Will Newtown lead to 'Lockdown High'?

By: Gene Healy - January 7, 2013

Sandy Hook Elementary School students returned to class without incident last Thursday, less than three weeks after one of the most horrific school shootings in U.S. history.

Such horrible but extremely rare tragedies often spur legislative panic attacks in which the urge to "do something" overwhelms sober judgment. The tragedy in Newtown, Conn. is proving to be no exception.

In a breathless, italics-strewn press statement the week after the shootings, National Rifle Association honcho Wayne LaPierre demanded that Congress "act immediately" to put "a police officer in every school." "Our children" he railed, "are utterly defenseless and the monsters and predators of this world know it." "There'll be time for talk and debate later."

Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., shares the NRA's "ready, fire, aim" approach to post-Newtown lawmaking. She's introduced legislation encouraging state governors to call out the National Guard for school security. "The slaughter of the innocents must stop," Boxer declared recently: "is it not part of the national defense to make sure that your children are safe?" A separate bill she's sponsored expands Justice Department grants to schools for "surveillance equipment, secured entrances and other important safety measures."

But if it's "all about the children," as the tired refrain goes, then it's worth looking at how all this legislative hysteria might affect them. Unfortunately, the reaction to Newtown looks likely to accelerate the post-Columbine trend toward "Lockdown High."

That's the title of an illuminating 2011 book by investigative journalist Annette Fuentes; subtitle: "When the Schoolhouse Becomes a Jailhouse."

Though "the Columbine scenario is terrifying," Fuentes writes, "the odds of it occurring in your hometown are about one in two million." Nonetheless, such terrifying scenarios have driven an ominous redesign of the American schoolhouse: "From metal detectors to drug tests, from increased policing to all-seeing electronic surveillance," our schools are steadily becoming "prisonlike institutions where children are treated like suspects."

Is the prison analogy overblown? Not according to some federal officials charged with helping to reshape the schools. Fuentes quotes Peter Cosgrove of the National Law Enforcement and Corrections Technology Center, part of the National Institute of Justice, the Justice Department's R&D shop: "You have kids in school being educated in life and

in prison you have a similar situation of people being reeducated. In theory, they're not far apart." The "same technology," he notes, "will be useful in both prisons and schools."

Fuentes describes a post-Columbine project funded by NIJ that created the "first-ever iris-recognition-cum-access-control system" for a rural New Jersey school district whose biggest prior security breach had been a parent who forgot to sign in before delivering cupcakes. Other districts have begun "tracking students like cattle" with radio-frequency chips in student ID cards, letting school officials, like counterterror agents on 24, pinpoint the students' location at any time.

We're likely to see much more of this in the post-Newtown rush to expand federal grants for "secure schools." A chicken in every pot, and a chip in every tot?

As with the War on Terror, there's plenty of profit to be had for security firms and consultants, but it's not clear the drive toward hardened, regimented, Panopticon-style schools is making students any more secure.

It is, however, giving them an education of sorts. "For millions of children," Fuentes notes, "being scanned and monitored has become as much a part of their daily education as learning to read and write." The resulting educational environment seems less likely to produce free-thinking citizens than obedient subjects, attentive to the demands of Homeland Security.

"Why do I feel like this all just going to end in school drones?" Forbes columnist James Poulos cracked on Twitter recently. Don't give them any ideas.