills.

But that study also saw an increase in "avoidance behaviors" such as skipping school after the second drill.

The results were not what Nickerson expected. "I thought we were definitely going to find this makes kids more anxious," she said. "I truly wanted to know 'does this cause more harm?'"

Other studies have returned opposite results.

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A 2022 study taken at a southwestern U.S. university asked students whether the active shooter drills they experienced in high school made them feel safer. The majority of students said they felt more fear and risk and felt less safe as a result.

Another study conducted in 2020 by Everytown for Gun Safety and Georgia Tech University evaluated social media posts connected to 114 schools in 33 states, charting posts 90 days before and after active shooter drills. According to the results, 42 percent of those posts were connected to stress and anxiety, and 39 percent to increased depression.

"We definitely want drills to be trauma informed," Nickerson said. "We don't need actors and props, and make people feel like this isn't a drill. We know it's best practice to announce this is a drill."

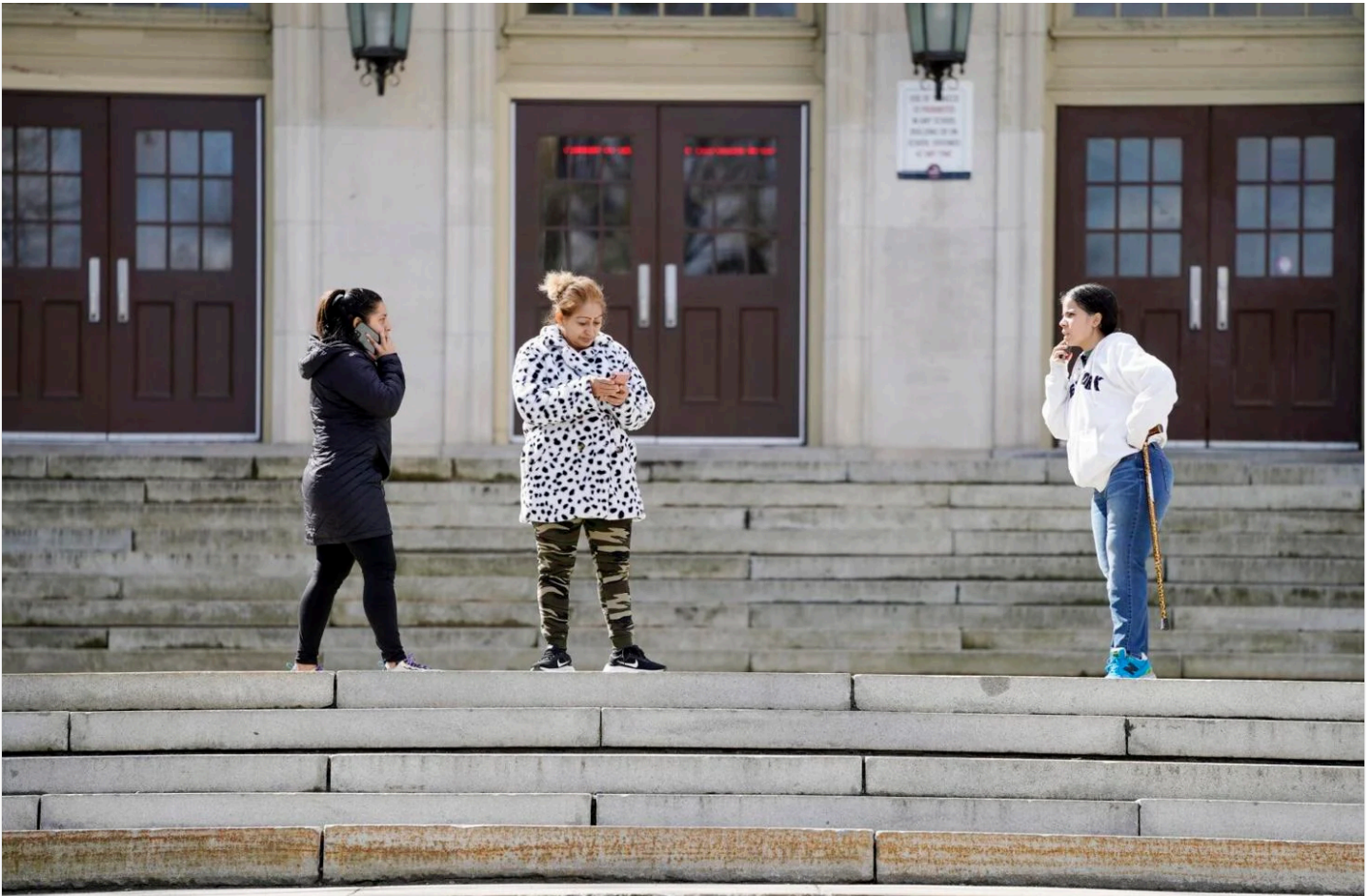
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**MORE INFORMATION**



The shooting threat at Monument High was just a hoax. But for one parent and student, the trauma was very real



A 'sickening' reality: Fake school shooting threats, or 'swatting calls,' take their toll on Berkshire school students, parents and community members

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