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More security isn't answer to prevent shootings, say Catholic educators

by Carol Zimmermann by Catholic News Service

Washington — In the wake of the Dec. 14 shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn., Catholic education officials have primarily focused on providing administrators with the resources they need for teachers and parents to help students cope with the horrific tragedy.

The U.S. bishops' education secretariat, the National Catholic Educational Association and the Council for American Private Education, quickly posted guidelines on their websites about how to talk to children about violence.

These guidelines emphasized the need to assure children of their safety, keep explanations appropriate for children's ages and limit exposure to television coverage of the event.

Karen Ristau, president of the National Catholic Educational Association, said the next step is to provide resources for schools to tap into available programs that help students find peaceful solutions and help teachers identify students who are isolated and without peers.

Ristau told Catholic News Service that information would be more useful than "having more locks on the doors."

Dominican Sr. John Mary Fleming, head of the U.S. bishops' Secretariat of Catholic Education, said the guidelines' advice that parents should assure their children they are safe in school has raised questions among those who said this was no longer true.

In response, Fleming, a member of the Dominican Sisters of St. Cecilia Congregation in Nashville, Tenn., said that children should be assured that the adults in their lives "are doing everything possible to keep

them safe."

She also noted that almost all schools, particularly after the 1999 shooting at Colorado's Columbine High School, have strict safety measures in place, as did Sandy Hook School, the scene of the recent shootings that left 20 children and seven adults dead.

She told CNS that most schools, Catholic schools included, not only have strict policies about admitting people into their buildings but also have crisis management policies, safety drills and lockdown procedures.

Since the school in Newtown also followed these procedures, she said the shooting demonstrates that "society as a whole needs to address this in different way" specifically looking at the issue of gun control.

Patricia McGuire, president of Trinity Washington University, likewise noted in a blog Monday on Huffington Post, that since the Columbine shooting, schools have "beefed-up security, instituted lockdown drills, and trained teachers on how to protect their pupils from the unthinkable."

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McGuire urged fellow educators to honor the courage and sacrifice of Sandy Hook's teachers and principal by "insisting that this nation enact laws to protect our students and campus communities from the harm of violent minds with easily accessible weapons in hand."

In helping students immediately cope with this tragedy, Fleming urged Catholic school superintendents to not only provide resources to parents and teachers but to also use the tragedy as an opportunity for prayer and as a teaching moment.

"Our schools afford us the perfect opportunity to speak about redemption, grace and heaven," she wrote in a letter to Catholic school superintendents Monday.

She also noted that children and parents are "seeking to understand and make sense of this very difficult event. The question being asked is how God can allow this to happen?" Catholic educators, she said, can address this difficult issue by stressing the free will people have been given to make choices for good or evil.

"Learning to support each other to make good choices is a way to talk about how we can support each other in dealing with the tragedy," she said. She also advised educators to highlight the heroic acts of the principal, teachers and individual students in Newtown.

"They are pulling virtue from their toes," Fleming told CNS, referring to how the townspeople of Newtown have joined together as a community in their care and support for one another.

Both Fleming and Ristau noted that several Catholic schools across the country have held prayer services for the victims of the Sandy Hook shooting.

Classes at St. Rose of Lima School in Newtown were canceled the week after the shootings to protect students from the sight of twice daily funerals at the church, according to the director of communications for the Diocese of Bridgeport, Conn.

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