Brad Little

School safety responses

Telephone interview, April 2, 2018; interview has been edited.

*In the past two weeks, we have seen two large student protests at the Statehouse regarding school security and gun violence. But some have criticized these protests, especially on the national level. What is your general impression of the tone and the message of the student protests, particularly in Idaho?*

I was gone the day of the Statehouse protests (March 14 and March 24). What I heard from legislators was that the student protesters were “very respectful … and quite impressive.” The authors of House Bill 665 — a newly passed law allowing law enforcement to prosecute school threats over social media platforms — give the students credit for helping to get this bill through the Legislature. “Good for them.”

*The demonstrators have, to a large degree, called for gun control. Is there a place for gun control, in any form, as part of a state strategy on school safety? Specifically, are there measures you would support, or measures you would oppose?*

Gun control already exists; guns already aren’t allowed on school campuses. But much of school security also comes back to technology, such as wiring, security cameras and door locks. The security aspect of technology “trumps everything else.” Schools have to have security technology that works, and isn’t frozen up if an employee is downloading a large file.

*In your view, has the state of Idaho done enough to keep its schools safe? If not, what would be your top priority? What would a school safety plan look like in your administration?*

The state needs to make sure schools are built and designed with security in mind. “With the amount of money we’re putting in bond equalization, the state has leverage.” The state will put nearly $23.2 million into this line item in 2018-19, to offset local school construction costs. By putting $9 million into college and career advisers — an increase from $7 million in 2017-18 — the state will free up school counselors to address behavioral and mental health issues.

*Should the state do more — and allocate more resources — to add school resource officers or other employees to “harden” school sites?*

The state should do more to help hire security for schools. But there’s a big difference between hiring a school resource officer in an urban school and hiring on in a rural school. “We recognize that we can’t afford an SRO in every school.” The state passed a law this year that could help — allowing retired law enforcement professionals who hold concealed weapons permits to carry firearms on school grounds.

*Should the state do more to encourage or enable schools to arm teachers or other staffers? Do you believe such moves would make schools safer?*

The state should continue to allow schools to choose to arm teachers, but this should remain optional. School staffers who carry firearms should be “not just a little trained, but a lot trained.” And training alone doesn’t mean an armed school employee will be able to make a difference. “You’ve got to have the instincts to do the right thing at the right time.”

*To what extent do you believe the school safety issue is a component of confronting issues such as bullying? If so, is there anything your administration would do differently to address the issue of bullying?*

“There is a definitely a nexus” between bullying and school violence. This is another reason why schools need to counselors in place who can work with bullying victims. The schools need staffers that have as much training as possible, and students who face bullying need to have a place where they can complain.