

# Motivational speaker says kindness matters in schools

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Putting a “human face on school security,” motivational speaker Stephen Sroka told an audience in Baton Rouge on Friday that more Tasers and metal detectors won’t make schools safe.

Better to win the loyalty and harness the collective power of students, he said.

“Today we need to have a focus on student detectors, not metal detectors,” he said.

Sroka was the opening speaker at the National African American School Board Members Association’s annual convention, held in Baton Rouge for the first time. The convention, which is being sponsored by the East Baton Rouge Parish School Board, concludes Sunday.

Sroka said schools are criticized despite offering students the “safest place they will be all day,” but they can’t avoid problems the youth bring in from outside.

“People call it school violence. There is no school violence. There is community violence that takes place in schools. And until we have a safer community, we won’t have safer schools.”

A retired educator from Cleveland public schools, Sroka now travels the country talking to groups. He also visits schools beset by tragedy, or works with them to implement his “Power of One” prevention program.

On Wednesday, a 14-year-old suspended student walked into one of those Cleveland schools and shot two teachers and two students before killing himself.

“How the hell did this kid get two guns to walk into school? Three knives? A box of ammunition? It’s the school’s fault?” Sroka asked.

Schools, however, can help by forging more personal connections with their children and helping them get help for their many problems, he said.

Even small gestures pay off. Sroka said a former student of his thanked him for simply saying hi to him every day — a courtesy no one else extended.

“You have saved kids’ lives in ways you don’t even know,” he said.

Sroka said he’s visited at least seven schools in the wake of shootings and found each time that the shooter was picked on repeatedly.



*Motivational speaker Stephen Sroka on Friday tells attendees at the National African American School Board Members Association’s conference different ways they can make schools safer. The conference is at the Sheraton Hotel in downtown Baton Rouge and continues through Sunday.*

“Words kill,” he said. “The boy in Cleveland was beat up. People called him names.”

Sroka never sat still Friday. He walked back and forth among his audience in the Sheraton Hotel, passed out “Power of One” wristbands and gave most of the crowd a hug. A succession of projected images punctuated his rapid-fire talk, which he said he often gives to younger audiences.

Sroka had something to say about almost every educational issue:

“No Child Left Behind is leaving most of our kids behind.”

“The war isn’t in Iraq. The war is right here.”

“We’re trying to teach hip-hop kids in old-school ways.”

“Our kids don’t have a moral compass. So how do they make the right decision?”

“Those of you that are judgmental, have never been humbled. I’ve been humbled.”

Although he ranged around, Sroka repeatedly returned to the importance of adults making personal connections with kids. The rage kids have is often tied to the absence of such connections, he said.

“Often the toughest kid I have to talk to is the biggest baby,” he said.

More aggressive disciplinary techniques, such as zero tolerance policies, tend to backfire, he said.

“I would suggest to you that in the end, only kindness matters,” he said.