

UCLA NEUROPSYCHIATRIC INSTITUTE AND HOSPITAL
DAVID GEFFEN SCHOOL OF MEDICINE AT UCLA

DUKE UNIVERSITY MEDICAL CENTER

From: Dr. Melissa Brymer
To: Newtown Board of Education
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Thank you for reaching out to me so that I can share with you aspects of my discussions this week in regard to how the community has been affected by the potential of closing of Hawley Elementary School and associated redistribution of students in the Fall of 2016. It has been a great honor to work with your community over the past two years. I understand that I have only gotten to know your community after the worst violent act in the United States occurred at one of your elementary schools. The indescribable anguish of 26 children and adults being murdered has altered every fabric of your community, especially for the families who will continue their courageous efforts to move into their future knowing that their loved ones were stripped from them that day. The strong bonds, connections, and the dedication of your residents and staff to do what is best for their children have inspired me both personally and professionally. Thus, it is critically important to understand and appreciate the current response from a trauma and grief standpoint.

In the past week, I held focus groups with Hawley parents and staff, and Sandy Hook parents. I also conducted individual meetings with Sandy Hook staff and parents, Hawley staff and parents, select principals, and BOE members. When I met with the BOE members, the purpose was to make sure that I understood the different communications that you were receiving regarding the potential closing and redistribution. I also received over a dozen emails from parents and staff, and I reviewed four of the open source social media and media outlets that are active on this topic. The themes of each interview included how the discussions of the potential redistribution have affected them as parents, their children, and the school staff. All individuals were promised that no names would be used in the report. I am aware that I was only able to meet with a few dozen staff and parents due to the short time frame and ending of the school year. However, I do believe I received enough input to inform this report. Due to time constraints, I was not able to interview Head O'Meadow or Reed staff and parents, but believe this should be an important next step.

This report is broken into two sections. To create an understanding for the current response, a scientific explanation of the conceptual framework is provided that serves as the foundation for my recommendations.

Conceptual Framework

When violence impacts a community, each individual has their own experiences and ways of addressing trauma and bereavement that leads them down different pathways. In each interview, participants reported an appreciation that different individuals in the community were differentially impacted and have had to face diverse consequences. Violence alters individuals' appraisal of danger and what is considered physically and emotionally safe. Each interviewee shared concern over your community's safety. Given that trauma impacts our entire bodies, it also means that responses to these concerns and fears and protective actions to address these feelings are altered and often magnified. So what may seem on the outside as intentional hurtful behavior may really be an individual's difficulty coping.

After violent events, individuals will seek emotional safety, including by reappraising their social networks for receiving and offering support to others. During the interview process, parents highlighted how staff provided a consistent, warm, and compassionate presence for their child. They reported that this has been a critical component to their families' healing. Young school-age children, especially, will lean on adults familiar to them for reference on how to respond to new fears and changes that are occurring all around them. Parents discussed how important it has been to have the stability of the staff over the past two years. They also expressed fears that, if their young child has to enter a new environment without these supports, it may impact them negatively. Adults often redefine their social networks to include those who have had shared experiences and with those that they perceive have been caring and supportive to them. They also tend to distance themselves from individuals who are perceived to have given hurtful or unhelpful responses. Thus, new groups have formed at the school and community level. Many parents shared that who they trust has changed since the tragedy, and that they are more hesitant to reach out to new individuals for fear of saying something hurtful or being hurt. Hawley parents and staff, in particular, discussed a concern over losing the supports they have found to be vital to their healing. They also reported that they have had recent staff losses that served to strengthen their connections to one another. Consequently, they expressed concern that they would not "belong" with the other communities, as they understand their experiences are different. The fear of losing these supports was described as stressful and difficult to manage.

The scientific literature on displacement (e.g., after Hurricane Katrina) indicates that humans are deeply attached to physical place/space (landscape, buildings), and that when humans are displaced, especially suddenly from their familiar landscape, this can cause distress and a significant sense of loss. In addition, after displacement, integration of different groups/schools does not occur rapidly, naturally or smoothly. When choice and routines are lost due to a disaster

or violent act, there is a high level of intensity of response to protect and to hold on to those things that are associated with comfort and stability. For example, the point was raised to me that if you wanted to integrate part of Hawley into the new school location, then it would make sense to have discussions about how this school should operate in the future. Specifically, what would be its name, its song, or its traditions (e.g., a father-daughter dance, a Sock Hop or both)? During my interview, individuals felt ill-prepared or emotionally not ready for these discussions. When discussions have started, there has been a strain put on relationships. Social support is one of the most researched protective factors after traumatic experiences. However, we know that long-term, community intervention strategies are needed to rebuild healthy social connections and foster understanding and tolerance of different group perspectives and perceptions.

After violent events, communities need to foster a social justice framework to counter the feelings of helplessness, lack of control, and mistrust. Social justice, for the purpose of this report, means equal rights fostered by transparent and consistent communication between all parties, informed decision-making driven by calm, deliberate and open problem solving, and opportunities for all citizens in the community to give voice to the critical issues shaping their environment. This requires evoking a democracy and holding leaders and their citizens equally accountable for both the process and final outcome of problem solving and decision-making. During the interviews, individuals reported a concern that they would not have an equal voice in decision-making in the future, that their opinion did not matter, and by extension they did not matter. A majority reported that the recent discussions created feelings of helplessness and surprise, ultimately constituting reminders of their trauma. Participants reported a re-emergence of some of their trauma reactions, including fears of recurrence, nightmares, dysregulation of emotions, sleep problems, and anxiety. The lack of a concrete plan accentuated their concerns. Newtown has a long history of promoting democratic decision-making and fostering the voice of its residents. Therefore, there was anger felt in regard to not having a true say in what was happening in their community. To re-establish social justice, there needs to be community conversations to create an equal voice and an investment in the democratic decision-making process that has always been a part of this community.

In conclusion, by applying a trauma and bereavement lens, I hope this report provides a better understanding of the current community's reactions and also sets the stage for steps that can be put into place to help repair the relationships that have been strained over the past two weeks and to move Newtown forward.

Recommendations

1. For change to occur in a community that has had the trauma and losses as your community, it must include these elements:

- a concrete and step-wise plan to move forward (surprises should be avoided)
- a longer timeframe to allow for and to respond to the community's trauma and grief reactions
- frequent, transparent, and consistent communications
- opportunities to promote and foster choice and community decision-making
- discussions that instill tolerance for multiple voices and different experiences in a compassionate and kind manner

2. Address ongoing safety concerns through clear and regular messaging. This messaging must be consistent across leadership. For example, most Hawley parents did not participate in meetings when updates on the new building were shared. There needs to be strategies for such updates to be shared across communities to reduce the unknowns. It is also not uncommon to have to contextually discriminate between prior trauma/violence exposure and aspects of future experiences. For example, when safety issues are being raised about the future safety of any building, there should be procedures in place to point out updated safety practices and upgraded hardware enhancements that have been made to all Newtown schools.

3. Foster cohesion and a sense of belonging by organizing community conversations. These conversations need to be guided with the goal of creating a language that is considered respectful across groups, fostering greater understanding of different experiences, and discussing a way of addressing conflict in a managed and regulated way. After several of the focus groups, I received emails stating that the experience was insightful, that they learned from others, that they felt less alone as they saw that others had similar challenges, and that they felt relief that they could voice opinion without negative consequences. This shows that Newtown is ready to do this difficult work. As guidance for these discussions, Newtown may want to consider some of the Sanctuary Model commitments, which are: *Commitment to Nonviolence* (building and modeling safety skills), *Commitment to Emotional Intelligence* (teaching and modeling affect management skills), *Commitment to Inquiry and Social Learning* (building and modeling cognitive skills); *Commitment to Democracy* (creating and modeling civic skills of self control, self-discipline, and administration of healthy authority), *Commitment of Open Communication* (overcoming barriers to healthy communications, reducing hurtful behaviors, and enhancing self-protective and self-correcting skills); *Commitment to Social Responsibility* (rebuilding social connections

skills, establishing healthy attachment relationships), and *Commitment to Growth and Change* (restoring hope, meaning, and purpose).

4. Reduce disruptions to healthy social connections and create new connections. I am very aware that it is always emotional when a community must consider shutting down an elementary school. However, when a community has gone through losses, it should be recognized that this difficult decision causes a disruption to the support system that families have depended on to cope with all the adversities that they have been facing. Part of the planning needs to address minimizing as many of these disruptions as possible (e.g., identifying how staffing will be distributed), and creating group activities to foster new connections (e.g., PTAs to work together to create joint functions).

5. Facilitate the integration of the school communities, if it is decided that a school must close. This includes addressing the different school cultures/traditions. Decision-making must be equal across communities. School leadership must guide these discussions and be transparent with their actions. Increasing choices for families will also help, such as allowing incoming Kindergarteners to start at the newly proposed school.

Over the past 2 1/2 years, I have seen Newtown make the changes required to support their residents. I have also seen the staff, parents, and students work hard to boost their coping skills and find ways to cope with additional distress and reduce the effects of traumatic stress and adversity. I have seen a strengthening in so many staff, parents, and students. However, leaders need to see the signs of when stress is too much for a system, and, if there is too much pressure placed on them, consider the role of shock absorbers. If you relieve some of the weight or pressure, they can continue to handle the effects of riding on rough roads. The community is requesting that you relieve some of the pressure/stress - whether that is re-evaluating the closing of an elementary school, examining the timeframe for when such a decision is made, and/or examining the timeframe for the redistribution of students. Given that you will be transitioning the Sandy Hook school back into the community, I include these frameworks and recommendations for you to consider. It can help you decide whether these elements can be addressed within the proposed timeframe or not.

If there are circumstances that residents are not aware of, such as that a school must be closed next year, then this decision should be made known to the community within the next month. It is not recommended that the BOE wait until the end of the summer, as families need to plan what is best for their children as soon as possible. Also, failure to inform the community in July would not allow people to restore their emotional resources/energy for start of the new school year.

Both Hawley and Sandy Hook staff had specific suggestions for how to foster an integration plan for school personnel – many of these suggestions mean starting these efforts at the beginning of the school year.

I apologize for not being able to include all comments as there was an acute need to respond swiftly to inform the BOE for the upcoming meeting. I have chosen not to attend the BOE meeting, not because it is not important, but because the voices of your residents need to be heard. Creating a space of tolerance for each other's experiences and circumstances is the way to move forward to strengthen your community. I am happy to work through Dr. Erardi to find some times to answer questions or find ways to further discuss and promote some of the recommendations in this report.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Melissa Brymer".

Melissa Brymer, Ph.D., Psy.D.
Director, Terrorism & Disaster Program
UCLA/Duke University National Center for Child Traumatic Stress