

May 2019

ONcall

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Increase community confidence in your school safety efforts

Keeping students safe at school is one of the most important priorities in any school district. School safety experts plan for and mitigate against everything from environmental risks like air quality and water issues to stranger danger and physical threats from violent behavior.

School shootings are high-profile examples of the tragedies that put student safety at risk. Although they are only rare occurrences, they are terrifying and tragic and they dominate the public perception of school safety. These are the types of threats that can keep school leaders awake at night and have parents questioning whether to send their children to class for the day.

Schools can't function effectively when safety is a constant preoccupation. School leaders have two challenges: the first is to ensure student safety, and the second is to share their school safety efforts and improve partnerships that increase confidence that schools are safe.

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Planning for safety

Districts have many resources to assist with safety plans and threat assessment. State departments of education, school board associations, administrator groups and public safety experts can offer guidance, sample plans, assessments and consultant services. Some online resources include:

Student Threat Assessment

www.studentthreatassessment.org

John Van Dreal is a school psychologist and school safety and threat assessment expert. He has developed a threat assessment system, and he provides trainings for school staff, community agencies and law enforcement officers.

National Association of Elementary School Principals: School Safety Resources

www.naesp.org/school-safety-resources

These helpful articles, websites, and checklists will help you guide your school community through the prevention, management, and aftermath of safety issues.

National Conference of State Legislatures: School Safety Overview and Legislative Tracking

www.ncsl.org/research/education/school-safety.aspx

A new resource by the National Conference of State Legislatures addressing state school safety laws — both current and proposed. The site includes an interactive graphic for school safety legislation and additional resources.

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The important thing is to have a safety plan and share that you have a safety plan, but sharing all of the details of your plan is not recommended. Local law enforcement and public safety officers can review the plan — and should be an integral part of developing it. They may have guidance on which specifics you should not share, such as building aerial photos or blueprints.

Partner with your community

It is a challenge to understand and prepare for all of the potential risks to students when they come through the school doors, but threats to physical safety from others require constant vigilance and strong partnerships from public safety agencies, community members, parents, staff and students. After your safety plan has been developed, reviewed and tested, the communication plan and crisis communication plan should be developed to support it. This, too, should have input and buy-in from all partners.

“The tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School has shown that violence in our schools and communities is not a school problem or a community problem — it is both. While it is important to help principals address the immediate safety needs in schools — like installing the deadbolt on the classroom doors, or fixing the outside lock on the gymnasium door — principals have and are taking action to make schools safer than ever before. A principal’s first responsibility is to foster a safe, orderly, warm, and inviting environment. To be effective, schools must be able to provide intervention and supports for students and families, and draw upon the collective resources of the entire learning community.”

*Gail Connelly, Executive Director, National Association of Elementary School Principals
www.naesp.org/communicator-january-2013/student-safety-principal-s-first-priority*

Be sure to plan for trainings and develop specific communications for each audience that will be affected by or play a role in your safety plan. This includes communicating with administrators, teachers, support staff, parent clubs and extracurricular program staff.

Tell your community about your safety efforts, but don’t tell them everything.

Public safety officials should review your communication plans. This is an area where full transparency in communications is not advised. Posting your safety plan is a good idea, but elements that include specifics about your responses or your school buildings, such as blueprints, might not be. A law enforcement perspective may be helpful.

Be sure to have clear strategies outlined in your crisis communication plans as well. Define protocol for sharing information on social media that considers the safety of students and their parents who may try to race to the school in the early stages of an incident. Try to clarify when and what you will share at each stage of an event or possible event to prevent early or widespread panic that could create additional safety hazards.

Tip lines encourage threat reporting

Prevention is the key to school safety. Do you have a mechanism for reporting safety concerns? Many safety experts say that vigilant students and community members are key to preventing safety threats and school violence. Based on research that shows school shooters often leak their intentions beforehand, early reporting is one of the most effective ways to keep schools safe. Students often do not want to publicly report their concerns about fellow students, but will report anonymously. For example, Pennsylvania’s new tip line system has received thousands of reports in just the first month of operation (Education Week, <http://bit.ly/2IaRD2p>)

Many states have implemented optional or required tip line systems for schools. “At least 19 states now have systems to encourage reporting of school safety concerns and at least eight others are developing them. Some states that have had tip lines for a while say they have helped prevent real threats.” PBS News Hour, <http://bit.ly/2IaRD2p>

These reporting systems have proven to be effective threat prevention tools if people know about them. They should be part of school safety communication planning to ensure that students and parents know what they are and how to use them.

Contributed by Jay Remy, communications consultant