

# School safety: Are costly high-tech gadgets the answer?

Lawmakers buy industry fix to protect schools from guns

Security companies spent years pushing schools to buy more products — from “ballistic attack-resistant” doors to smoke cannons that spew haze from ceilings to confuse a shooter. But sales were slow, and industry’s campaign to free up taxpayer money for upgrades had stalled.

That changed last February, when a former student shot and killed 17 people at a Florida high school. Publicly, the rampage reignited the U.S. gun-control debate. Privately, it propelled industry efforts to sell school fortification as the answer to the mass killing of American kids.

Since that attack, security firms and nonprofit groups linked to the industry have persuaded lawmakers to elevate the often-costly “hardening” of schools over other measures that researchers and educators say are proven to reduce violence, an Associated Press investigation shows.

The industry helped Congress draft a law that committed \$350 million to equipment and other school security over the next decade. Nearly 20 states have come up with another \$450 million, and local school districts are reworking budgets to find more money.

Most everyone agrees that schools can be more secure with layers of protection, such as perimeter fencing, limited entrances and hiding spaces inside classrooms.

But there’s no independent research supporting claims that much of the high-tech hardware and gadgets schools are buying will save lives, according to two 2016 reports prepared for the U.S. Justice Department. As with high-profile shootings in the past, that has not stopped industry representatives from

rushing in, some misusing statistics on school violence to stoke fears that “soft target” schools could be victims of terrorist attacks or negligence lawsuits.

“School safety is the Wild, Wild West,” said Mason Wooldridge, a security consultant who helps school districts assess their vulnerabilities. “Any company can claim anything they want.”

Wooldridge knows from experience. Several years ago, he helped outfit an Indiana high school with a \$500,000 security system that includes smoke cannons. Now out of sales, he says a school that wanted a system with the same level of security could get it for about \$100,000, using less expensive but equally effective equipment.

Many proponents of hardening a school like an airport or police station have backgrounds in law enforcement or the military. Some have little experience or qualification. The Ohio man dubbed “Joe the Plumber” during the 2008 presidential campaign has been appearing on school safety conference panels to hawk a cheaper lockdown alternative.

Educators worry that hardening will siphon focus and money from programs that prevent bullying and counsel at-risk kids. Students have reported in government surveys that visible security measures like metal detectors and armed officers make them feel less safe.

Industry representatives say they support other solutions to preventing school gun deaths, but insist hardening hasn’t gotten the chance it deserves.

“There really needs to be a change in thinking that recognizes security is a primary need in schools,” said Jake Parker, director of government relations for the Security Industry Association, which has been central to the hardening effort. Also, he acknowledged, “The more schools protect themselves, the better it is for industry.”

Revenue for school security companies would grow even more than analysts project if the industry succeeds in plans to craft state legislation that would set minimum standards for campus equipment purchases.

There are no widely accepted, independent standards for school building security, as there are for the plumbing, fire protection systems and even athletic bleachers on campus. To fill that void, security companies have promoted their own takes on what “best practices” for school security should be. At least one state has turned such standards into law.

Industry-written guidelines set a steep price for cash-strapped districts. According to a nonprofit group formed by a major lock manufacturer, for example, upgrading an elementary school with basic security equipment costs at least \$94,000 and a high school at least \$170,000. If all the nation’s public schools were to follow those guidelines, the cost would total at least \$11 billion, according to industry calculations.

Hardening advocates acknowledge that mass upgrades would not eliminate shootings. Many shooters are students whose familiarity with a school’s layout and security could help them outsmart even elaborate safeguards.

Low-tech solutions may also work just as well. Leaders at one school district in New Jersey heard a vendor’s pitch for classroom doors that lock automatically and simply mandated that teachers lock their doors during class, saving several hundred thousand dollars.

“If we’re just expecting technology to solve all these problems, I think we’re going to fall short,” said Ronald Stephens, executive director of the California-based National School Safety Center, created originally as a federal program under the Reagan administration. “And we may not like the climate we create.”

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## **‘EXTREMELY SOFT TARGETS’**

Max Schachter was grieving the loss of his son, Alex, and became enraged when he learned of the successive failures at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida.

School counselors and law enforcement had received warnings about the shooter’s worrisome behavior. His bullets shattered standard-issue classroom door windows, providing access to victims such as Alex, as the school’s only armed safety officer hid.

With one child still enrolled and a middle schooler on the way, Schachter searched for ways to make Stoneman Douglas High safer. He found Southwestern Junior-Senior High School in Shelbyville, Indiana. The campus had become known as the “Safest School in America” after the \$500,000 retrofit that Wooldridge helped install for his step-father’s firm, NetTalon Security Systems.

The Indiana Sheriff’s Association, an early backer of NetTalon’s safety package, arranged a private tour. Schachter returned to Florida impressed. Putting his life insurance career on hold, he has fast become a leading school safety activist and important ally of the hardening movement.

“After 9/11, we hardened the cockpits and the airports,” Schachter testified during a hearing of the Federal Commission on School Safety created by President Donald Trump after Parkland. “The reasons these monsters are still attacking our schools is because they’re extremely soft targets.”

As horrific as they are, shooting rampages in America’s 122,000 public and private elementary and secondary schools are uncommon, though more prevalent than elsewhere in the world.

An AP analysis of FBI statistics showed 35 active shootings at elementary, middle or high schools, resulting in the deaths of 61 students and staff

members, from 2000 to 2017, the last year included by the FBI. AP's analysis shows that active shootings, defined by the FBI as a gunman trying to kill in a confined and populated area, had not appreciably increased at schools during that time. But in the first five months of this year, two major shootings — in Parkland, Florida, and at Santa Fe High School in Santa Fe, Texas — left 27 students or staffers dead.

In making a case for hardening, proponents have asserted big increases in school gun violence in recent years. Some have done so by including mass shootings that happened any place, not just those at schools. Others used data that included incidents at schools that weren't attacks on students or employees, but were instead accidental discharges, suicides or community violence that spilled onto campus, sometimes after hours.

Many experts say that schools remain among the safest places for children. Rob Evans, a retired state police captain who is the Vermont education agency's school safety liaison, calls school shootings "low-probability events" and noted kids are more likely to die in other ways — including, data show, crossing a street. But the horror of shootings jolts public policy, and schools race to show a nervous public they're taking action.

"We've got to take the passion out of it," Evans said. "If we're going to spend a dollar, let's spend a smart dollar."

Education security revenue in the U.S. was about \$2.5 billion in 2017, approximately 60 percent generated by elementary and secondary schools, according to the research firm IHS Markit. The firm had projected anemic growth for several years but, after Parkland, revised its forecast to \$3 billion by 2019.

The flow of money has created opportunities for businesses new to school security.

"Joe the Plumber" Wurzelbacher is working with a company that

incorporated two months after Parkland to sell a \$139.99 “SwiftShield” that slides around a classroom door handle so a shooter cannot enter.

The company began sponsoring panels at school security conferences that featured the one-time political star. Wurzelbacher acknowledged skepticism at those conferences but said his concern is genuine: His adult son is a teacher, and he has three children ages 5 and under.

The SwiftShield barricade device, invented by a roofer, offers schools “unparalleled” safety, the company claims. It sells for one-twentieth the cost of some bullet-resistant doors or high-tech locking systems — and about 200 districts have expressed interest, Wurzelbacher said. Companies selling higher-priced security alternatives are protecting their turf when they argue barricade-style devices violate safety codes in many states, he said.

“There’s going to be a lot of money to be made here,” Wurzelbacher said. “I think there’s a lot of people who are offering school systems an illusion of security, as opposed to real security.”

Some educators fear that increased spending on school fortifications will lead to cuts to programs that involve human intervention, such as mental health care.

Campuses are safer when students feel comfortable reporting suspicious behavior and staff are trained in deciphering whether that behavior is dangerous, according to school psychologists like Tricia Daniel. Armoring schools like fortresses can make students feel like they are serving a sentence, she said, not getting an education.

“None of what works involves sound-bite solutions, the purchase of a single program or security system, and quite frankly the overhardening of our schools,” Daniel, who was inside a middle school in her Alabama district during a deadly 2010 shooting, told the federal safety commission.

The National Association of School Psychologists and dozens of other organizations endorsed a “call to action” after Parkland that advocated greater mental health services and a ban on assault-style weapons. The federal commission has shown more interest in fortifying buildings than in keeping guns away from students.

Schachter, the Parkland father, hopes the commission will adopt national hardening standards that he has been developing with the security industry and law enforcement.

In August, Schachter met privately with the four Cabinet secretaries on the commission. Then, in public testimony later that day, he praised the system in Indiana’s “Safest School,” saying it overcame the five central challenges in shootings: Authorities are immediately notified, ballistic-hardened doors shield classrooms, video cameras let law enforcement assess the scene, teachers can share real-time updates, and smoke cannons disrupt the shooter.

Those are the same talking points that NetTalon, the company that developed the system, and its law enforcement allies have used for years.

In an interview, Schachter repeated those points and objected when asked whether he knew of any research showing that hardening was the most effective security approach.

“I don’t think I need research,” he said, “to show me we need to do something differently.”

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## **NATIONAL PLAYER**

The man behind the “Safest School” is a former Army Ranger who has worked for a decade to turn his privately held company of fewer than a dozen employees into a national school security player.

Donald R. Jones Jr. says the ambushes he survived in Vietnam inform his approach, and he clocks the carnage as a school shooting unfolds. The first 911 call takes a few minutes. Police won't arrive for several more minutes, longer in rural America. If the attacker has easy access to kids, he says, it will be a massacre. Like others in industry and some politicians, he cites global terror as a concern.

“What if the attackers are two ISIS guys?” asks Jones, one of NetTalon's co-founders and now its president. “What if he shoots the classroom then throws a Molotov cocktail in the classroom and everybody dies of smoke inhalation or burns to death? We are just an event away from 100 or more kids being killed.”

When Virginia-based NetTalon started 20 years ago, its focus was on sensors, cameras and floor plans that helped first responders monitor buildings for intruders or fires. After the 2007 shooting at Virginia Tech University, NetTalon rebranded its system for campus security.

A rare buyer was a district in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, which reportedly spent \$75,000 to create a subset of well-protected classrooms at McKinley Middle Magnet School. The system reduced “casualties” during a 2008 simulated attack, then-principal Herman Brister said. But in hindsight, he told AP, he would've preferred using the money to hire an armed resource officer.

Jones blamed poor sales on a bad economy, and the company's attention turned to fire and security monitoring systems in the Middle East.

It again focused on schools after the 2012 attack at Sandy Hook Elementary in Connecticut.

NetTalon teamed up with the Indiana Sheriff's Association — adding some security features at the group's suggestion — and the system went live at Southwestern Junior-Senior High for the 2014 school year. The company absorbed nearly all the cost, with the district and state sharing the remainder.



Not long after, officials with the National Rifle Association visited, and NBC featured it on a national broadcast.

Next up would be a lobbying effort to help NetTalon expand the “Safest School” model across the state. In 2016, while Vice President Mike Pence was Indiana’s governor, NetTalon and the Sheriff’s Association helped write into law minimum school security standards that prioritize hardening.

The effort was guided in part by Mason Wooldridge, the step-son of Jones, through a school safety nonprofit he had formed. But when questioned in a legislative hearing about whether he stood to receive “financial gain” from the legislation, Wooldridge did not acknowledge his family ties to NetTalon — or that he and Jones were named on a patent application for the system.

Wooldridge told AP that he had left NetTalon by then because of business disagreements, including the cost of its security system, and is unsure he’s entitled to profits based on the patent.

Wooldridge said he didn’t like having his integrity doubted and prefers working directly for schools on safety because he doesn’t have to “promote fear as the basis for a bottom line.”

“If you stay in that world,” he said of security sales, “you are a beneficiary of tragedy.”

NetTalon’s allies at the Sheriff’s Association helped craft guidelines that the new law required Indiana’s Department of Homeland Security to publish. The guidelines recommended an internet-based emergency response system like the “Safest School” and even mentioned “countermeasures” to disrupt an attacker, though not specifically smoke cannons, which some experts warn might also disorient students and police.

But the law made the standards voluntary and provided no funding. As with NetTalon’s first foray into schools, districts passed. To some, Wooldridge

said, the system was not just expensive but also excessive. Ballistic doors NetTalon made cost \$3,900 each, he said, but solid wood core or metal doors selling for hundreds of dollars would also protect classrooms.

Mike Kersey, a sheriff's commander in Indiana who advised NetTalon, said the system's price isn't as shocking when paid in installments over time.

“It's amazing to me sometimes that we can find \$4 million to put in a football field,” Kersey said, “but then we can't find a few hundred thousand to augment our schools and make them safer for kids.”

Jones acknowledged that his investors “would like to see a return on their money,” but said his insistence on selling an entire security system over individual products hasn't been lucrative.

It wasn't until early 2018 that NetTalon secured another school contract, worth around \$1 million, with a rural district in Indiana. In the interim, the company faced lawsuits from a consultant and an investor claiming about \$1.3 million in unpaid debts, records show.

Then Parkland happened. Within a month, Jones was invited to a school safety meeting that Schachter organized. Indiana's attorney general bragged about the “Safest School” while seated next to Trump during a White House meeting. An Indiana congressman introduced federal legislation to help fund similar security systems.

Jones knows from experience that a new contract may be the exception, unless he can help schools get funding. He said legislation planned for 2019 in Indiana would let local districts vote to create fees to fund upgrades.

Such financing would remove the final obstacle to schools implementing the safety program his company helped develop, he said, and those that didn't act would risk lawsuits.

“In other words, if there is a publicly known higher standard of care and you

have done nothing to move to that standard of care and you have a massacre,” Jones said, “you’re negligent.”

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## **‘THOUGHT LEADERS’**

In a New Orleans hotel ballroom, the nonprofit Secure Schools Alliance and its panelists laid out the case for hardening schools to lawmakers and business leaders attending the American Legislative Exchange Council’s August conference.

The nonprofit had worked many months — and paid thousands of dollars, its executive director told AP — to make its pitch. And the reception was encouraging.

The U.S. Education Department’s deputy secretary promised to treat the group’s recommendations as “best practices.” And ALEC, a conservative organization known for shaping public policy in states, endorsed the nonprofit’s platform as the model for future state legislation.

What was left unsaid: The Secure Schools Alliance was created and funded by Allegion plc, a \$2.4 billion publicly traded corporation that runs its U.S. business from Indiana and specializes in locks, doors and entry systems.

Like NetTalon, Allegion has positioned itself among the school security industry’s “thought leaders.” Allegion has worked through the Security Industry Association lobby group, in addition to the Secure Schools nonprofit, to get public dollars for hardening and push equipment recommendations for schools nationwide.

Allegion’s efforts date to 2014, after it embarked on a school sales campaign, offering free security assessments and updating its product line. The executive overseeing its U.S. business, Tim Eckersley, said its new classroom door lock — triggered by a wireless remote worn around a teacher’s neck and

costing between \$700 and \$1,200 — was a product “this market needs to drive growth.”

But school spending lagged amid tight government funding, executives said in earnings calls. Less expensive door barricade devices were also gaining popularity. Eckersley later lamented that schools’ motivation for updating technology waned as time passed without a massacre like Sandy Hook.

“We can’t afford to wait until the next tragedy to do something,” Eckersley, who works at Ireland-based Allegion’s U.S. headquarters, implored in a news release.

Allegion formed the Secure Schools Alliance with a mission of “launching a national conversation” about school safety. Its job posting for an executive director was more specific. Priorities included influencing state policy, meeting with legislators, addressing conferences and creating best practices.

Allegion’s public affairs director, Maria Pia Tamburri, serves as the nonprofit’s board president. Allegion has also given the nonprofit between about \$100,000 and \$200,000 annually over the last four years — virtually all its revenue since it was founded, according to records and interviews.

In two years of tax returns the nonprofit provided to AP, Secure Schools didn’t say Allegion was its creator. Nor do the nonprofit’s website or written materials make that relationship clear.

Tamburri has cited a moral obligation to promote school safety and told AP that business was not a factor in Allegion forming the nonprofit.

“Allegion founded the alliance because it’s the right thing to do and our people are passionate about school security,” she wrote in an email.

Robert Boyd, a former congressional chief of staff and Delaware school official, became the nonprofit’s executive director in 2015. Boyd said he understands that the nonprofit’s corporate ties might cause skepticism, but

Allegion doesn't expect a "return on investment" from funding it. He added that he supports other safety solutions, as well.

"This notion that the Alliance is out here as some patsy doing the bidding of corporate sponsors," Boyd said, "is just absurd."

Kenneth Trump, a former school administrator in Ohio who runs a training and security assessments firm, isn't so sure.

"It basically comes down to Allegion, with a few others trailing behind them, setting the standards," said Trump, who is not related to the president. He doesn't believe that standards should be written by a "private business influencing legislators and changing laws and regulations, which, by no coincidence, benefits their bottom line."

Allegion was also instrumental in creating a school security caucus in Congress. At the caucus' 2016 launch event, two of the founding members — Rep. Susan Brooks, R-Indiana, and Rep. Rick Larsen, D-Washington — announced a bill to reauthorize a federal spending program for school infrastructure that had averaged about \$15 million annually before lapsing in 2011.

The push for new funding didn't get far — until the Parkland shooting. In a matter of weeks, the Senate and House passed legislation committing more money to security hardware, for more years, than industry had sought.

The Secure Schools nonprofit helped draft the legislation, Boyd said, including language that required product purchases be based on best practices, such as those developed by industry. In March, Trump signed the STOP School Violence Act, authorizing about \$350 million for equipment and other security over a decade.

Boyd said the nonprofit and its allies also have met with deputy education secretary Mick Zais, who spoke in New Orleans, about letting schools make

security purchases through a \$1.1 billion program designed largely for academic enrichment programs.

Beyond money, the nonprofit has focused on getting industry-created best practices and equipment guidelines adopted nationwide. Boyd is working with groups that write building and safety codes, and with ALEC as a co-chairman of its homeland security task force. He said ALEC would soon develop model state legislation that members could introduce next year.

Allegion executives, meanwhile, have become upbeat during earnings calls.

In the months following Parkland, CEO David Petratis told financial analysts that the company had been working to “drive recognition of school security infrastructure needs” with government officials and expected business to be “extremely profitable for us going forward.”

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