TURNING A SHOVEL INTO TEARS

A day gone wrong was actually a day gone right

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The crackle of the radio was rarely good news, and today’s urgent all-channel broadcast was no different. “There’s an angry student who took a shovel from the greenhouse and is swinging wildly at anyone who comes near him in the courtyard,” was the panicked message from the high school front office.

As principal, I remember changing courses immediately from wherever my previous mission was taking me and began running straight toward the courtyard. While at the same time I was yelling back at the radio, “Call the police! I’m on my way!”

I also remember doing the math on how close we were to a passing period and thinking the math was not in my favor. Should I call for a lockdown?

We all have those moments in our career where you think that you’ve seen it all — until you are reminded quite directly that’s never the case. When I blasted through the doors of the courtyard, I saw something I hadn’t seen before: a student with his back against the wall, swinging a shovel, yelling obscenities at anyone and everyone, and extremely angry at the world.

I was first on the scene and took a quick assessment of the situation. I immediately dug deep into my principal prep classes that trained me for this exact situation and remembered I didn’t have a class on how to deescalate a suicidal, angry, violent and emotionally-wounded student. So, my next step was to turn to whatever natural instincts I had for dealing with a situation like this. I looked around to assess the situation and found about five classrooms full of students pressed into the windows like an aquarium exhibit. I also remember hearing the sirens of our local police racing to the scene.

“Billy, put the shovel down,” were the first words that came out of my mouth. This is a crucial first piece to the story that all principal prep classes should take note of: I knew the student’s name (lesson #1 — in
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Please don’t shoot him. I know him. Give me a chance to talk him down.”

first responders to massive amounts of emotional trauma. The answer isn’t a shiny new curriculum, more testing, and higher standards. The answer is an education system (with more adults) built upon time, space, and grace for relationships.

As much as some people might think Billy’s scenario was a day gone wrong, I see it as many things gone right. Just think how badly this could have ended up if relationships didn’t exist between the hurting student, building leaders, local law enforcement, and the rest of the staffy in the school? Relationships matter. I’m also thankful I worked in a school where everyone agreed (including law enforcement) that the only “discipline” this hurting student needed was unconditional love, more adult support, and seeds of hope.

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I find myself reflecting back on this day quite often and wondering if I could have done something different. And, each time I come back to the same answer: I wish I could have connected with Billy earlier in the day when hopelessness started taking him over. That’s my only regret.

Thank you to all of you who create hope and build relationships every day in your schools.