

## VIRTUS® videos provide powerful message

*VIRTUS® is the program of National Catholic designed to strengthen communities through awareness, education, and training.*



Words are sometimes overrated. By contrast, actions are generally a reliable measure of reality. And those truths have VIRTUS® developers and participants smiling from coast to coast as we consider some early success in the field testing of the *Protecting God's Children* videos.

"They're extraordinary and they are informative," said the Most Reverend Gregory Aymond, Bishop of the Diocese of Austin, Texas, referring to the two awareness videos produced by National Catholic as a part of the VIRTUS® program. "They are very direct in talking about the mind and heart of the perpetrator and in calling us to recognize—at a deeper level—the mind and heart of the victims."

Bishop Aymond is not alone in his assessment. When word about the training and videos spread, thousands of people came forward to participate—numbers that have far exceeded expectations. Sister Thecla Cain, Chancellor of the Diocese of Austin, said the first presentation was for several dozen priests. Their enthusiasm apparently caught fire. Approximately 750 people attended the first public viewing that soon followed. Since then, audiences have remained very large, with several presentations to 650 or more people, including one viewing with more than 1,200 present. In coming months, the Diocese will train trainers. The trainers will then offer the written and video training at the

parish level—to all new employees and volunteers, and to anyone else who's interested.

Why is the enthusiasm so great? Bishop Aymond said he sees two major factors. First is the quality of the content—a frank and concise presentation of the dynamics of child sexual abuse, including a discussion of warning signs and steps that *anyone* can take to help prevent abuse. Bishop Aymond said he's received verbal and written comments from priests, religious, and laity alike, remarking on the insightful content of the videos and expressing appreciation at having the opportunity to learn about and publicly discuss such important issues.

The second success factor is the way the Diocese is presenting the videos—as an integral part of a larger risk management effort. The Diocese is using the videos to supplement training on a new, comprehensive prevention policy. And nobody is allowed to view the videos without participating in the overall training program.

Bishop Aymond said, "The videos have to be presented by someone who can also answer questions and generate discussion—someone who understands child sexual abuse." Using Austin as a starting point, presenters are collecting questions, comments and other feedback to use in developing written materials to accompany the videos. In the near future, National Catholic will offer a VIRTUS® *train-the-trainer* program for dioceses that are implementing components of the VIRTUS® program. National Catholic intends to train many trainers—all over the country—so every Catholic community can have direct access to these powerful risk management tools.

The Diocese of Austin is utilizing the flexibility that program developers purposefully designed in VIRTUS®. When Bishop Aymond arrived in Austin, the Diocese already had a prevention policy. Administrators of the Diocese were working toward the implementation of background checks for employees and volunteers. Bishop Aymond said, "The more I listened to that, the more I realized that if we'd educate people and ask them to be with us on a level of Christian ethics and integrity, then we'd not only have a reason for the background checks but, more importantly, we'd be calling people to a level of integrity and accountability that we didn't have before."

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# Characteristics of Safe and Responsive Schools

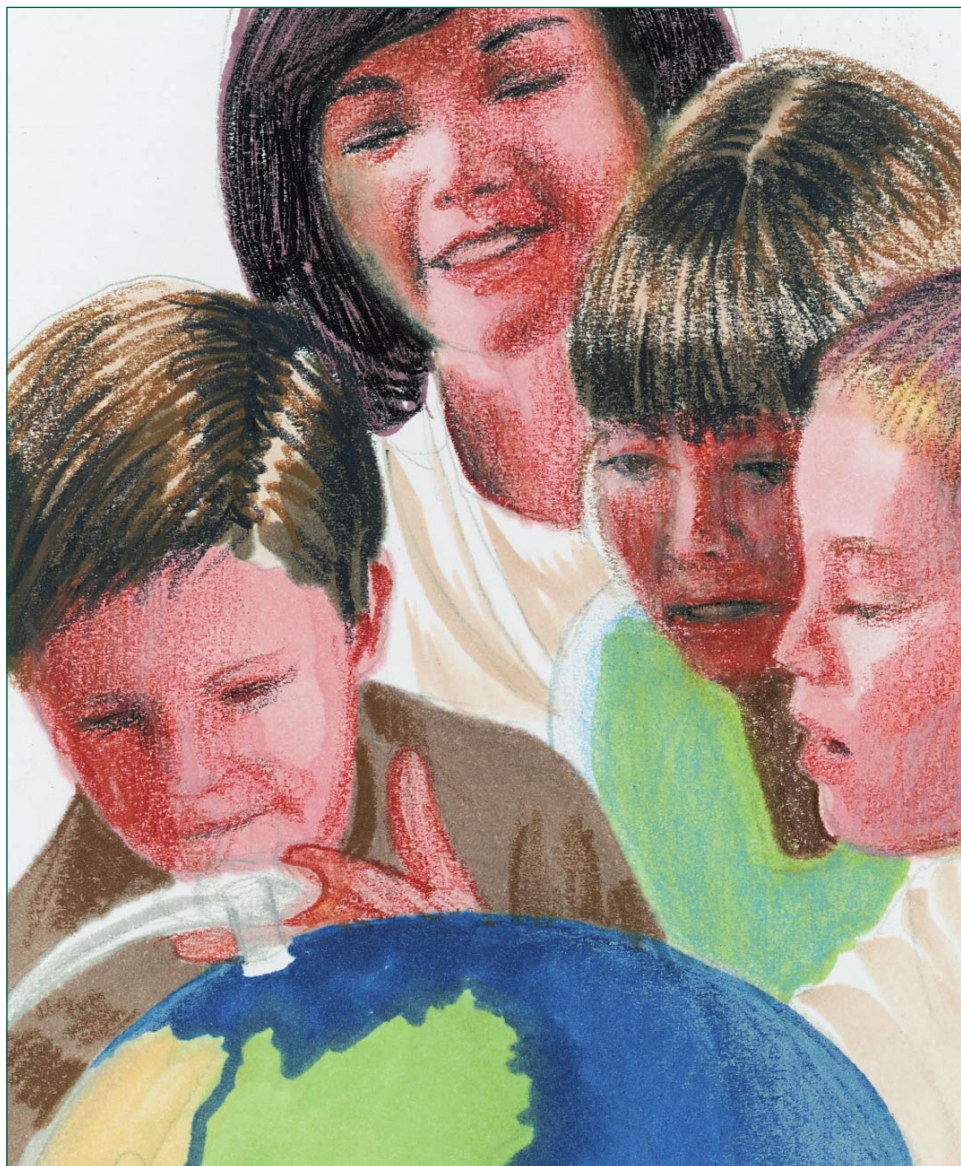
Philip J. Lazarus, Ph.D.

The violence that affects our communities has found its way through the schoolhouse door. Recent, highly publicized acts of school violence committed by troubled youths have shaken our belief that our schools are safe. With reports that bullying, hazing, and other forms of violence remain at significant levels, we must take strong, positive steps to safeguard the physical, emotional, and mental well being of our children.

Fortunately, current statistics suggest that the odds of a student dying in school, by homicide or suicide, are less than one in a million. In fact, reports suggest that lightning is three times more likely to kill a child than school violence. And less than one percent of student deaths altogether occur in schools—even though one death is *too many*. The sad truth is that far more young people die in our communities or homes—although the situation often first arises or otherwise develops in school.

Prevention of child violence requires more than just preventing school violence. It requires a broad societal effort where all stakeholders in schools, churches, homes, and communities acknowledge the problem and work together to find solutions. In particular, Catholic schools are called to model academic excellence and faith development and to create a supportive and challenging atmosphere that affirms the dignity of all people in the school community. VIRTUS® is committed to making our schools as safe as possible while on their educational quest so that teachers can teach and students can learn. All schools must have the latest knowledge about preventing school violence, as well as the necessary resources, tools and support to make it happen.

One way to make schools safer is for all stakeholders to have an understanding of the characteristics of a school that is safe and responsive to



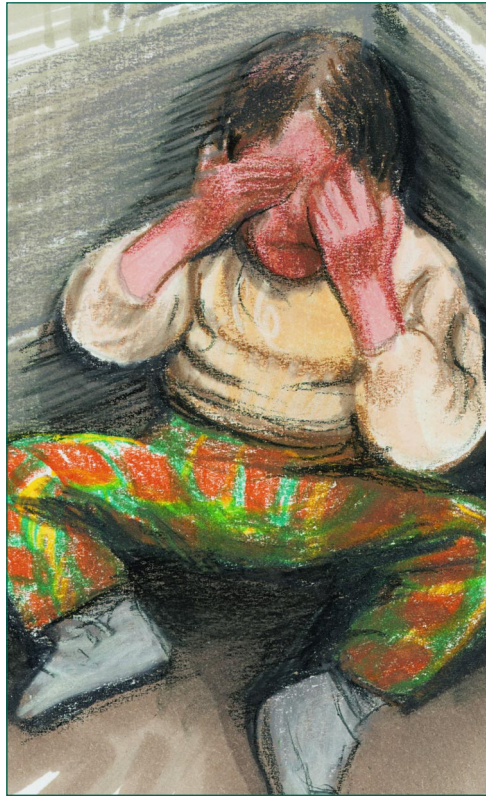
every child. In response to the tragic school shootings over the past few years, a document entitled, *Early Warning, Timely Response: A Guide to Safe Schools*, was distributed to every school in this nation.

*Early Warning, Timely Response: A Guide to Safe Schools* was developed by the Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice of the American Institute for Research, in collaboration with the National Association of School Psychologists.

This Guide addresses the essential characteristics of well-functioning, effective schools. Safe and responsive schools:

1. Focus on academic achievement. Effective schools communicate clearly that all children can achieve academically and behave appropriately. Adequate resources are made available and individual differences are respected.
2. Involve families in meaningful ways. When families are involved in the growth of their children, students are more likely to experience school success. Schools need to make every effort to have parents feel welcome, remove barriers to participation, and keep families engaged in their children's education.

3. Develop links to the community. Effective schools have close ties to families, faith communities, support services, and community organizations and make it a priority to develop meaningful connections.
4. Emphasize positive relationships among students and staff. A critical factor in preventing school violence is the development of a positive relationship between an adult and a child at risk. Effective schools also foster encouraging and supportive relationships among students.
5. Discuss safety issues openly. Schools can make an effective difference by teaching about the dangers of firearms, as well as how students can manage angry feelings appropriately and resolve conflicts constructively.
6. Treat students with equal respect. Effective schools communicate that all students are valued and respected. A major source of conflict in schools is that students may perceive that they are being treated unfairly due to race, gender, religion, socioeconomic status, disability, ethnicity, sexual orientation, athletic ability, physical appearance or some other factor. Effective schools respect diversity and demonstrate a sense of concern and community.
7. Create ways for students to share their concerns. Students are usually the first ones to know about bullying, harassment, assault, and potential school shootings. A reporting system must ensure that students have the opportunity to report behaviors that lead to school violence and that students are protected from reprisals.
8. Help children feel safe expressing their feelings. Children need caring school staff to whom they can express their needs, anxieties, and concerns. When children feel disconnected from school staff, the potential for violence increases.
9. Have a procedure in place for reporting children who potentially are abused or neglected. Schools must establish staff guidelines and procedures consistent with state and federal laws that are



designed to protect the well-being of children.

10. Offer extended-day programs for children. School-based before- and after-care programs can reduce violence. These programs offer a number of options and activities, such as mentoring, tutoring, assistance with homework, computer access, sports, counseling, and community service.
11. Promote good citizenship and character. Schools must help students become productive citizens. They reinforce shared values of their local community, such as respect for others, kindness, honesty, and responsibility. Moreover, they stand for the civic values set forth in our *Constitution* and *Bill of Rights*. Effective schools also acknowledge that parents are the primary moral educators of their children and work in partnership with them.
12. Identify problems and assess progress toward solutions. Safe schools continually examine circumstances where students may feel threatened or intimidated. They openly share this information with students, families, and the community and work together to create solutions.

13. Support students in making the transition to adult life and the workplace. Effective schools can provide students with work-study programs, apprenticeships, and community service that will help prepare them for the years ahead.

The most promising prevention and intervention programs involve the entire community working together to form positive relationships with students so that all children feel included. If we understand the characteristics of safe schools, the conditions that lead to violence, and the types of support that are necessary to prevent violence, we can make our schools safer.

This article discussed the characteristics of safe and responsive schools. In the next issue of *COMMUNICARE*™, a *VIRTUS*® action plan will be presented on how to make schools safer.

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*Philip J. Lazarus, Ph.D., serves as chairperson of the National Emergency Assistance Team of the National Association of School Psychologists. Members of NEAT have lead crisis response teams after the tragic school killings in West Paducah, Kentucky; Jonesboro, Arkansas; Edinboro, Pennsylvania; Springfield, Oregon; Littleton, Colorado; Flint, Michigan; Lake Worth, Florida; Santee, California; and El Cajon, California. Dr. Lazarus is an associate professor and director of the School Psychology Training Program at Florida International University in Miami, Florida. He is co-editor of the upcoming text, Best Practices in School Crisis Prevention and Intervention. Read more about Dr. Lazarus on the VIRTUS® website: [www.virtus.org](http://www.virtus.org).*

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## VIRTUS® Steering Committee

National Catholic has invited international experts from a variety of organizations and disciplines to participate in a Steering Committee—to provide guidance to the VIRTUS® Development Team.

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So, Bishop Aymond expanded both the mission and makeup of the core committee. The committee's objective was to develop a comprehensive prevention policy, including mandatory background checks of all employees and volunteers—with an emphasis on those who work with children and vulnerable adults. The committee developed the new policy, established an effective date approximately five months in the future, and embarked on a rigorous campaign to present both the policy and the *Protecting God's Children* awareness videos to as many diocesan employees and volunteers as possible.

Sr. Cain said the Diocese uses weekly electronic newsletters, letters from the Bishop to parish department heads, and word of mouth to promote the mandatory training sessions. The initial objective was to train priests. Priests play a critical role in the outreach. "But probably our greatest asset is that Bishop Aymond is so interested in having people participate," Sr. Cain said.

So, why is Bishop Aymond so interested in sharing this message? "I could

not imagine our Diocese without this program," he said. "It has brought us to another level of professionalism in managing the way we conduct our ministry."

"The Catholic Church stands strong for respect for human life. This program is another way in which we can uphold a very, very strong respect for human life—of the born—of our precious gifts of children. I think we, in a sense, owe it to the people of the Catholic Church—to give them an opportunity to learn about these issues and to help prevent abuse within our communities."

These are sincere and powerful words from a powerful Church leader. And the Diocese of Austin is proving that actions are a reliable indicator of reality. In this case, the *Protecting God's Children* videos really are a powerful tool available to dioceses to integrate into their own, individual prevention programs.

For more information on the *Protecting God's Children* videos, or any other components of the VIRTUS® program, call Mike Bemi at 1-877-486-2774, or send email to [virtus@nationalcatholicsvcs.org](mailto:virtus@nationalcatholicsvcs.org).