

CHALK TALK: The Intrusions of the World on the Classroom

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As I begin my combined 36th year of school as learner and educator, two things recently occurred to me: I have now spent as many years as a teacher as I have as a student and how much the day-to-day realities of what it means to go to school have changed in that time.

Hanging behind my desk, held in place with brightly colored magnets, is a somewhat crude computer-generated image of my classroom, indicating where my students and I need to hide if there is an intruder in the building.



This drawing became a permanent part of my classroom after my first lockdown drill when a team made up of state and local law enforcement officers visited our school, assessed how and where my students and I were pretending to hide, critiqued our efforts and gave us feedback on how best to protect ourselves. We were directed to stay away from the classroom windows and doors, minimize ourselves as targets, and be in a crouched — not kneeling or sitting — position ready to move and, if need be, run. In this scenario, I became a student in my own classroom.

When I began my first teaching job in 2000, I was prepared with an education based on learning pedagogy, student development and classroom management. It never occurred to me then that I would also need instruction in dealing with an active threat in the classroom.

According to Education Week, in 2018 there have been 35 school shootings, 17 of which resulted in injuries or deaths. Thirty-three people lost their lives, 79 percent were students and 21 percent were educators.

I feel deep sadness and anger every time the media reports a new incident of gun violence in a school. The students at those schools should never have to be part of, or witness to, violence in a place that, for many kids, is where they feel the most safe. Parents should never have to receive a phone call that their child is the victim of gun violence.

From the Daily Hampshire Gazette, Northampton, Mass. Used by permission.

I have thought a lot about the “what ifs” in my role as a teacher in my school. What if someone was in the building with a gun, trying to access my classroom, threatening one of my students? I don’t want to think about these things, but the reality is, I have to.

Classrooms have been historically designed to get students out in the event of an emergency, not to keep students in. I know that I will do everything I can to keep my students safe, even if that means that my safety is compromised.

In January, after the school shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, a suggestion was made by the Trump administration that authorized teachers at schools should carry guns. Recently, Betsy DeVos, the U.S. secretary of education, has begun an investigation into the possibility of allowing the use of federal funding for this endeavor.

This is a difficult burden to contemplate and I wonder how much this would really help. The emotional distress of a gun in a classroom, for both the teacher and the students, seems to me a key argument that this should never occur, let alone the real danger it poses to law enforcement officials who might enter a classroom without the knowledge of who is allowed to have a firearm.

I am very proud of my students. On their own initiative they have started to speak out. Many of them participated in a local March for Our Lives event. Spurred on by that event, they organized a school walkout where they proceeded to the center of town to hold a rally. They have given speeches, written blogs, and sent letters to Congress. They are mobilized. They want change and so do I.

As a history teacher, my students and I talk about current events in class on a daily basis. Many of our discussions over this past year were about incidents of gun violence in schools. Although we have all just returned to school for a new school year, every one of us eager and excited by the promise of what this year might bring, I am, with a heavy heart, getting ready for another one of these conversations.

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