

School Safety at St. Gregory the Great:
The BluePoint Alert System is the New Measure for Campus Security
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On February 14, 2018, a gunman walked into Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida and began to open fire. Seventeen lives were lost in the tragedy and seventeen others were injured. According to an article by the New York Times, medical personnel did not know where the gunman was for almost thirty minutes and law enforcement struggled to identify the individual for fifteen minutes. Unfortunately, an event like this is not the first in United States' history. In 1999, two students at Columbine High School opened fire on their school and killed fifteen students, in 2012, a similar incident occurred and Sandy Hook Elementary School killing twenty-eight in total, and many others that fit a similar profile. In response to the overwhelming violence taking place, St. Gregory the Great Catholic School in San Antonio, Texas has taken steps to prevent the loss of life at their school and avoid an incident similar to the afore mentioned schools by adopting a security system offered by BluePoint Alert Solutions. However, when pondering this new system, one must ask themselves how our schools have reached this point in which additional security must be adopted to protect themselves from harm and if these systems will do what they intend to do, save lives.

In a February 2018 CNN article, James Gagliano, a retired FBI hostage rescue team member, is quoted saying "It changed everything...Prior to Columbine, nobody understood what the term 'active shooter' meant." The Columbine shooting of 1999 opened the United States' eyes to the danger in schools. Two high school students that were bullied sought revenge and murdered thirteen others before killing themselves. The tragedy made many begin to find new ways of combating school shootings. Since Columbine, several dozens of other shootings have happened on campuses across the country. Many have debated over possible solutions. The current methods of response to active shooters is to barricade. Evie Blad, author of *Do Schools' 'Active-Shooter' Drills Prepare or Frighten?* discusses that such procedures do not make parents

comfortable. From earliest of school-aged children, students are taught what to do in the event of a lockdown. Many of them involve barricading doors and fighting back if need be. In Blad's article, she writes "'That's the fine balance,' said Dan Rambler, the Akron school district's director of student services and safety. 'We're not trying to panic people.' A growing number of districts around the country have replaced or supplemented traditional lockdown drills—which teach students to quietly hide in their classrooms in the event of a school shooting—with multiple response drills, which teach them a variety of ways to respond and escape. Most controversially, the drills teach young students how to “counter” a shooter by running in zig-zag patterns, throwing objects, and screaming to make it difficult for a gunman to focus and aim. Akron uses a protocol called ALICE (Alert, Lockdown, Inform, Counter, Evacuate). It was developed by former police officer Greg Crane and his wife, Lisa Crane, a former school principal, after the 1999 shootings at Colorado's Columbine High School. (Blad) However, President Trump has different idea about school safety. The president plans on allowing teachers to carry firearms in the classroom. In an article written by the Washington Post, the president is quoted saying “‘A gun-free zone to a maniac — because they're all cowards — a gun-free zone is, let's go in and let's attack, because bullets aren't coming back at us,’ Trump said during a Feb. 22 listening session at the White House with teachers, students and parents.” The article continued saying that “The administration will start working with states to provide ‘rigorous firearms training’ for teachers and other school personnel who volunteer to be armed, said Andrew Bremberg, director of the White House Domestic Policy Council. The White House has not proposed offering states new funding for this training.” The National Education Association (NEA), has spoken out against this plan. The Washington Post reports: “Lily Eskelsen García, president of the NEA, the teachers lobby, said last month that “bringing more guns into our schools does nothing to protect

our students and educators from gun violence. Our students need more books, art and music programs, nurses and school counselors; they do not need more guns in their classrooms.” On the contrary, the National Rifle Association (NRA) has showed great support for the idea. Due to school shootings, many have begun to fear guns and call for more gun control. On the contrary, gun free zones can be seen as an easy target for a person looking to cause harm.

In the 1990s, a law was passed that prohibited any person from having a firearm on campus. The law calls for the expulsion of a student for the possession of a gun, knife, or any kind of weapon. In place of the security guns could provide, the federal government would give grant money to the school to buy equipment such as metal detectors and money to train school security. In the February of 2018, a former student walked into the campus of Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida and murdered many. An armed school guard remained outside while the shooting took place. It is difficult to suppress the thought of the lives that could have been saved if the security guard had stepped in. Rather, a geography teacher, an athletic director, and a coach were all killed protecting students from the gunman. Each were unarmed. This clearly shows the valor of teachers when they are called to protect their students. It also shows that having armed security is not always an effective solution. Can schools protect themselves from danger without guns? One approach has been to create gun-free zones to discourage the possessions of firearms and give consequences to those who do not follow the rules. Larry Elder, a radio commentator and gun-rights activist, is quoted in a book arguing that gun-free zones would actually attract a school shooter. Elder goes on to talk about different instances in which active shooters were stopped by people with guns and furthers his argument that “guns prevent or stop shootings in progress.” In 2018, President Donald Trump began an initiative to arm school teachers with firearms to stop school shooting and attempt to prevent the loss of life.

However, it is difficult to convince parents, school boards, and the school's teachers that carrying firearms is a wise choice. In addition, the training that would be necessary to ensure incidents are avoided would be expensive. Due to this, St. Gregory the Great has begun to seek other methods of school safety.

Fortunately, in San Antonio, there have not been any high-profile incidents involving an active shooter in a school. Archbishop Gustavo Garcia-Sillar, the head of the Archdiocese of San Antonio, did put out a statement regarding the Sutherland Springs shootings in Texas. In a Twitter post, Archbishop Gustavo posted "No war, no violence, no guns." He followed up this post with "Governor, NO war, NO violence, NO guns. Enough is enough!!!" St. Mark the Evangelist Catholic Church's, a church within the jurisdiction of the Archdiocese of San Antonio, has a post regarding firearms title "Archdiocese of San Antonio Firearm Policy." It reads as follows: "For the peace of mind of our church family, we want to inform you that individuals may not enter church property with a firearm. We appreciate your compliance with this policy. PURSUANT TO SECTION 30.06, PENAL CODE (TRESPASS BY LICENSE HOLDER WITH A CONCEALED HANDGUN), A PERSON LICENSED UNDER SUBCHAPTER H, CHAPTER 411, GOVERNMENT CODE (HANDGUN LICENSING LAW), MAY NOT ENTER THIS PROPERTY WITH A CONCEALED HANDGUN ... PURSUANT TO SECTION 30.07, PENAL CODE (TRESPASS BY LICENSE HOLDER WITH AN OPENLY CARRIED HANDGUN), A PERSON LICENSED UNDER SUBCHAPTER H, CHAPTER 411, GOVERNMENT CODE (HANDGUN LICENSING LAW), MAY NOT ENTER THIS PROPERTY WITH A HANDGUN THAT IS CARRIED OPENLY ... This Policy does not prohibit clergy from lawfully and securely possessing a weapon in their residence which may be owned, leased, or operated by the Archdiocese, nor does

it prohibit an individual from possessing a firearm in a locked vehicle parked in or traveling through a parking area.” In an official policy found on the Archdiocese of San Antonio’s website, they make their stance against the open-carry laws in Texas. A segment of this policy reads as follows: “It is the policy of the Archdiocese of San Antonio that an individual may not possess a firearm – concealed or open carry – at any facility owned, leased, or operated by the Archdiocese or by an Archdiocesan entity. Peace officers commissioned by local, state, or federal agencies are exempt from this restriction.” The Archdiocese has made their stance on gun possession very clear, which has ruled out the idea of teachers or administrators carrying a weapon on campus to protect the school and the students. This has made campus security a much more difficult task. Schools must take on a more creative and practical approach to combating danger.

St. Gregory the Great Catholic School is a parochial school under the jurisdiction of the Archdiocese of San Antonio. The campus is very spread out and has multiple open areas that would be an easy entry way for a potential shooter. The school, as of the Spring 2018 semester, has approximately 430 students and around 50 faculty and staff members. All people on campus are found outside at some point every day and are exposed to any potential danger that could be lurking nearby. What makes the school grounds of St. Gregory the Great different is that for each class switch or visit to the front office or restroom, the person in transit is outside in an area that has nothing deterring someone from trespassing. There are no armed guards or security patrolling the campus. The grounds are rarely visited by the local police due to a large service area. At any given time, the school can be found vulnerable. In a response to attempt an increase in school security, many teachers and staff voluntarily patrol areas of the campus and confront suspicious people, but the demanding schedules make consistency with this difficult. What also

makes the school potentially dangerous is the proximity to the church. The church building itself is located on the same grounds as the school as is a St. Vincent de Paul site that gives food to the poor. The church is a place of worship for many, including transients and parents and many who have fallen on hard times come to the church seeking enough food to get them through the day. It is not uncommon for people to mistakenly wander on the campus, however, some of them are seeking shelter from outside conditions such as the heat or rain, but some are seeking shelter from law enforcement. In recent times, the school has been put on lockdown for incidents such as transients wandering on campus seeking “murder suspects” according to the school administration, and there was an incident in 2016 in which a man on the run from Balcones Heights Police Department, who was attempting to avoid apprehension for a warrant, ran across the school’s baseball field toward the playground. The school was on lockdown for hours as the police tried to clear the situation. It is because of this incident that the community began to demand more school security.

In 2015, Principal Martinez partnered St. Gregory the Great with A&M Safety and Threat Management, LLC. This company is run by two former U.S. Marines and current Bexar County Sheriff Deputies. They offer a very unique training to schools, an active shooter simulation. What this company aims to do is create a stressful environment and allow teachers to practice their response to a critical situation in order to create muscle memory and prevent the loss of life should an actual incident be taking place. The company brings a gun to campus loaded with blanks to simulate the sound a gun would make should someone bring one to school and attempt to fire it at someone. The process is to barricade the doors, get students to a safe location (if possible), evade (if possible), and fight as a last resort. St. Gregory the Great was the first to bring this to their campus, and the Archdiocese of San Antonio has since made it a requirement

for all of their schools to adopt their methods of school safety. While they admit that there is never enough time to practice every scenario, they believe that allowing teachers to have some frame of reference about what to do in a critical situation can be the difference between lost lives and saved lives. It is a difficult task, however, to communicate with police and relay accurate information while trying to remain calm and keep children calm. In order to improve safety measures more, the school sought an additional method for school safety.

The parents and school counsel had begun to call for a more secure campus and an enhanced security system for the school. An early discussion the counsel had to satisfy this need is an iron rod fence. The cost for the iron fence would cost nearly \$130,000 and would take time to install. An additional issue with the iron rod fence is that, while it keeps unwanted visitors out, it also keeps people inside in the event of an active shooter. With this in mind, the counsel looked elsewhere for a solution. According to Principal Martinez, “We (school council) sought alternative solutions. A member of school council has a colleague who lives up north whose school implemented this system and loved it so we called them in to vet them and decided to move forward with it.” After some discussion with other parents and stake holders, the decision was made to adopt the system into the school.

After a visit from the company to St. Gregory the Great, it was estimated that the BluePoint Alert System product was going to cost St. Gregory around \$17,000 to install. While this was a much more affordable price than an iron rod fence, the issue of finding the funding for such a program remained an issue. The city of San Antonio holds an annual fundraiser campaign called “The Big Give SA.” The initiative uses a website that allows citizens to make direct donations to a non-profit of their choice. The non-profits range from small charities to large organizations. Among these organizations are Catholic schools. Principal Martinez began to

campaign for donations from the community and explaining in detail what the money would be used for and Due to a generous donor of \$10,000 and a steady income of approximately \$7,000 from the school's benefactors the school was able to purchase and install the system in to the school.

As of late March 2018, seventeen school shooting had occurred in which someone was either hurt or killed. In response to the tragedies and in an effort to prevent the loss of life, Mr. Daniel P. Martinez, principal of St. Gregory the Great Catholic School, has introduced the school to a new security system offered by BluePoint Alert Solutions. This new system works in the same fashion as that of a fire alarm. The blue box is fastened to a wall and wirelessly alerts the police when the silent alarm is activated. The objective of this system is to cut down police response time to an active incident and decrease the amount of fatalities. How the system works is, when the alarm is activated, a text message is sent to all impacted personnel along with police officers. The issue in the past with dialing 911, is that it would take time for the call to be placed, the caller to relay as much information as possible to the dispatcher, and for the dispatcher to relay that information to the police. Another common issue is getting important information to law enforcement. During the parkland shootings, the name of the shooter was mentioned several times, but that information did not get to law enforcement until much later. When the alarm is activated, a private surveillance company gains full access to the school's camera and opens communication with the responding police department. It will also send out a mass text message to all faculty and staff on campus to which they can reply any information they know of. The texts are scanned and all similar words regarding the shooters race, gender, features, location, and clothing are tracked and the number of times the words are used is sent to law enforcement. In addition to these services, alarms that look similar to fire alarms are placed throughout campus

and all faculty and staff computers are given an app that allows them to activate the alarm remotely and sends a virus-like pop-up to all other faculty and staff informing them that there is danger on campus.

The software was installed by a Louisiana based company called Open Eyes. Open Eyes is a safety consulting firm that offers self-defense, group employee, and crisis training. One of the services they provide is the BluePoint Alert System. During the training at St. Gregory the Great, Open Eyes co-founder, Kelly LeDuff, stated that they do not provide this service to every campus. In fact, there are some campuses that they have had to turn away. The main ingredient to school safety, according to Open Eyes, is an active and established relationship with local law enforcement. One advantage that St. Gregory the Great has is that they are the only school located in Balcones Heights, TX, a small suburb located within the city of San Antonio. The disadvantage of this is that the entire school is not located within Balcones Heights, part of it is located in San Antonio. According to Principal Martinez, your location on the campus determines which police department responds to the call. LeDuff placed special emphasis that because Balcones Heights police have knowledge of the school and its layout, the system was installed to help them cut down on their response time. LeDuff has vehemently stated the BluePoint Alert System is a tool, not a solution. He continues to place emphasis that the school should keep using their current safety method and only implement this new tool as a means to improve their safety, not to replace it.

Open Eyes, BluePoint Alert Systems, and A&M Safety and Threat Management have all come together to help protect the children, faculty, and staff of St. Gregory the Great. They have agreed to work together to find a solution to help teach teachers and administrators how to keep everyone as safe as possible during a critical incident. According to Principal Martinez, each

teacher, administrator, staff member, and some parents will receive training at least once a year to continue developing muscle memory and the implementation of the technology on campus. There is no possible way to prepare for every possible incident, but the ongoing training is going to help these team members work together to prevent the loss of life on campus and ensure that law enforcement will arrive before the incident becomes a worse situation. The faculty on campus were skeptical at first due to a disbelief that there would be enough time to trigger the alarm and do everything else they need to do in order to protect the children, but the administration believes that if they follow the training and believe in the systems put in place, it will work.

Throughout the 21st century, school shootings have haunted the memories of Americans and brought many questions to mind about the safety of children. Many potential solutions have been brought up, but finding a permanent solution has proven to be a nearly impossible task. St. Gregory the Great has made an attempt to take a step forward with BluePoint Alert Systems. While it is impossible to doubt the possibility of a school shooting taking place at St. Gregory the Great, the hope is to limit the number of casualties should one take place. BluePoint Alert Systems is but the latest improvement to school systems in San Antonio, and even though there is no published testimony to its effectiveness, one must believe that a system designed to protect the lives of children cannot be a bad thing for a school.

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