



Recovery in Aurora: The Public Schools' Response to the July 2012 Movie Theater Shooting (B)

December 2013

This case was written by David L. Tannenwald, Case Writer, Program on Crisis Leadership, for Dr. Arnold M. Howitt, Executive Director of the Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation at the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. Funds for case development were provided by the Aurora Public Schools. Cases are developed solely as the basis for class discussion. They are not intended to serve as endorsements, sources of primary data, or illustrations of effective or ineffective management.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, revised, translated, stored in a retrieval system, used in a spreadsheet, or transmitted in any form or by any means without the express written consent of the Program on Crisis Leadership, Harvard Kennedy School. To contact the Program on Crisis Leadership, email crisisleadership@hks.harvard.edu.

Recovery in Aurora: The Public Schools' Response to the July 2012 Movie Theater Shooting (B)

At 12:37 a.m. on Friday, July 20, 2012, a shooter walked into a movie theater in Aurora, Colorado and opened fire, killing 12 people, injuring 58 others, and traumatizing a community. (See timeline of events in Exhibit A.)¹ Within hours of the attack, the Aurora Public Schools under the leadership of Superintendent John L. Barry mobilized in a number of ways. This included giving police permission to use Gateway High School, an APS school, to interview witnesses and gather victims' families and opening several additional schools as shelters for families who had been evacuated from their homes after police discovered explosives in the suspect's apartment. At the same time, Superintendent Barry and the Incident Response Team – a collection of 20 APS officials trained to manage crises – were simultaneously developing a long-term recovery strategy for the schools. Having witnessed the effect of violence on communities while in the military, Barry feared that the Aurora shooting could have significant psychological repercussions for staff and students.

As a result, at an Incident Response Team meeting on Monday, July 23, he unveiled a multi-phase recovery plan. Phase one (which was from July 20-22) was already over, phase two would stretch from July 23 until the start of school on August 6, and phase three would encompass the school year. From Barry's vantage point, dividing the process into segments was integral to helping people recover. "I know, having dealt with this in the military, that people have a hard time if you...tell them that we're in a crisis and it's going to be a year to years to recover," Barry later explained. "But if you start breaking things into phases and telling them what you're going to do for the next weeks and months, then people feel more confident that you know what you're doing."²

The strategy prompted a range of reactions from APS staff and community leaders. On the one hand, many thought that the plan demonstrated impressive foresight. "That's where I really give John a lot of credit...," said APS Chief Operating Officer Anthony Sturges. "He knew instinctively because of his [military] background that this could have much greater repercussions [for the schools]."³ "The very fact," added Aurora Police Chief Dan Oates, "that the public school leadership recognized that they had a role in the community recovering from this event is huge."⁴ Not everyone, however, was enthusiastic about the approach. Rather than dedicate the school system's finite resources to responding to a non-school event, some thought Barry should instead defer to the municipal government and other community groups. "John took a lot of criticism," recalled Deputy Superintendent William Stuart, reflecting on the reaction to the recovery plan from some staff and parents, "for what some people thought was going overboard in terms of a school district's response to a community-based event."⁵

¹ Sara Burnett and Jessica Fender, "Aurora shooting suspect left apartment 'booby trapped,' music blaring," *Denver Post*, July 20, 2012, available at http://www.denverpost.com/breakingnews/ci_21118947/police-search-apartment-suspected-gunman-deadly-aurora-shooting [accessed on June 18, 2013].

² Interview with John Barry, Superintendent, Aurora Public Schools, Aurora, Colorado, May 23, 2013. Hereafter cited as "Barry interview." Unless noted, subsequent quotations from and attributions to Barry come from this interview and several follow-up telephone interviews.

³ Interview with Anthony Sturges, Chief Operating Officer, Aurora Public Schools, Aurora, Colorado, May 22, 2013.

⁴ Interview with Dan Oates, Police Chief, City of Aurora, Aurora, CO, May 21, 2013. Hereafter cited as "Oates interview." Unless noted, subsequent quotations from and attributions to Oates come from this interview.

⁵ Interview with William Stuart, Deputy Superintendent, Aurora Public Schools, Aurora, Colorado, May 23, 2013. Hereafter cited as Stuart interview. Unless noted, subsequent quotations from and attributions to Stuart come from this interview.

July 23 – August 6: Preparing for the Start of School

During the week after the superintendent introduced the multi-phase recovery strategy, Barry and the Incident Response Team – which met daily for the first five days after the shooting – laid out and began to implement a detailed plan for phase two (the two-week period before the start of school). A key priority early on would be making sure that all APS community members received mental health support if they needed it. To that end, Barry asked Bonnie Lavinder, the director of APS’s Equity and Engagement Division, to work with Aurora Mental Health, a community mental health provider, to make sure that there were counselors at every school when the academic year began.⁶ The IRT also decided that all teachers would discuss the shooting with students on the first day of school and that teachers would receive age-appropriate talking points to guide these conversations. The talking points were crafted in partnership with Drs. Dan Nelson and David Schonfeld from the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement, an organization to which APS had been referred by the US Department of Education and which, at the time, was based at Cincinnati Children’s Hospital and promotes awareness about the role schools can play in helping students and staff recover from the loss of a family member or a larger crisis. Barry also reached out to Reid Hettich, a prominent local pastor. Hettich helped organize a group of 25 religious leaders who met with Superintendent Barry to discuss ways that the faith-based community and schools could work together to address students’ spiritual questions about the shooting.⁷

Barry and the IRT simultaneously fundraised for and disseminated information about APS’s plans. Superintendent Barry asked Bonnie Lavinder, the senior staff member from the Equity and Engagement Division, to work with the district’s finance staff to complete a series of grant applications. This included \$50,000 from the U.S. Department of Education, which APS was applying for at the recommendation of Secretary of Education Arne Duncan. Duncan had called Superintendent Barry after the attack to offer his condolences and support.⁸ Barry also suggested that Lavinder, who was emerging as a key leader in the recovery process, and the finance team begin soliciting private donations and request grants of at least \$50,000 from the Broad Academy (of which Barry was a graduate) and a series of local foundations.⁹ He emphasized, however, that any excess expenses could be covered by the Aurora Public School’s reserve fund.¹⁰ At the same time, the communications department created a disaster recovery webpage on the APS website containing descriptions of and contact information for counseling and faith-based resources; organized a press conference that included Principals Jones and Hedges and Superintendent Barry; uploaded a podcast for students featuring Secretary of Education Arne Duncan; and sent numerous phone and e-mail messages – including automated telephone calls – to students and faculty. Finally,

⁶ APS also arranged for extra substitute teachers to be available should any teachers need to leave their classes and speak to a counselor.

⁷ Interview with Reid Hettich, Lead Pastor at Mosaic Church of Aurora, Aurora, Colorado, May 20, 2013. Hereafter cited as “Hettich interview.” Unless noted, subsequent quotations from and attributions to Hettich come from this interview.

⁸ Secretary Duncan had visited the Aurora Public Schools the previous February for a roundtable discussion on the district’s career development programs. “USDE Secretary Arne Duncan to Visit Aurora Public Schools,” Aurora Public Schools, February 28, 2012, available at <http://aurorak12.org/2012/02/24/usde-secretary-arne-duncan-to-visit-aurora-public-schools/> [accessed on July 3, 2013].

⁹ The Broad Academy for School Superintendents is an institute that trains experienced leaders from outside the education sector to lead urban school districts. Barry graduated from the academy in 2004. “What we do,” The Broad Superintendents Academy, available at <http://www.broadcenter.org/academy/about> [accessed on July 3, 2013].

¹⁰ Under state law, the reserve fund is required to be 3% of the district’s overall operating budget, but the Aurora Public Schools, per the Board of Education’s mandate, maintains a 4% reserve fund.

Superintendent Barry kept APS Board of Education members abreast of the situation through periodic e-mail updates and briefings at the Board's regular meetings every week or two.

Concerns from the APS Community

Some people raised questions about APS's approach. One complaint was the high volume of communications. "One evening I got five [automated] phone calls at my house....," recalled a parent who is also a school district official. "I understand wanting to get the information out, but five in one night I wasn't answering the phone again." Another source of concern was APS's plan to have teachers discuss the incident with students on the first day of school. Some teachers and principals did not want to dedicate time to preparing for these conversations when they were already extremely busy planning for the start of school, and certain staff and parents feared the discussions could prove counterproductive. "There were a lot of people," recalled APS Chief Communication officer Georgia Durán, who fielded several calls from confused parents and teachers, "who asked, 'why would you talk with kids about this? Isn't that going to be more alarming for them?'"¹¹ More broadly, a large contingent of the APS community worried that the school district was getting too involved and being too publicly visible in a non-school event. Among those who had questions about Barry's approach was Jane Barber, a member of the Board of Education, who was concerned that it might appear that the school district was attempting to profit from the tragedy. In an e-mail to Superintendent Barry on which the other members of the Board were copied, she wrote,

My problem is we cannot concentrate on the tragedy of July 20. We need to use the accomplishments of our students and our teachers. I know you know more about after effects of tragic events than I do. But the constant reminder is not the way to campaign. We need to be there for the students when they need us, but not use them for our benefit. Not well said but I think you can figure it out.¹²

Responding to those raising questions, Superintendent Barry contended that a scaled-down approach could lead to far more severe problems. "We can't ignore the shooting and act like it never happened or just move on," Barry wrote in a reply to Barber that also included links to a host of articles about the potential medium- and long-term effects of the shooting. "...If we prevent one suicide or help get someone back on track faster than they would alone, we have made a difference."¹³ He made a similar argument in an IRT meeting in late July. "Some people will say we are overreacting," he said at the conclusion of an Incident Response Team meeting in late July, before emphasizing the importance of being "proactive" because of the potential "all-consuming" nature of the attack and its psychological consequences. Looking back, Barry reflected, "I got criticized for putting too much information out, which I will take any day rather than the other criticism, [which] is, 'you're not telling me enough.'"

¹¹ Interview with Georgia Durán, Chief Communication Officer, Aurora Public Schools, Aurora, Colorado, May 20, 2013. Hereafter cited as "Durán interview." Unless noted, subsequent quotations from and attributions to Durán come from this interview and a follow-up telephone interview.

¹² Barber, APS Board of Education Vice President Cathy Wildman explained in a subsequent e-mail to the author, was concerned that the district might appear as if it was attempting to profit from the tragedy because there was an upcoming referendum on a mill levy, which would help to fund the schools. (E-mail from Jane Barber to John Barry, August 20, 2012, obtained by author from Cathy Wildman, Vice President, Board of Education, Aurora Public Schools; E-mail from Cathy Wildman to author, December 18, 2013.)

¹³ E-mail from John Barry to Jane Barber, August 20, 2012, obtained by author from Cathy Wildman, Vice President, Board of Education, Aurora Public Schools.

In making this case, Superintendent Barry relied heavily on the counsel of Drs. Nelson and Schonfeld, the specialists from the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement, who felt that APS's approach was unusually "proactive, thoughtful, and comprehensive."¹⁴ They communicated this perspective to staff and parents during a visit to Aurora before the start of school as well as through a webinar for teachers and principals that was subsequently posted on the APS website. "When these two experts came on our site," said APS Chief Financial Officer Adrienne Bradshaw, "they validated every single step our superintendent was taking."¹⁵

The First Day of School

On August 6, over 35,000 students returned to the Aurora Public Schools and, according to Barry's instructions, were greeted by teachers ready to discuss the shooting. In some instances, students had little to say, and some parents chose not to have their children participate; but in the schools most heavily affected by the attack, they discussed it at length. For example, at Paris Elementary School, students shared that they had previously interacted with the suspect in their neighborhood, that they heard he was part of a gang which included other members who were going to come after them (a rumor which teachers attempted to dispel in these initial conversations), and that they had witnessed numerous violent events in their community in recent years.¹⁶ The teachers likewise had wide-ranging experiences with these conversations. Some felt that they were unqualified to address students' concerns, but at least ten teachers reported to APS Chief Communication Officer Georgia Durán that the conversations were a great way to connect with students. Most importantly, to the relief of Barry and other district leaders, the Aurora Public Schools got through the first day without serious incident.

Phase Three – August 7 - November 1: The School Year Begins

As the summer wore on, a difficult set of question arose for the City of Aurora and its recovery effort. One was whether, when, and how to phase out the temporary memorial that people had created across from the movie theater and outside the Aurora Municipal Building. Although it contained many heartfelt tributes, city officials feared that it would get damaged as bad weather set in and felt that it might be harder for some people to move on if there were constant reminders of the incident across Aurora. The city therefore gave victims' families an opportunity to retrieve the items they wanted and then cleaned and archived the remaining materials.¹⁷

A more difficult issue was how to divide over \$5 million in donations that people across the world had made to Aurora after the shooting. On the day after the incident, Colorado Governor John Hickenlooper had announced that all of the funds would go to Community First Foundation, a Colorado non-profit that would process and then distribute the funds. The task of creating the formula to divide the money initially fell to the 7/20 Recovery Executive Committee, a group that was facilitated by the city and included a host of community members. But the committee came under heavy criticism from victims' families for not distributing the funds fast enough.. Following an emotional press conference in which several victims' relatives expressed frustration with the process and said

¹⁴ Draper, "Aurora Public Schools..."

¹⁵ Interview with Adrienne Bradshaw, Chief Financial Officer, Aurora Public Schools, by telephone, June 17, 2013. Hereafter cited as "Bradshaw interview." Unless noted, subsequent quotations from and attributions to Bradshaw come from this interview.

¹⁶ Interview with Lisa Jones, Principal, Paris Elementary School, Aurora, Colorado, May 23, 2013. Hereafter cited as "Jones interview." Unless noted, subsequent quotations from and attributions to Jones come from this interview.

¹⁷ Interview with Michelle Wolfe, Deputy City Manager, City of Aurora, Aurora, Colorado, May 24, 2013. Hereafter cited as Wolfe interview; Sara Castellanos, "City Removes Items from Temporary Aurora Theater Shooting Memorial," *Aurora Sentinel*, September 20, 2012, available at <http://www.aurorasentinel.com/news/metroaurora/removal/> [accessed on July 4, 2013].

that some money had been given to local non-profits, the Governor of Colorado announced that Ken Feinberg – a New York-based lawyer who had previously dealt with victims’ donations after 9/11 and the BP oil spill – would be coming to Aurora to decide how the funds would be distributed.¹⁸

As the school year got underway, the recovery process likewise became more difficult to manage in the Aurora Public Schools. At the end of July, Superintendent Barry had tasked Bonnie Lavinder, a senior official in the district’s Equity and Engagement Division, with helping to lead the recovery. She dedicated a substantial amount of time to this work, which included coordinating extra counseling and security, fundraising, and community engagement. However, as the weeks progressed, her normal job responsibilities competed with the time she was able to spend on the recovery. For example, Lavinder was attempting to coordinate with Aurora Mental Health to position extra counselors at schools where students and staff wanted more mental health support. But the organization was dealing with unusually high requests from across the city, forcing it to shuffle counselors among schools. This left school psychologists reporting that their students were meeting with a different counselor every week.¹⁹ Lavinder, along with the APS financial team, was also working extremely hard to obtain the grant from the Department of Education for which Secretary of Education Duncan had recommended that they apply. The application process, however, was extremely time consuming, requiring extensive justification as to how the school system’s recovery related to the community shooting. Meanwhile, there was increasing concern about the safety and well being of the Paris Elementary School community. Within weeks of the shooting, a fire engulfed an apartment building housing a number of the school’s families, and shortly thereafter a murder occurred within blocks of the school.²⁰

Hiring and Integrating a Disaster Recovery Coordinator

To make sure that the recovery process would get sufficient managerial attention, Superintendent Barry notified the Board of Education and the APS leadership team that he intended to hire a full-time Disaster Recovery Coordinator for a 12- to 18-month stint.²¹ The move produced a range of reactions from board members and district staff. Some personnel, recalled APS Chief Financial Officer Adrienne Bradshaw, were relieved to have a new colleague to help shoulder the heavy workload of the recovery, and several board members felt that the hire reflected the superintendent’s excellent leadership throughout the crisis. But other board members and senior staff raised questions in private conversations with Barry and colleagues and at staff and board meetings about how in an era of heavy budget cuts the district could afford to hire a full-time disaster recovery coordinator at a

¹⁸ Andrea Rael, “Aurora Shooting Victims’ Families: 7/20 Committee, That Includes The Governor, Hasn’t Given 100% of Funds To Victims,” *The Huffington Post*, August 28, 2012, available at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/08/28/aurora-shooting-victims-f_n_1837714.html [accessed on December 20, 2013]; Electra Draper, “7/20 Committee: Will build on its ‘good work’ for Aurora Victims,” *The Denver Post*, available at http://www.denverpost.com/ci_21575755/7-20-committee-will-build-its-good-work [accessed on December 20, 2013]; “Families of Aurora shooting victims say fund money going to nonprofits,” *FoxNews.com*, available at <http://www.foxnews.com/us/2012/08/28/families-aurora-shooting-victims-say-fund-money-going-to-non-profits/> [accessed on December 20, 2013].

¹⁹ Interview with Bonnie Lavinder, Director of Equity & Engagement, Aurora Public Schools, Aurora, Colorado, May 24, 2013. Hereafter cited as “Lavinder interview.” Unless noted, subsequent quotations from and attributions to Lavinder come from this interview.

²⁰ Jones interview.

²¹ The Aurora Public Schools Board of Education has a “policy governance” model that delegates substantial authority to the Superintendent. This includes the ability to hire new staff so long as it does not imperil the district’s finances. District policy specifically proscribed the Superintendent incurring any expense over \$750,000. Barry interview; and “Board Policy Manual,” Aurora Public Schools, available at <http://boe.aurorak12.org/files/2012/01/APS-Board-Policy-Manual-Sept-2011-r1.pdf> [accessed on September 26, 2013].

relatively high salary. There was some “angst,” recalled Board Vice President Cathy Wildman, who emphasized in her interview that she was providing her perspective and not speaking on behalf of the entire board, about spending additional money on “something related to the shooting versus academics within the district.”²² Barry replied that he hoped that the district would be able to obtain grants to fund the position but, if necessary, it could dip into the emergency reserve fund. Barry’s choice for the position – Francis Pombar, the deputy chief of attendance and truancy from the School District of Philadelphia and a fellow alumnus of the Broad Academy and Air Force veteran – was also a source of concern.²³ Although Superintendent Barry felt that an outsider would provide a fresh perspective on the district’s approach, some staff and board members felt that someone from within the organization who possessed a more traditional educational background would be better suited to lead the response.

Yet the biggest question for district staff and Pombar, who began his new position in mid-September, was what precisely his role would entail. Barry envisioned the disaster recovery coordinator as someone who would report directly to him and have two principal responsibilities: 1) managing the recovery process (i.e., the support services in schools and grant applications) and 2) providing a recommendation to the district about how it could leverage its resources and community partnerships to improve mental health support for students. Some senior staff members, however, did not understand what Pombar’s tasks would be or how he was to interface with other district administrators. “I remember he [Francis] was driving from Pennsylvania in the rain, and I was on [the phone] with [several members of the school district’s leadership team] and Francis,” recalled APS Chief Communication Officer Georgia Durán, “and I remember saying, ‘...we’ll do whatever we can to support you,’ because we didn’t know what his job would be.”

For Pombar, the process of defining his role was similarly challenging. He immediately took over as the APS representative on the city’s 7/20 Recovery Committee, a position previously filled by Lavinder; began to help manage grant applications related to the 7/20 recovery process; and started moderating the district’s Crisis Management Committee, an interdepartmental body created as part of the recovery process but soon phased out. However, he also had to figure out how to tackle the broader goals of supporting individual schools and departments, interfacing with community partners, and developing recommendations for how APS could better support its students. “I was given a big canvas,” Pombar later explained, “and so I had to create it on my own. There...was the big goal and then you come up with the milestones and then the metrics to get there.”²⁴

After officially taking over as recovery coordinator on September 10, Pombar set up meetings with key players in the city and the school district but received conflicting responses from the two constituencies. On the one hand, many of the community leaders with whom he met – who included officials from the fire and police departments as well as local mental health non-profits and faith-based groups – were excited to have a fresh, energetic person

²² Interview with Cathy Wildman, Vice President, Aurora Public Schools Board of Education, by telephone, November 19, 2013. Hereafter cited as Wildman interview. Unless noted, subsequent quotations from and attributions to Wildman come from this interview.

²³ Barry initially attempted to find a candidate through the National Association of School Psychologists and the National Association of School Social Workers, but these inquiries yielded few attractive candidates. He then considered making Lavinder the full-time recovery coordinator, but she wanted to stay in her current position. Anxious to fill the position as quickly as possible, he then reached out to Pombar.

²⁴ Interview with Francis Pombar, Disaster Recovery Coordinator, Aurora Public Schools, Aurora, Colorado, May 20, 2013. Hereafter cited as “Pombar interview.” Unless noted, subsequent quotations from and attributions to Pombar come from this interview as well as one follow-up telephone interview.

to support them. They also appreciated how carefully Pombar listened and inquired about the challenges they faced. “I saw him as someone who didn’t come in to save us,” said Carole O’Shea, the head of the Aurora Police Department’s Victim Services Unit, “but to serve us.”²⁵ But Pombar found the process of integrating into the school district was more challenging. Most notably, a contingent of district staff members – especially personnel who reported to the district’s department heads – were not attending the crisis management meetings he tried to organize. From the vantage point of Chief Communication Officer Georgia Durán, this difficulty resulted from lingering confusion about why the school district was responding so forcefully to the shooting as well as uncertainty about Pombar’s role. “We should have done a much better job,” she later said, “of introducing Francis, his position, what he was doing, and why he was doing it.”

Fearing that the low attendance at his meetings was interfering with his mission, Pombar informed Superintendent Barry that he wanted to address the Aurora Public Schools leadership team. Early that fall, Pombar told the group – which consists of eight department heads, the superintendent, and the deputy superintendent – that “my work is just as important as yours” and that he needed people to attend the meetings that he called. The conversation produced a range of reactions. Some suggested that people missing meetings was part of the challenge of working in an urban school district, while others articulated the questions they had had about Pombar’s hiring in the first place. “Some of the true feelings of what they thought of my work and how it was presented to them [the leadership team] was shared with me,” said Pombar. “When I came into the district, I didn’t know there was such opposition.” Nonetheless, Pombar and several leadership team members felt that the conversation provided a breakthrough in which they developed a clearer understanding of one another’s positions. “The room was quiet [after Pombar finished],” recalled APS Chief Financial Officer Adrienne Bradshaw. “[The] Superintendent thanked him [Pombar]...and asked for us to support him and we did.”

November 2 – January 19: A Challenging Period

In the late fall, the city and the schools shifted their focus to preparing for the holidays, a period that experts cautioned would be an extremely challenging period for those dealing with the aftermath of the shooting. People typically celebrate the holidays with their families, which may make them more inclined to think about loved ones who have passed away; and, at the same time, the community was approaching the six-month anniversary of the shooting on January 20, a potential trigger for the entire population. Although this period was likely to affect the whole community, the students and staff of the Aurora Public Schools were highly vulnerable, warned Drs. Nelson and Schonfeld from the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement. In late December and early January, students would be on school vacation, separating them from in-school support structures and, for many of the district’s impoverished students, forcing them to spend more time in homes without proper food, shelter, and parental support.²⁶ While this was an annual problem for APS students from high-risk backgrounds, district staff thought that some students might be more dependent on the schools’ support because of the traumatic events of the previous six months. For district leaders and principals who had been heavily involved in the emergency response and recovery, the risk was burning out from such a stressful period. “I’ve had my ups and downs throughout the year, probably more than I thought I would,” recalled Gateway High School Principal Bill Hedges,

²⁵ Interview with Carole O’Shea, Supervisor, Victim Services Unit, Aurora Police Department, Aurora, CO, May 22, 2013. Hereafter cited as “O’Shea interview.” Unless noted, subsequent quotations from and attributions to O’Shea come from this interview.

²⁶ Draper, “Aurora Public Schools...”

who had helped the police operate in his school after the shooting. Hedges, along with several teachers and officials from throughout the district, decided to take some additional vacation time to rest during the first semester.²⁷

To support the city and school community during this difficult time, Pombar organized four holiday workshops at APS facilities during December. Each event featured food and beverages, a student performance, and representatives from over a dozen community organizations (including officials from the police and fire departments and local businesses, mental health non-profits, and faith-based groups).²⁸ A similar event that Pombar had organized in the fall had had low attendance, a problem that Dr. Brook Griese, the co-founder of Judi's House, a local non-profit specializing in child bereavement, attributed to the Aurora Public Schools holding the event in a district office. Parents and families, she suggested to Pombar, were likely to be more comfortable in an actual school. Pombar, who had felt it best to have the events at schools all along, held the December events at the schools, leading to higher attendance and contributing to what Dr. Griese characterized as a "snowball" networking effect in which families and community groups became more familiar with one another's needs and services.²⁹ School officials and board members, several of whom attended the community meetings to gauge the recovery's effectiveness, observed the benefits of linking parents with so many community groups as well.³⁰ "Francis took community engagement to not just another level," said Georgia Durán, reflecting on the December events, "but four or five levels higher."

The Shooting in Newtown, CT

Supporting community members became even more important following a highly publicized attack in Newtown, CT, on December 14, 2012 in which a gunman forced his way into Sandy Hook Elementary School and shot and killed 20 students and six teachers. For Aurora's emergency responders, the attack brought back memories of the traumatic events of 7/20. "The [Aurora police] chief...said, 'I feel like we're right back there again,'" recalled Carole O'Shea, the head of the Victim Services Unit at the Aurora Police Department. In the Aurora Public Schools, parents and students raised new questions about how the district could guarantee their children's safety. To allay their concerns, Aurora Public Schools officials doubled the size of the school district's security force and asked teachers to discuss the Newtown incident with their students and review the district's security policies (which they had been practicing throughout the year). The teachers received guidance from Aurora Mental Health about how to identify students who were struggling, but some teachers were uncertain as to how to make all of their kids feel more secure. "I didn't know how to deal with this because I'm not going to lie to the kids and say that won't happen because I can't say that with conviction," said Paula Hedin, a fourth grade teacher at Paris Elementary School. "We were encouraged to talk to them and make them feel safe and build that community, but I didn't know how. It was...left up to us what the best way to do that was."³¹

Although the Sandy Hook shooting added to the stress of city and school officials, many community leaders found some satisfaction in being able to share their experiences and lessons learned with Newtown officials. At

²⁷ Interview with Bill Hedges, Principal, Gateway High School, Aurora Public Schools, Aurora, Colorado, May 21, 2013. Hereafter cited as "Hedges interview." Unless noted, subsequent quotations from and attributions to Hedges come from this interview.

²⁸ Although the events had an ostensible mental health focus, Pombar declined to refer to mental health in the title because he feared that the negative connotations surrounding the phrase could decrease attendance.

²⁹ Interview with Dr. Brook Griese, Co-founder, Judi's House, Aurora, CO, May 22, 2013.

³⁰ Wildman interview.

³¹ Interview with Paula Hedin, Teacher, Paris Elementary School, Aurora Public Schools, by telephone, June 16, 2013.

the district level, Pombar, Superintendent Barry, and Chief Communications Officer Georgia Durán participated in a video conference with Newtown officials early in the winter, and students and staff from Gateway High School took a picture in front of a banner saying, “Aurora Loves Newtown” and then sent the photo to the Connecticut school.³² Beyond the school system, several city officials, including Fire Chief Mike Garcia, reached out to their counterparts in Newtown. “I’m now part of a club I hoped to never have joined...,” Garcia said, referencing the experiences of Boston, Fort Hood, and other communities that have recently been the targets of violent attacks. “But you also want to help the next chief that has to deal with this.... I gave the chief a call at Newtown just to let him know that I know what he’s going through and...[to ask] if I can be of any assistance.”³³

January 20 - May 20: Rebuilding Stronger

On January 20, 2013, Aurora marked the six-month anniversary of the shooting by reopening the movie theater where the attack had occurred. Some residents advocated razing the cinema, warning that it could become a target of copycat attackers and saying that the community should not have to be reminded of the event every day. But in a poll of the Aurora population conducted by city officials, the vast majority of the city’s residents – especially younger citizens – supported reopening it. “If it doesn’t reopen, he [the gunman] wins. Plain and simple,” argued Alex Milano, a teenager who was in the theater on the night of the shooting.³⁴ Cinemark therefore held a ceremony at the theater on January 17 featuring speeches from Colorado Governor John Hickenlooper and Aurora Mayor Steve Hogan and then invited people to enjoy a weekend of free films and concessions.³⁵

The six-month threshold was significant for the public schools as well. In conversations with Pombar and Barry, Drs. Nelson and Schonfeld pointed out that getting through the six-month mark without a suicide, attack, or other traumatic event was a significant accomplishment. But they also warned that the psychological consequences of an event like the 7/20 shooting often manifest themselves most virulently anywhere from nine to 24 months after the incident and that the schools needed to remain vigilant. To school officials, the signs of this continued stress, though not widespread, were noticeable. A student at Gateway High School collapsed into a fetal position after a car backfired; at Paris Elementary School, Principal Jones had to cover several classes when teachers broke down in tears; and students and staff continued to seek mental health support.

As a result, the Aurora Public Schools continued to press ahead with the recovery process. Pombar oversaw a number of initiatives, including coordinating several additional community workshops that built on the December

³² The banner also contained hearts and personal messages from students and staff. “CBS Showcases Gateway High’s Strength Following Aurora Shooting,” *CBS Denver*, February 3, 2013, available at <http://denver.cbslocal.com/2013/02/03/cbs-showcases-gateway-highs-strength-following-aurora-shooting/> [accessed on July 4, 2013].

³³ Interview with Mike Garcia, Fire Chief, City of Aurora, Aurora, CO, May 24, 2013. Hereafter cited as “Garcia interview.” Unless noted, subsequent quotations from and attributions to Garcia come from this interview.

³⁴ Once the decision to reopen the facility had been made, the Aurora Police Department’s Victim Services Unit offered victims an opportunity before the reopening to visit the theater with professional psychologists. Two days after Christmas, the victims also received an e-mail from Cinemark – the company that owns the theater – inviting them to a reopening ceremony and to enjoy free movies and concessions during the weekend after the theater was reopened. Several victims’ families found the timing of the message and the offer of free movie tickets “insulting.” Steve Almasy, “Angry victims of families say they will boycott Colorado theater reopening,” *CNN*, January 3, 2013, available at <http://www.cnn.com/2013/01/02/us/colorado-theater-shooting> [accessed on July 3, 2013]; O’Shea interview.

³⁵ Kurtis Lee, “Century Aurora theater reopens with ceremony, showing of ‘The Hobbit,’” *The Denver Post*, January 17, 2013, available at http://www.denverpost.com/ci_22396748/century-aurora-theater-reopening-night-remembrance [accessed on July 3, 2013].

events by continuing to make students and their families aware of the resources that different community organizations could provide. He also helped to arrange a surprise visit by Denver Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning to Gateway High School. (CBS Sports ran a piece on the Gateway High School football team during the Super Bowl pre-game show in February as well.) Pombar simultaneously dedicated a substantial amount of energy to his work with the 7/20 Recovery Committee, which was developing plans to open a community-wide resiliency center later that spring. Based on similar facilities created after the Columbine and Oklahoma City attacks, the center would offer Aurora residents on-site counseling services, physical education classes (e.g., zumba and yoga), and information about mental health services. The members of the 7/20 committee expected that it would cost approximately \$35,000 a year to operate the facility, provided they had free access to an unused city building. But several grant applications were unsuccessful, and some city council members questioned whether there was sufficient demand for the center. To bolster the case, Pombar emphasized that the facility would be a valuable resource for Aurora students, especially during the summer when school was not in session. In the end, the city granted the community permission to use the building, and the resiliency center opened in July 2013 several months later than originally planned.³⁶

For Pombar, managing all of these tasks and relationships – which included typing up and sending out meeting minutes and scheduling numerous appointments – was proving extremely time-consuming and stressful. He therefore approached Superintendent Barry – with whom he was meeting at least once per week – about hiring an administrative assistant, at least on a part-time basis, to help him manage the logistics and communications surrounding the recovery. Shortly thereafter, the district hired Lindsey Shackleford as Pombar’s full-time assistant. According to Pombar, Shackleford’s administrative support enabled him to focus more on forming recommendations for the district about how to bolster support for struggling students. “There was a point I’m thinking, ‘OK, I’m a one-person team,’” Pombar recalled. “I need at least some administrative support so I can really focus on the...strategic picture...as opposed to the tactical, which is also critical. But when you’re doing both, something is going to slip.”

The Social and Emotional Task Force

With Shackleford on staff, Pombar shifted his focus to developing a new system to identify and support the district’s most troubled students. Per Colorado law, the Aurora Public Schools already had a “Response to Intervention” framework that identified students with serious academic problems (e.g., truancy, failing grades, etc.).³⁷ At the same time, the Aurora Public School’s Division of Equity and Engagement had a separate set of protocols that guided interventions for children experiencing significant social and emotional problems. Having

³⁶ Sara Castellanos, “Center Dilemma: City Looks at Creating ‘Resiliency Center,’” *Aurora Sentinel*, February 7, 2013, available at <http://www.aurorasentinel.com/news/center-dilemma-city-looks-at-creating-resiliency-center/> [accessed on July 3, 2013]; Sara Castellanos, “Support Center: Resiliency Center Set to Open Doors to Victims of Trauma,” *Aurora Sentinel*, May 27, 2013, available at <http://www.aurorasentinel.com/guide/wellness/support-center-resiliency-center-set-to-open-doors-to-victims-of-trauma/> [accessed on July 3, 2013]; Adrian Garcia, “Aurora Strong Community Resilience Center Opens To Help Ease Trauma,” *The Denver Post*, available at http://www.denverpost.com/ci_23645484/aurora-strong-community-resilience-center-opens-help-ease [accessed on December 18, 2013].

³⁷ “Response to Intervention” refers to a multi-step process used in school districts across the country to identify students with serious academic problems and treat them with a series of increasingly intense interventions depending on how they respond to the initial attempts. Mary Beth Klotz and Andrea Kanter, “Response to Intervention: A Primer for Parents,” National Association of School Psychologists, available at <http://www.nasponline.org/resources/handouts/revisedPDFs/rtiprimer.pdf> [accessed on July 3, 2013].

spoken extensively with district staff and representatives of APS's community partners, Pombar thought it was important to connect these efforts.

With Superintendent Barry's support, he therefore created and led a social and emotional task force, which consisted of school psychologists and district-level staff involved in existing interventions and which was tasked with exploring the feasibility and benefits of merging the academic and emotional approaches. They accomplished this by reviewing best practices across the country, analyzing data that the district had on the impact of its existing programs, and discussing the strengths and weaknesses of the system. To Pombar, the task force was integral to his work as a recovery coordinator because it could lead to the creation of an early-warning system that would reduce the risk of violent attacks in the future. "You want to prevent an Aurora theater shooting. You want to prevent a Newtown, Connecticut..." explained Pombar, who wanted to be able to say that, "We did everything we could to prevent a child from hurting himself and hurting others."

School officials had divergent perspectives on whether friction among members interfered with the committee's work. On the one hand, Pombar felt that certain committee members were worried that the task force's recommendations would result in their departments losing resources and power. "Everyone is very territorial," Pombar later explained, adding that the district had numerous "stovepipes" and that "many people on the leadership team have a piece of those stovepipes...so there's that resistance to change." But others did not see any difficulties. "I don't think there's friction," contended Rosanne Fulton, then the Chief Equity and Engagement Officer for the Aurora Public Schools. "Committee members and leadership team members wanted to be sure that the recommendations would provide greater cohesion for services to the schools, and that is not an easy goal to achieve."³⁸

After several months of meetings, the committee concluded that the district should hire a director of mental health services, a recommendation that was presented to the Board of Education in May. As of December 2013, this recommendation remained under consideration, and the district had hired several additional mental health counselors.³⁹

May 21: The One-Year Commemoration and Beyond

As the one-year anniversary of the shooting approached, the city's 7/20 Recovery Committee considered how best to commemorate the event. Taking account of the criticism following the lengthy prayer vigil the previous year, it decided to have a short prayer service followed by a day of community service throughout the city. It hoped this would uplift spirits as people still found themselves in varying stages of the recovery process. Some believed that after the one-year anniversary they could move on, but others felt it would be difficult to heal completely until James Holmes's trial was over. Amidst a year of extensive pre-trial maneuverings and hearings, the suspect had repeatedly been seen on television in courtroom appearances, providing victims a frequent reminder of the destruction he had wrought. That the trial was not yet over (at this point, pre-trial motions were underway) also meant that a "gag order" instituted by the judge was still in effect. This prevented emergency responders from discussing many details of the event. For Aurora firefighters, who had been heavily criticized in the news media for the department's failure to deploy ambulances more rapidly, the inability to explain their

³⁸ Interview with Rosanne Fulton, Chief Equity and Engagement Officer, Aurora Public Schools, by telephone, June 19, 2013.

³⁹ E-mail to author from Adrienne Bradshaw, Chief Financial Officer, Aurora Public Schools, December 13, 2013..

actions clearly was extremely troubling. “The gag order has really hurt us in a lot of ways,” Chief Garcia said. “One of them is you can’t get out your story.... People in the media were second-guessing [our work]...and there were negative headlines.... In many ways, that was more detrimental and harmful to our firefighters than the event itself.”

Within the Aurora Public Schools, which concluded the academic year the week before Memorial Day, some still wondered why the school had been so involved in the first place and felt that the district had spent too many resources (both human and financial) on the recovery. In total, the school had spent over \$350,000 on the effort, plus \$150,000 in in-kind expenses; these expenses were partially offset by \$118,000 in grant revenue.⁴⁰ Meanwhile, the Cherry Creek School District, critics noted, had not implemented such an expansive response and had not suffered catastrophic results. A small cadre of lingering critics suggested that Barry had been so vocal and aggressive in part to bolster his own stature.⁴¹ One district official reported that several staff voiced this concern after an article published in the *Denver Post* about the city’s commemoration plans featured a picture of John Barry (and no other Aurora official) and commentary from him. This seemed incongruous to some staff members because Barry was not a city employee, let alone the primary spokesman for the city’s recovery.⁴² Barry, who did over a dozen interviews about the school district’s recovery, emphasized that he “was as surprised as anyone about his picture being in the paper regarding the whole city” and that he “never represented [him]self as the city’s response person and always discussed [the] response in APS only.”⁴³ Pombar’s position with APS also ended in July, as the district transitioned to a new superintendent.

To Barry and the majority of staff and community members, however, the impact of the recovery – though difficult to quantify – had been substantial. “There wasn’t any data in so far as measurement of results because it’s hard to do that when you’re providing humans with resources to help them recover,” explained Barry, who also pointed out that the gap between expenses and revenue was offset by the district’s emergency reserve balance. “But a lot of it is what didn’t happen [e.g., suicides and mental health breakdowns], as opposed to what did happen, and a negative is often hard to prove.” Barry and other staff members also highlighted the dissipation of criticism and increase in praise by the end of the school year. “Many employees [had] said, ‘We’re getting in too deep,’” said Bonnie Lavinder, recalling staff sentiment at the outset of the school year. “But I don’t know anyone

⁴⁰ On the revenue side, the Aurora Public Schools received a \$50,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Education; a \$26,500 grant from the Rose Community Foundation, a Denver-based organization; and four five- to ten-thousand-dollar grants from other local foundations. The primary expenses in the recovery were salaries for the Disaster Recovery Coordinator and his assistant; supplies for back-to-school and community resource events; professional development for staff (e.g., suicide prevention and other mental health training); travel expenses for Drs. Schonfeld and Nelson to Aurora; salaries for extra substitute teachers; off-duty officers for various events; the community resilience center; and this Harvard Kennedy School case study about the recovery process. In addition to the \$350,000 the district spent directly on the recovery, there were additional costs from electricity and air conditioning, wear and tear on buildings, and salaries of regular school employees for the time devoted to the recovery totaling approximately \$150,000. Bradshaw interview; 7/20 Recovery Grants Spending Report, February 28, 2013, personal files of Francis Pombar.

⁴¹ In May 2012, two months before the shooting, Barry had informed the Board of Education that he would be retiring in July 2013. He publicly announced his retirement in fall 2012. Post retirement, he created a consulting firm for superintendent mentoring, emergency management, and leadership development in schools. Kevin Simpson, “Aurora schools superintendent John Barry will move on,” *Denver Post*, November 27, 2012, available at http://www.denverpost.com/ci_22073571/barry-step-down-aurora-public-schools-chief-current# [accessed on December 11, 2013]; E-mail from John Barry to author, November 27, 2013.

⁴² Ryan Parker, “Aurora begins to plan July 20 remembrance of theater shooting,” *Denver Post*, June 5, 2013, available at http://www.denverpost.com/breakingnews/ci_23396016/aurora-begins-plan-july-20-remembrance-theater-shooting [accessed on July 4, 2013].

⁴³ E-mail from John Barry to author, July 14, 2013.

who feels that way now.” Chief Communication Officer Georgia Durán, one of the staff members who initially had not fully understood why the district was taking such an expansive approach, now believed the strategy had had positive effects that extended beyond the impact of 7/20. “We created a dynamic which changed the norm about asking for help,” she contended, noting that APS community members were more aware of the community resources at their disposal and, having witnessed their effectiveness, now more inclined to seek them out.

But above all there was a sense among many district staff that the recovery effort had helped APS students and the community through a difficult time. “We’re not all better,” reflected Dyanne Wooldridge, a psychologist at Gateway High School, “but we’re on the right path.”⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Interview with Dyanne Wooldridge, Psychologist, Gateway High School, Aurora, Colorado, May 21, 2013.

Exhibit A: Aurora Movie Theater Shooting Timeline

July 20, 2012

12:37 a.m. – A gunman enters a movie theater in Aurora, CO and opens fire.

12:45 a.m. – Police apprehend the suspect, James Holmes, in the parking lot outside of the movie theater.

12:55 a.m. – The fire department's emergency dispatch notifies emergency medical workers that ambulances are needed at the rear of the theater.

1:15 a.m. – Aurora Public Schools (APS) Chief Operating Officer Anthony Sturges calls Superintendent John Barry and alerts him of the shooting. Soon thereafter, APS opens Gateway High School for the police to interview witnesses.

5:30 a.m. – A custodian at Paris Elementary School finds families from the neighborhood who had been forced to evacuate hiding on school property.

7:30 a.m. – Superintendent Barry convenes APS's Incident Response Team at the school district's command center.

9:45 a.m. – Paris Elementary School Principal Lisa Jones is patched into the Incident Response Team's meeting by telephone and updates team members on the events at Paris Elementary School.

4:00 p.m. – In the Gateway High School library, Aurora Police Chief Dan Oates meets with representatives of ten families who had not yet reconnected with their loved ones who had been in the theater. That evening, the police formally notify these families that their loved ones had been killed.

Saturday, July 21, 2012

Throughout the weekend, the school district staffs several of its schools with grief counselors with whom community members can meet.

Afternoon: Emergency responders safely remove the explosives from James Holmes's apartment.

Evening: An impromptu memorial service is held at Gateway High School for AJ Boik, a victim of the shooting who graduated from Gateway High School in 2012.

Sunday, July 22, 2012

President Obama visits Aurora, and, following his departure, a prayer vigil occurs outside of City Hall.

July 23, 2012

At an Incident Response Team meeting, Superintendent Barry unveils a multi-phase recovery strategy.

August 6, 2012

Students return to school.

September 10, 2012

Francis Pombar officially takes over as recovery coordinator.

December 14, 2012

A gunman shoots and kills 20 students and six teachers at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, CT. The shooting occurs amidst a month-long series of holiday workshops that Pombar is organizing at APS schools.

January 17, 2013

Days before the six-month anniversary of the shooting, Cinemark reopens the movie theater where the shooting occurred.

February 2013

Pombar convenes the social and emotional task force.

May 2013

The Aurora Public Schools conclude its school year.