

# Strategos International — Christian former cops fight a battle of wit, skill and strategy with imaginary school shooters

By [Peter Rugg](#)

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The classroom's desks are empty now. It's the end of the day, and the final bell has rung. The last person in the room is Lisa Butts, 43, the assistant principal at South Valley Middle School.



Co-Owners - Mark Warren (left) & Vaughn Baker

• Sarah Rae



## Subject(s):

Butts started out as a math teacher in Pennsylvania in 1993, then moved to Missouri in 2003 to take this job with the Liberty School District. In black dress pants, heels and a sweater, she's an athletic woman with dark-blond hair. The day has been sunny and bright, but standing alone in the middle of the classroom, she senses twilight descending.

She hears the gunshots. They echo hollowly through the halls. Now comes the shouting. Her heart beats faster. She can feel the blood rushing to her head.

No one's at the door yet, but the gunfire is getting closer. Butts can make out the voices of four men as they run down the hallways, pounding on classroom doors.

She locks the door and turns off the classroom lights. Now, with the sun down, the room is black. She goes to the bookcase and pushes it away from the wall, then huddles behind it, getting as low as she can. Her face is in the dust of the floor, her knees tucked beneath her body.

Someone opens the classroom door. A bit of light streams into the front of the room. She holds her breath. A man walks in. She hears his footsteps stop near her hiding place.

"Ollie ollie oxen free," the man calls out. Then he walks back to the front of the class and turns on the lights.

Butts stands up. She wipes the dust from her clothes as best she can and comes out from behind the bookcase with a smile on her face.

This is the third time they've run this drill, and Butts is ready to start hitting back. During the next simulated school attack, she'll get to hit the intruders with a chair or fire extinguisher.

Walking into the hallway, she sees other administrators and teachers leaving classrooms, their clothes also dirty from hiding beneath desks, behind bookcases or in coat closets.

She also sees two men she has never met, their guns at their sides. Vaughn Baker and Mark Warren, along with four other men, all of them similarly armed, have been training Butts and her staff since 8 a.m.

"It was so valuable to feel yourself in that role," Butts says of the exercise. "You try to plan, but you really don't know what it's going to feel like. The reality is, you realize pretty quickly there's not a lot of places to hide in those classrooms, and if you want to protect your kids, there's only so many options you really have."

The plan to train Missouri's teachers in school-defense strategies dates back to an October 2006 morning at Memorial Middle School in Joplin. A 13-year-old boy wearing a dark-green trench coat walked into school and pointed a Mac-90 assault rifle at his classmates. Though an administrator tried to talk him out of using it, the boy fired a round into the ceiling before he was arrested. The day ended without bloodshed — mainly because the attacker's gun jammed.

After that, Paul Fennewald, coordinator with the [Missouri Office of Homeland Security](#), started a task force to study public schools' plans in the event of a shooter. The group discovered that there were hardly any plans.

Following the April 2007 Virginia Tech massacre that left 32 dead, the task force studied Missouri's colleges. Fewer than 30 percent of schools — and 30 percent of the fire departments in their response range — had done any planning.

"That's a glaring weakness," Fennewald tells *The Pitch*. "If you have a catastrophe like a Virginia Tech or a Columbine, you need more than just your campus security ready to react. Some schools had great plans, but a lot didn't. There was no consistency."

For the last two years, Fennewald has been trying to get Missouri's schools prepared. He asked schools to make diagrams and submit floor plans for cops and firefighters. But those wouldn't help the teachers and students who would be trapped, waiting for help.

"We went to every agency that would have a dog in the fight to try and figure out what to do," he says. "We talked to parent-teacher groups, school counselors, nurses, first responders, you name it. And the idea to do shooter response training was one of the things to come out of all that discussion."

With the Missouri Sheriffs' Association, they agreed on what type of training they would need. Then they started accepting bids.

Beating out more than a dozen agencies across the country for the one-year, \$100,000 contract were Baker and Warren, who call themselves Strategos.

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In Grandview's business district, there's a warehouse with a sign that reads "Rolox Home Center." Often, no one's at the front desk. In the back is a warehouse filled with home-construction implements, stacks of insulators, and an open bay where flatbed trucks ship the company's wares. The fluorescent lights hum. It smells like plywood.

In the far back corner is a wooden staircase with no signs leading to an unmarked door.

On the other side of the door is the dummy. Its blank face partially hidden by a handkerchief, it's dressed in a pair of camouflage pants and a long-sleeved black shirt. At its side is an empty gun holster.



Image on the side of their trailer

These are the cramped offices of [Strategos International](#), co-owned by Baker, a 42-year-old family man and former police officer with SWAT team experience. Standing just under 6 feet tall, he walks with the good posture and measured movements of a man who has spent his life training to defend himself. His office, which he shares with the rest of the staff, sits across from a supply room stocked with plastic

flashlights, tactical assault-response manuals, hydration systems, holsters, pouches, backpacks, and knives with serrated blades that fold into the handles.

Baker goes into the supply room and reaches for a stack of magazine-sized manuals wrapped in cellophane. He withdraws one volume authored by his company: *A Law Enforcement Officer's Guide to The Strategies of Low-Light Engagements*. On the cover, a man wearing what appears to be body armor shines a light into the book's corner, illuminating the Strategos International logo of a silhouetted figure pointing a gun before a target symbol.

"There you go," he says, "a little light bathroom reading."

Strategos International started in 2001, when Baker was a police officer in Lee's Summit.

At the time, he and Warren had a plan to demonstrate and sell products — such as ballistic shield packages and active-shooter response first-breaching kits that include hatchets and bolt cutters — to private law-enforcement agencies and military units. Some of their business would come from teaching people with concealed carry permits how to use guns, or from reviewing security plans for business owners worried about break-ins, but they planned to spend most of their time as consultants.

Baker is also a regular churchgoer. The pastor at [Abundant Life Baptist Church](#) in Lee's Summit is a former cop, and many in the 2,000-member congregation are cops who had joined to support the pastor's new vocation. When you get that many cops under one roof, eventually they're going to talk about safety. In 2006, Baker agreed to put together a security protocol.

"We just wanted the church to be safer, and on our Web site you see we're a Christian business, so we put a program together," Baker says. On the site, the company's mission statement quotes Romans 13:3-6:

*3 For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? Do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: 4 For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil. 5 Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake. 6 For this cause pay ye tribute also: for they are God's ministers, attending continually upon this very thing.*

On the site's home page, potential clients are otherwise greeted by the image of a heavily equipped and armored man firing a huge gun into a blazing field of yellow explosions.

Strategos ended up reviewing and writing protocols for checking kids in and out of the church day care, reviewing the personal histories of anyone who worked at the church, and safeguarding church members who work with children from false accusations of child abuse. They also planned responses in case someone decided to attack the church — on Sunday, March 8, a 27-year-old gunman, Terry Sedlacek, walked into a church service in Maryville, Illinois, and has been charged with shooting and killing the pastor and injuring two parishioners.

The program turned out to be so popular that other churches requested their own safety procedures. Today, Strategos International has worked with 25 churches in the metro and another 10 around the state.

Along with the church business came more requests from private companies for safety reviews and from cops who decided they wanted a little extra training for themselves or their wives. Baker spends most of his time traveling around the country — for example, teaching a "Strategies of Low-Light Engagements" course one week in Florida, a law-enforcement response to active shooters in Indiana, or a five-day SWAT team tactics course in Arizona. This February, he and a handful of employees spent five days with the Missouri Department of Mental Health planning for the possibility of a mentally impaired patient doing something violent.

As business grew, Baker no longer had time to oversee all training. The company developed a singular approach for hiring personnel who now train at schools, churches and businesses. Potential new hires have to spend long days doing grunt work on the road — essentially, they're being driven to the breaking point to test their character.

"We'll pay expenses, but they won't get paid as staff or anything else until we've known them for months," Baker says. "They all have police or military backgrounds, but I want to see the stuff they can't put on their résumés, and after a 14-hour day — that's when you start to really see who people are."

When Baker heard about the plan to overhaul Missouri's public-education safety procedures, he knew they should apply. Baker had been preparing such a curriculum since 1999, when he was still an officer in Lee's Summit and heard about the Columbine shooting.



**Subject(s):**

[Strategos](#), [Vaughn Baker](#), [Mark Warren](#), [Richmond School District](#)

By the end of the year, 32 of Missouri's schools will be ready for an attack.

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Students and administrators have been killing each other for generations.

The worst attack on a school took place in the Bath Township of Michigan in 1927, when a disgruntled school-board member, Andrew Kehoe, set off explosions inside and outside a school, killing 45 and wounding 58. Most victims were elementary-school students. Supposedly upset over a property tax, Kehoe started the day by killing his wife and setting his farm on fire before heading toward the school. He then set off bombs using dynamite and other explosives that he had smuggled into the school over several months. Eventually, he killed himself and others by driving his car up to the school while rescue work was under way, then setting off a bomb inside it. For good measure, he had loaded the vehicle with shrapnel.

Baker says people are in denial if they think some dramatic change occurs in a town or school to create the atmosphere that results in such an attack. "What do you think the difference is the day before this happens, and the day after?" he asks.

The most common problem, Baker says, is school administrators who think they're immune.

"Overall schools are safe places to be. Whether you're talking about a narcotics deal going bad or some kid who brings a gun to school, all in all those incidents don't result in death. There are only 50 to 60 deaths in schools every year. With the number of students going to school, the odds of something happening are about a million to one. But that doesn't mean things can't happen.

"A lot of smaller schools think only big cities have to worry," Baker adds. "But the truth is, half of these cases happen in towns with populations under 10,000."

Part of the Strategos plan encourages schools to start tracking their own threats so they can chart patterns in school violence and improve their responses over time.

There's one thing they need to work on now, though, regardless of their safety protocols or exit strategies or how well teachers can swing the flagpoles hanging above their chalkboards.

Before any teacher learns to fight back, Baker spends 45 minutes lecturing about a federal study of school shooters. Forget the outcast in the black trench coat, Baker says. Just pay attention to whether a kid talks about killing people.

"There absolutely is no profile," Baker says. "Some shooters have been kids with good grades and lots of friends. It's really all over the place. But, in almost 85 percent of cases, the attacker told someone beforehand. In a lot of cases, no one takes them seriously. There's one on record where the shooter told 25 people exactly what he was going to do, and no one said anything. We've got to create an atmosphere where people can talk about these things."

Baker tells schools to invest in a database so officials can keep track of incidents in which kids talk about killing people. After all, Baker cautions, some stages of planning could rise to the level of criminal conspiracy regardless of whether a kid carried out his plans.

Strategos started its Missouri trainings in January. Once this year is over, if the response is good, the state's Office of Homeland Security might extend the contract by another year. And while Baker says he hasn't planned for much after this year's contract, he knows the experience could position Strategos to take its school-defense tactics nationwide.

"My understanding is that a lot of states haven't done anything like this, but I think some are looking into it," he says. "If this type of thing is something that others pursue, not a lot of other companies are going to have the type of experience we have doing this."

Almost everything in Strategos' training requires people to act against their instincts.

In training, Strategos does its best to simulate a school under siege. Trainers set off alarms and shoot guns, not just to get their trainees' adrenaline pumping but also because, in the past, people have reacted to such situations in specific — and disastrous — ways.

"We set off a gun because during the attack on Columbine, a woman heard the gun, walked out into the hallway, and someone shot her," Baker says. "If you hear something that sounds like gunfire, you need to assume it is."

He teaches a three-pronged strategy: lock out, get out and take out.

The first is the simplest: Lock and barricade the classroom door at the sound of gunfire. Turn out the lights and stay quiet so the room looks empty and the shooter moves on.

This is the only step that most schools have considered.

"We've talked about locking up a classroom before but never really planned much after that," admits Butts, the assistant principal at South Valley Middle School.

Baker says most teachers assume that, if they're on a ground floor, they should try to get their students out the windows before an assailant reaches their classrooms. Or, if a gunman gets in, they should hide behind furniture. Both are wrong.

"A lot of people will say your instincts are the highest form of human response," Baker says. "But we train to overcome our instincts. It's perfectly natural to be scared and hide in a corner. It doesn't mean that's the best course of action."

In one school attack, two students pulled the fire alarm and waited like snipers outside to shoot their classmates and teachers — who couldn't run back into the building because they had followed fire-evacuation protocol and locked the school doors behind them. Baker trains teachers to ignore fire alarms and keep children inside until they don't have a choice, even if there's a man with a gun 50 feet down the hallway.

"There hasn't been a child killed or hurt in a school fire in 25 years," Baker says. "Schools are designed not to burn. But if someone's about to start a fire in a room with you, or someone's actually coming into the room, that's the time you get out." Thus, the "get out" part of the strategy. If you're on the ground floor, head for the windows.

But if it's the third floor, and a shooter's forcing his way into the room and students are huddled behind a bookcase — that's when the Strategos approach diverges from the average person's instincts. Almost all teachers, Baker says, want to stay in their hiding places. Baker wants them to find a weapon and fight. Chairs and flags are good and probably easy to grab in such a situation. A fire extinguisher is even better — not only can it be used as a blunt weapon but its chemicals also can blind an attacker.

Baker says he always makes it clear that it's the teacher's or administrator's responsibility — not the students' — to take that shot.

"What we tell teachers is the same thing a soccer coach tells a goalie: If you're going to get beat, get beat doing something," he says. "Most gunshot wounds are survivable — if you don't let them take their time and shoot you wherever they want."