School Safety and Crisis

School Violence Prevention:
Guidelines for Administrators and Crisis Teams

School administrators and crisis team members can create safe, secure, and peaceful schools free from the destructive influence of violence in all of its forms. To do that, schools must implement purposeful, coordinated strategies to increase levels of safety and security and simultaneously promote student wellness and resilience. These efforts improve students' readiness to learn and build positive school climates.

School violence is a broad term that includes overt aggressive behaviors such as physical fights on campus, bullying (including online bullying or cyber-bullying), physical assault, bombing, arson, or other deliberate means of causing harm to the staff and students. Sadly, it includes rare, tragic, devastating school shootings. In addition, school violence includes more covert behaviors that increase fear and diminish school safety such as threats of injury at school, weapons possession, and harassment. In some communities, gangs recruit school-age students to be members and contribute to violence in schools.

When violence occurs at school, trust is violated, which thereby diminishes schools' efforts to attain their primary mission of educating all students and helping them to reach their full potential. While not all instances of violence can be prevented, policies and procedures that support a balanced cross-discipline approach to school safety and emphasize clear communication, foster positive personal connectedness, and implement evidence-based support will be most effective in preventing school violence.

STRATEGIES FOR CREATING SAFE SCHOOLS

Efforts to reduce school violence are most successful when they use multiple strategies selected specifically for each school's needs. No single strategy or program will create a safe school and effective efforts require collaboration among administrators, teachers, school psychologists, other school mental health professionals, school resource officers, parents, students, and community agencies.

Create school–community safety partnerships. First, it is critical to engage in a systematic planning process to understand the school's safety challenges and opportunities. Establish a school leadership team that includes key personnel: principals, teachers, school-employed mental health professionals, instruction professionals, school resource officers, community members, and a professional skilled in data collection and analysis.

Conduct a needs assessment for planning and selecting programs and interventions. School safety measures should be geared to the specific needs and culture of the school community. A

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needs assessment can identify strengths and risks, such as the types of violence that occur, the context in which they occur, the most frequent victims, and the effectiveness of discipline procedures and existing intervention efforts. The needs assessment should also look at staff members' specific strengths and existing resources that may be deployed more effectively. The resulting data help guide decisions regarding program and strategy selection and professional development.

Establish comprehensive school crisis response plans. It is critical to have crisis plans for multiple crisis situations with clearly defined roles for each member of the multidisciplinary crisis team. Plans should also consider the importance of the mental health response to minimize the traumatic impact of such events. Therefore, crisis response plans should have explicit procedures for reaffirming physical health, ensuring perceptions of safety and security, reestablishing social support, evaluating psychological trauma risk, and providing the interventions appropriate for the level of risk.

Balance measures to ensure both physical and psychological safety. Intruder-based, armed violence is not only extremely rare but also extremely difficult to prevent. Solutions that may seem obvious and simple, such as metal detectors and armed security officers may not be the most effective means of prevention. Schools cannot be barricaded against all possible harm. Trying to do so is counterproductive to maintaining a healthy learning environment. Excessive building security does not promote a sense of safety or student well-being (and can undermine it), nor does it provide a guarantee of safety when an armed intruder is willing to die. Reasonable physical security—such as locked doors; lighted and monitored hallways; and visitor check-in, check-out systems—must be combined with violence prevention and positive behavior supports.

Enhance efforts to create and maintain a positive school climate that promotes learning, psychological health, and student success. School administrators must balance physical security with efforts that foster student resiliency, connectedness, and social competency. Central to this effort is helping students and their families feel valued and personally invested in keeping their schools safe. This relates to teaching codes of conduct, bullying prevention, conflict resolution, personal responsibility, respect, and compassion. Promoting trusting student-adult relationships is essential to students feeling safe and empowered to report potentially dangerous activity (including threats of violence and suicide). Such reporting is one of the most effective school safety strategies.

Respond systematically to all threats made by students. Schools can and must respond to all threats that students (and others) make on school campuses. Use a threat assessment approach for evaluating and intervening with students' potential violent behavior. Although research shows that the vast majority of student threats of school violence do not result in actual violence, they nonetheless provide opportunities to better understand and respond to any special needs of the students making the threats and the students being threatened. Each threat needs to be reviewed and threat response efforts at school should be based on research-validated procedures. Collaboration and communication with other education, mental health, and law enforcement agencies is essential to an effective process, which should be incorporated into the school safety plan and training.

Promote antiviolence initiatives that include prevention programs for all students. General interventions include school-wide violence prevention programs. These activities encourage all students to experience positive emotional development and to use nonviolent means to resolve their

personal conflicts. Such programs are natural bridges between interventions that focus on individual change and those seeking to establish the positive climate and culture of the school.

Provide adequate access to mental health services and supports. Mental health, behavior, safety, and learning are integral to one another. Yet only a fraction of students in need actually receive mental health services, and among those who do, the majority access those services in school. In many schools, however, the availability of school-based mental health professionals remains inadequate. School administrators should consider how their school-based mental health personnel are engaged and then consider advocating for more staff members if necessary. School psychologists, counselors, and social workers can offer assessment and counseling to students and can consult with families and teachers to provide effective interventions and supports. They are trained to do so within multitiered systems of support, such as Response to Intervention, which promotes learning and sustainability of supports over time.

Intervene with students who experience significant school behavioral adjustment problems. Implement strategies that foster students' social–emotional skills that are associated with adaptive coping and resilience. For students who are experiencing social and/or psychological distress, the complex problems they face require the coordination of interventions across school and community agencies. Schools alone cannot address the myriad needs of these students. For this small number of students, cooperative agreements may be needed with community mental health, juvenile probation, child welfare services, alcohol and drug treatment, and other youth and family-serving agencies.

SUMMARY

There is no single or simple solution to making schools safe. It is a multifaceted, ongoing effort that requires commitment and participation from all stakeholders. Any act of school violence is unacceptable; so is failing to act with clarity and diligence on the lessons learned from so many tragedies and honed by the work of educators across the country. The challenge for school leaders and mental health professionals is to work together to put that knowledge into practice. When an entire community commits to reducing violence, the health and well-being of its children and youth are enhanced.

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