

Tavener: Hey, Michael.

Horn: Hey, Diane. I am thrilled to actually be sitting across from you and getting to record this in person in California. We get to record podcasts like this maybe once or twice a year, so I relish these opportunities.

Tavener: As do I, Michael. I don't ever want to take being in person for granted again. I'm really sitting literally with being here together for this conversation. The technology that enables us to connect every week throughout the pandemic and beyond is really amazing, and there is nothing like being in person. Three years after the start of that pandemic, things feel like they're really speeding back up again. I don't want my appreciation to fade.

Horn: I'm with you on that. Of course, we started this podcast virtually because of the pandemic. We thought if we could engage in dialogue with each other, we could help show some folks some ways to think differently about school in the wake of the pandemic and to use that as an opportunity to create schooling environments that really allow all individuals to be successful and, to use your words of your book, leave prepared for this increasingly complex world.

Now, as the audience is going to hear in a moment, the topic that you've brought for us today is a fraught one, and there may be no better topic to illustrate just how complex that world is, and, and here's the and, how much our society would benefit from rethinking how we restructure our schools given these challenges.

Tavener: Michael, as you know, I've felt compelled for some time to talk about what is happening to schools in response to tragic mass shootings. I do say two schools, I think. To be clear, I don't want to talk about the incidents themselves. I don't have anything to offer that others haven't already, but it feels important to discuss the impact on our schools and our communities and everyone who is surviving. And yet, I hesitate because the tragedy is so great and, as I suspect everyone realizes, far from over.

Horn: Look, I don't know that I have much to add to that either. The messages of grief over Twitter or email, they frankly seem so empty compared to the magnitude of the loss that these families and communities are going through. Obviously as a dad of two elementary school kids, every single time you read one of these mass shootings in schools, it's just literally earth-shattering. I know not only is the tragedies on your mind, Diane, but how we cope with that tragedy and frankly what we choose to do coming out of it.

Tavener: The key word there, Michael, is choose. What's bothering me is how we react to these tragedies. In our polarized society, the conversation that flares up each time there's a shooting surprisingly starts from I think a place of alignment in this time when it feels like nothing is aligned. But look, people believe that children should be safe in school. Everyone believes that. That no parent should send their child to school and have them never return because they fallen victim to gun violence in their classroom. This

alignment exists, but it quickly disappears with the discussion of how to ensure the safety of our children and teachers at school.

In general, on the one side, we have people who believe guns are the problem and we need to legislatively restrict access to them. On the other side, we have people who believe that people are the problem, specifically those committing these horrible acts, and they believe we need to do more to stop such people. That might be an oversimplification of the positions on this, but it's not the thing I really want to talk about today. What I want to focus on is what is actually happening in schools while this debate is raging and remains for the most part unresolved and unaddressed, at least at the policy level.

Horn: And from our perspective, that seems like a conversation that you and I can actually have an impact on. I agree with the direction. We're not going to get into what laws and actions society, broadly speaking, should put into action in this conversation. But suffice to say, I think that the evidence suggests the issue has not been addressed. Although it's often observed that children are still largely safe in schools relative to other parts of society, all we need to do is also look at that data on the number and frequency of attacks to see that there's a problem with these incidents rising across much of the nation.

What struck me as we've considered having this conversation is that schools actually have a role to play in this debate. There's an empowerment message that I hope will come out of our conversation to help make the world a more peaceful and healthy place.

Tavener: That's exactly right, Michael. Not only do they have a role to play in the debate, but in the absence of an aligned vision and strategy and set of policies for how to address this terrible reality, I would argue that they... And I shouldn't be saying they, it's me too. This is my role. We're acting I suspect somewhat unconsciously and in alignment with a vision and strategy that we may not have chosen, but exists and that I don't think we agree with. Let me be specific. The argument being made by folks in our society who do not think friends or the problem goes like this, guns aren't the issue, people are the issue, specifically people who have mental health challenges.

Our efforts should be focused on dealing with people with mental health issues that ultimately drive them to these horrible acts. There are two ways to do that. One is to do more to support mental health and two is to "harden schools" so they're safer if and when a person does decide to attack them. It's this last piece, Michael, that we really need to talk about. Because as you and I both know, schools are hardening and all of the science and evidence suggests that the hardening is going to, or quite frankly already is, exacerbating mental health challenges and will likely create new and additional issues.

Horn: I want to pause there because that's a big and important statement, and it's what we're here to discuss today. This is going to be the emphasis. In order to do that, let's start with this word hardening because it means something very specific in the context of schools and I want to make sure we're all on the same page about this. When folks talk

about hardening schools, they're talking about a range of measures, a pretty wide range actually. Everything from protecting school entrances and windows, locking doors.

This doesn't mean just front doors, classroom doors, adding metal detectors and armed security on school premises, installing cameras everywhere, running through active shooter drills, and in some cases, even equipping teachers with guns. There there's more, but you get the idea and the range of what we're talking. There is a whole industry that's cropped up around this to help schools take these measures. Now, [according to Isabelle Hau](#) at Stanford, 95% of schools control access to the building today, which is up from 75% in 2000, those stats are from the Department of Education, and 80% of schools use security cameras now up from 20% in 2000.

You get the idea of how this has increased. I think if you think about it from the perspective of schools and parents themselves, these actions seem very rational. We want to protect our children. We do what we've done frankly with airports. We make them more secure. Woe the conscience of the superintendent who doesn't harden their schools and then has one of these incidents occur. You can just imagine the outcry of parents in the community. I'm going to stop there for now because I'll have more to say on this in a moment, Diane, but I want to get you in.

Tavener: Michael, we don't even have to imagine the reaction because every time an incident occurs, we read about that reaction and we hear that reaction on television and on the news reports and the scrutiny begins immediately. Did the school leader along with the police and all the others and Bob do all of the things they were supposed to do? Because if they didn't, I hate to be so... Well, I'm just going to say it. They have blood on their hands, Michael, I think largely as a result of this societal reality. As a leader of a school system, my experience is that people in schools aren't thinking twice about implementing the hardening measures you have just listed.

There seem to be no questioning of them. And that's what I really want to talk about because the changes that come with hardening schools are design changes to schools. And as listeners know, everything we talk about on this podcast is about the design of schools and how we can intentionally redesign and change them to get the outcomes we want. Interestingly, most of the design changes that are supported by what we know about how people learn and develop seem extraordinarily difficult to embrace and implement. It's why we're having this podcast all the time.

Just as an example, topics we talk about regularly is the use of time in school, the calendar that include the extended summer break, discrete subject areas. I mean, you and I can go on and on and on, and we have all these episodes talking about these things. But in the case of the design changes driven by hardening, they are being implemented quickly and in my view, without the types of design processes we constantly talk about that enable a rigorous evaluation and consideration of what you're actually doing to the school.

Horn: This is a really important and nuanced point. I'm going to pause again here on this moment just because I know it's one that you've been a little hesitant to bring up. Because if people aren't listening carefully, they might jump to accusing you of not

caring about the safety of students. This is perhaps one of the reasons why these hardening changes are being so readily adopted. At the risk of repeating myself, imagine you're that school board member or school administrator or the teacher.

You're regularly watching school shootings unfold, and you see that a lot of the coverage is going to spotlight some safety thing, that one thing that the school could have done better, door left unlocked, a drill not followed, whatever it is. You get the message as that school leader that you better do what you can to keep your students safe. I'm not poo-pooing that, but you're not looking at the evidence out there of what would make schools more safe.

I don't want to belabor this point too much, but when we talked about discovery driven planning on a few episodes, we've talked about how the first step after listing out critical assumptions in a new plan is to just do some basic research to test whether your hypotheses are likely to prove true. I'm just going to say here, the research on these actions seems mixed at best of whether the hardening really actually protects kids and teachers from these shootings.

From an [Education Next article](#), just as an example, Randy Borum of the University of South Florida and his colleagues in a systematic review of the literature concluded, "Using surveillance systems, metal detectors and access controlled devices, school administrators have made numerous attempts to enhance safety, although there is little empirical research available to evaluate these practices." They couldn't even find real research there, but there's actually a bunch of other studies that show pretty negligible research. Now, I'm sure there's more nuance here.

Certain measures may be no-brainers to create order in certain communities and others that aren't effective and frankly might have some negative consequences actually. There is research that's suggesting too. Folks can read that in the same article in Education Next, which we're going to link to in the transcript.

Tavener: Yeah, we are. But here's the thing, Michael, of course, people institute the hardening and react quickly. That is what people do, because if something happens at our school and we haven't done everything we could have to prevent the actual shooting from happening or being worse than it was, then we will be held responsible by others and ourselves. As educators and people, that doesn't feel like something we can live with, and so we harden. It sucks to be in this position as a school leader. Society is fighting. We don't have a coherent policy that supports what we're trying to do. The public, parents, teachers and students, they're scared and they're angry, and all of this is coming our way every single day.

Here's the challenge, in the most recent school shooting in Tennessee, the school had properly hardened, Michael, and had done everything "right," as did the police, and six people are still dead. If hardening were a solution that truly stopped school shootings that ended the loss of life, we would be having a different conversation right now. But it isn't. The conditions that are created for children and people in hardened schools are undermining the elements of schools that we know promote mental health

development, all of the things that people are saying we need to work on in order to stop these shootings.

Horn: This is the point, and it's what Clay Christensen would've called an anomaly to the theory of hardening, right? The theory that we harden schools and then we'll prevent these shootings. But it didn't work here and it might not work that much anywhere, as I mentioned before, according to some of these reviews of the research. But again, for starters, it did not work in Tennessee, in this community. It's taken us a while. We've done some maybe throat clearing, but I think we've wanted to establish both our empathy and some facts on the ground, because this is the conversation now that we really want to have today, Diane.

When we've just rapidly hardened schools, we're actually circumventing a normal design process where we've analyzed and weighed the evidence related to these design changes and then asked ourselves, do they align not just to what we want to prevent, but also to what we're trying to accomplish, the outcomes we seek for students? I want to be super specific here so people understand what we're saying, and I know you think about this all the time, so I'd love you to give us a specific example to make this very real for folks.

Tavener: Let's take locking doors. One of the most basic and universally recommended called "safety measures" for schools is to lock every door and keep them locked all of the time. I take the theory here is that if they're locked, then the shooter can't have access to things, right? Michael, this includes the front door of the school, as well as every door internally. There's only supposed to be one entrance to the school. There's a related recommendations about fencing and limiting access and only allowing there to be one entrance to the school. Michael, even as I say this and I'm explaining this, most people are probably thinking, what's the big deal about locking doors?

I mean, isn't that a small thing to do given the potential it has to save lives? Maybe, but let's talk through what it looks like and feels like to be in a school every day, year after year when every single door is kept locked all of the time. What I can tell you it looks like from my experience of being in schools is that first of all, the parents don't have keys to the school, Michael. In fact, oftentimes teachers only have certain keys to certain doors. There's usually a small number of people who have all of these keys. And that means that a lot of people throughout the day aren't able to get into a door at any given time.

When a student leaves a classroom to go to the bathroom or the office, someone has to physically let them back in the classroom when they return. When they want to get into the bathroom, someone has to unlock it, or they can only go at a time when it's unlocked and supervised. If a teacher or administrator or parent wants to visit a classroom, they either have to unlock the door or knock and wait to be let in. You get the idea, Michael. Movement is restricted. I think maybe even more importantly, experienced as disruptive and unsafe to me and to others. Now when I'm in schools and I try to talk to people about this, they almost always say, "Yeah, it's kind of a pain, but we need to keep our kids safe."

I'm yet to encounter anyone who's thinking deeply about the long-term effects of what seems to be a pretty small change. But when I look at the science of learning and development, it's hard not to wonder what happens to a developing brain that spends 10 to 15 years in an environment each day that sends a pretty clear signal, you are being locked in to keep you safe. Your movements are restricted to keep you safe. You should be wary of and scrutinize every person who enters your classroom or space because they may be a threat. You are locked out of your learning spaces if you're late or have different needs that don't happen to line up during a scheduled time of movement.

And you may be a threat coming back into those spaces. I could go on and on about what children will internalize in this environment. Again, I see it as I see it. We suspect people feel like these things feel a bit fuzzy and it's not clear what the impact will be. That may be true. I'm going to resist looking to incarceration and refugee camps and all sorts of other parallels that feel too extreme for people to consider here. Instead, I'm going to ask us to consider exercise and eating as examples. The evidence is abundantly clear. Let's just say, for example, people who walk even 30 minutes every day are healthier and have significant lifetime benefits, or let's take eating.

If you just reduce the number of calories you consume each day by even 100 or 200 calories, if you do this consistently every day over time, it will have a significant impact on your weight and your health. The same goes for sleep and water intake and all sorts of things. My question is, why would we think that there would not be an impact of having a daily experience over prolonged periods of time that involves being locked in and out? We know from psychology that even short-term experiences with restricting movement and freedom and psychologically confining people and literally confining people can really mess them up.

You couple that with an overlay of what is being done and it seems inarguable that there will be impacts on how an entire generation views the world people their own movement, freedom, safety, and quite frankly, themselves. I know I'm ranting to hear a bit, Michael, so stop me.

Horn: No. Permission to have gone all through that because I think this is really the point. I want to make a few others on it, but I just to put a fine piece on this. If we are serious about improving people's mental health, that is... Let's put it this way. If it's a root cause of these shootings that we're seeing throughout the nation and we're serious about improving people's mental health, frankly, to reduce those shootings or any number of other pathologies, schools have an active role to play. Let's empower them. It's not as an additional task to all the things that they're already doing, but it's actually a core part of their design.

I think that's what comes out of all the things you just said. Look, we've talked before in this podcast about how in the course of academics, so like that coordinating of schools, we can help build kids' resilience, their well-being and their empathy, their attachment, their self-esteem. I'm just naming a few here, but we can also do things that do the opposite of that, that damage kids' mental health. We get this decision in essence of supporting and making mental health stronger or damaging. We can do things in damaging that also undermine the trust of community.

Frankly, as I read the literature, trust and the ability for people to speak up and say, "Hey, listen, so and so I think might need some help out there," that actually could be vital in not only preventing some of these disasters, but also getting people the real support that they need to get healthy and thrive, which that's what I want for individuals. I want to emphasize, again, I'm sure we're going to get some folks chiming in, I am not saying that there's a clear cut answer here. It's almost always certain circumstance driven rather than a blind faith in best practices.

There's certain measures that might work in your community. They might not work elsewhere and so forth. But I think the big thing is we ought to consider and weigh the evidence and then make a measured deliberate choice. I think that's your point as well, Diane.

Tavenner: It is, Michael. Another point we're saying again and again, this is not easy. Nothing about this is easy. Actually, nothing about being a school leader or a person responsible for leading schools is easy. It never has been, but it certainly seems more and more difficult every day. The last thing I want to do is pile on and add yet one more thing to people doing this critically important work. I know firsthand what it means to be sagging under the weight of everything we're talking about and more. It's likely not what any of us signed up for. And yet, it is where we find ourselves. What feels critically important is that we are conscious of where we are and the choices we're making because none of them are benign.

Michael, we share a very close friend whose three nieces were in the school building the day of one of the very deadly school shootings in Texas. She and her family and her community will never be the same, and those are in her words. She's very clear about that. Two of the 10 people who were killed that day were substitute teachers who, Michael, didn't have keys to locked doors because they were substitutes and couldn't get the spaces where they could escape as a result of those locked doors. While an anecdote, it illustrates the research base point that we don't have meaningful evidence of the efficacy of so many of the hardening actions on mitigating school shootings.

What we do have evidence about is the next chilling thing she shared with us, which was the shooting happened at the end of the school year. The school just went to summer break and didn't return until the fall. When they did return, the school had undertaken more hardening tactics. Specifically, they had installed metal detectors and created a significantly more stringent dress code. Because in this particular shooting, this shooter was a student who had come to school hiding his weapon under a trench coat and began shooting from his first period class. The metal detectors and dress code were presented as measures to prevent that from ever happening again.

Put yourself in the shoes of those student survivors for a moment though. What did it feel like when they returned to their school as victims and survivors of the shooting now only to be viewed and treated as a threat? Michael, we're treating our children as dangerous threats. We're treating anyone and everyone who comes to schools as threats. We know what the evidence tells us about the impacts of living for long periods of time in a state of fearful alert. It has an impact on our physical health and our mental health and the very fabric of our community and our society.

I don't want to be unconscious about the fact that decisions I'm making as a school leader in the name of keeping my students safe may be creating more danger by exacerbating, accelerating, amplifying, whatever you want to say, the very mental health challenges that are being identified as the cause of the school shootings and tearing at the fabric of our communities, which are the thing that support people who are experiencing a mental health crisis. I know we're saying the same things, but these impacts are happening on a grand scale across our country to all of our children. I just think we can't let this pass.

Horn: Yeah, no, I totally agree. I do want to add a few more points. For folks listening, if you're not convinced at this point, I just think there's another set of reasons both why school communities are making the actions that they're doing and why we ought to be cautious about it. On the ledger of why it's so easy to move to this hardening position, I actually think in many ways it's in the DNA of schools. Julia Freeland Fisher, my friend and colleague of the Christensen Institute, she wrote in her book, *Who You Know*, that, "schools institutionalized this monopoly by closing rather than opening their doors to people beyond what John Dewey dubs schools 'embryonic community.'"

This notion of creating this embryonic community that shelters kids from the outside world, which is Julia's point, this is actually all a historical, Diane, in some sense. It's really an experiment of the last 120 years or so. As Clay Christensen said, kids used to work for the parents actually starting at age six to really make the communities and families function, but now, actually parents in our society work for the kids. I get it. Society has changed in a lot of ways, but there are good reasons to wonder about fostering that embryonic community and wrapping kids up in a lockdown cocoon that actually shuts out the outside world at the expense of all else.

Frankly, it limits their development of social capital. That's the argument behind Julia's book. I think this gets to what we're designing schools to do from an outcomes perspective. If we're serious about schools, helping kids develop opportunity, not just self-actualize and have great mental health, but get access to life opportunities, which I think is a big purpose of schools, then who you know really matters. Connecting consciously students to the outside world as a matter of design is really important. The expeditions that you do are a very conscious choice.

It's so that students can learn about different career opportunities, what's entailed in them, what it looks like, what you do, how that lines up to what I enjoy and what my strengths are, what make in terms of money. And also though so you can develop an outside network over time that gets access to these people and opportunities. I'm not going to go through the entire logic chain and research behind social capital, except to say that right now who you know is a bit of a lottery, and schools actually have a role in changing that. It'll help improve academics. It gives more purpose to the work. It certainly stands to improve mental well-being and a sense of self.

It stands to change lives and life opportunities. Again, I'm going to say it again, I think we have to make measured judgments on these things. Maybe you don't lock doors, but you do put in certain measures to make sure weapons aren't coming into the schools. I'm making this up. I don't know, but I'd want to go through a discovery driven process



to get the outcomes that we desire and mitigate the bad things that we don't want and make very conscious trade-offs.

I want to say this explicitly, I don't want us to settle as schools, but I want to say we're going to choose this trade-off so that we get these other benefits. I just don't think we're having that conversation in each school and community right now.

Tavener: I agree with you, Michael. What you're saying is bringing something up for me then. I may have previously shared, but I think it's so aligned to what we're talking about and why I wanted to engage in this conversation. My dear friend Antonio Saunders talks often about the differences between unconscious and conscious leaders. One of the differences he illuminates is that unconscious leaders spend their lives fighting injustice. And as a result, they become expert in the skills required in a world that they quite frankly don't want, a world filled with fighting and anger and violence.

Whereas conscious leaders spend their lives designing and creating the world that they want to live in, and so become experts in the skills needed in the world that they strive for. I want your children and mine to grow up in schools and communities that believe in and nurture their potential and help to develop them into contributing members of society. Even as a school leader, I have choice in agency in the environment and experience of the children who are in my care. Michael, thanks for having this conversation with me. I'm very glad we're able to do so in person.

While this feels like a pretty hard pivot, given what we've just been saying, I am always curious about what you're reading, listening to, or watching lately. Maybe we'll leave the dialogue here and you can share one.

Horn: On a lighter note perhaps. Well, don't laugh at me, but in addition to basketball watching, I've been reading Harry Potter. I will tell you, I'm really late to this party, because it came out when I was in high school, I think, the first book, Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone. I kind of had this attitude of I'm not going to read it, and so I consciously didn't. And then at some point when I had kids, I said, "Okay, maybe I'll read it aloud to them."

They don't really let me read books aloud to them. They were a little scared. It was my opportunity to jump back in. We just finished Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone, and we'll do the second book shortly. But as I often am late to the party, I was really late to this one and we enjoyed it as a family.

Tavener: It's pretty late. I think it was a long time a book ago because the first year of Summit, Harry Potter is what got me through that year. I would read Harry Potter before I would go to bed and it would make my dreams about Hogwarts and Harry Potter land versus the running of the school, which cost me a few hours of sleep that year. I'm actually reading Atomic Habits by James Clear.

As you like to say, I'm a bit late to that party as well, because it is a best line book. I feel like everyone's read it. But nevertheless, he describes it as a handbook for how to have

the life that you want through very small and enduring daily habits. I didn't find it really engaging and useful. It's affirming where I do that well in my life and illuminating the places and reminding me of the places I don't fully systematize and have space to improve. It's a good fast.

Horn: I highly recommend it. For all of you though, again, back to the serious topic that we've addressed today, just thank you for tuning in and staying with us through the important conversation around rethinking schools and the roles that they do and can play in the lives of individuals and our communities at large. We'll see you next time on Class Disrupted.