

Ten Steps to Safer Schools

Security for students and staff begins with planning

BY RONALD D. STEPHENS

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Safe schools do not happen automatically. They require the collaboration and support of students, staff, parents, and the community. And they require sound policies.

Some, but not all, of these policies involve money. Every school district ultimately pays for safe schools, either now through safety measures, or later through litigation. In cases involving drugs or violence, it is not uncommon to see judgments against school boards run between \$25,000 and \$1 million and beyond. And whenever a suit arises from a serious incident involving school personnel on a school campus, you can be certain that the plaintiff's attorney will name not only the person who committed the act, but also the administrators and school board members, who are responsible for the supervision and management of all school employees.

The good news is that preventing problems is usually cheaper, and easier, than cleaning up after them. As school leaders, you can take 10 important steps to prevent problems and keep your schools safe:

Include safety in your district's mission statement. School violence is incompatible with the educational mission. Although this idea might seem obvious, it is nevertheless critical to place school safety on the education agenda. A sound mission statement supporting the goal of safe and drug free schools provides the legal basis for school board policies that work toward meeting that goal. In recent years, for instance, courts have upheld actions by school officials that are consistent with the district's mission statement. When school safety was not included in the mission statement, the actions school officials take to keep their districts safe may be more difficult to defend.

A good mission statement might say, "It is the goal of ABC Community Public Schools to provide a safe, secure, drug-free, and welcoming environment for all students and those professionals who serve them."

Craft individual safe-school plans. The safety needs of a K-3 building are quite different from the safety needs of an alternative high school for teenagers with behavior problems. Every school site should have a comprehensive safety plan that addresses its own educational, supervisory, social, and cultural needs. Bring in local police, health professionals, ministers, youth leaders, parents, and other community members to help school representatives develop a safety plan that fits the individual needs of each school.

The goal in each school should be to provide the least restrictive environment for students. Sometimes that might mean requiring uniforms, installing metal detectors, or conducting searches of lockers and cars.

Written behavior codes should be publicized and distributed to students, staff, and teachers. Expectations should be clearly communicated, consistently enforced, and fairly applied. Rules--and the entire safe-school plan--should be reviewed and updated regularly.

Develop written agreements with other youth-serving agencies. It is virtually impossible for school board members and administrators alone to keep schools safe. That's why it's important to create alliances with law enforcement officials the district attorney and prosecutor; the probation department the presiding juvenile court judge; and social, health, and welfare agencies.

Many communities develop written agreements--sometimes called "joint powers agreements" or "memoranda of understanding"--that spell out how the schools and youth-serving agencies will work together to serve young people in need. For instance, it's a good idea to coordinate with the department of social services, the courts, and law enforcement agencies when dealing with runaways or students with truancy problems.

Creating such alliances and agreements can make schools safer while bringing new resources into the educational community at little or no extra cost. Because kids spend about 25 percent of their waking hours in school, it makes sense to provide needed services through the school--and let other agencies help pick up the tab.

Establish crisis-management policies that include staff training. Each school and district needs a workable crisis-management plan that involves school personnel, students, parents, law enforcement officials, community emergency services, and the media. Individual schools should develop and publicize written policies and instructions for staff, students, and parents to follow during specific types of emergencies.

Procedures should include plans for communication within the school, as well as with the police and the media, about such matters as parent notification, pupil dismissal, transportation, resumption of classes, and any counseling necessary because of a crisis.

But the plan won't work properly without training. Administrators, teachers, staff, and students all need training and practice in emergency procedures. Ongoing training in classroom management, sound discipline practices, and school safety procedures go a long way toward preserving schools as safe havens for learning.

Conduct annual school-safety site assessments. School facilities that are poorly managed and maintained invite trouble and serve as a basis for liability. With that in mind, remove landscape and architectural barriers that restrict natural supervision, repair broken windows and malfunctioning doors, and clear away immediately any maintenance hazards and vandalism that compromise school safety. Annual site safety assessments and regular

campus inspections will encourage students and staff members to develop feelings of ownership and school pride.

In addition, every school should have a comprehensive and systematic crime-reporting process that includes maintaining and analyzing written records about school crime incidents. Such records, along with community crime data obtained from local law enforcement agencies, can be valuable student-management tools that help determine what incidents might be linked to other incidents and situation on campus.

Exercise full custodial responsibility. Your school board has a keen fiduciary and custodial interest in ensuring that the assets of schools remain intact for future children coming through the system. Use this interest as the basis for developing policies about what is and is not allowed on school property.

Make clear, for instance, that students are not allowed to bring contraband onto school property--and that school parking lots are school property. Parking permit agreements should stipulate that, for reasons of student health and safety and in return for the privilege of parking on campus, students' vehicles may be searched at any time. Students should also know that school lockers are school property and may be searched at any time.

Share information among schools and staff members about dangerous conditions or people. There's a nationwide trend toward requiring school officials to be notified of dangerous people in and near schools. Congress and various state legislatures have passed version of "Megan's Law," named after a child who was killed by a convicted child molester in her neighborhood. These laws require schools and neighbors to be notified when a convicted child molester lives nearby.

The trend also runs toward notifying school officials when dangerous students are transferred into or within a school district. The Federal Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) allows states to pass legislation to improve information sharing among school officials about students with histories of disciplinary problems. Texas, California, and Florida now require that school officials be informed when students with a history of violence are enrolled in their schools, and similar efforts are under way in other states. Such information should not be used to stigmatize students, but to ensure that appropriate supervision and education strategies are used so no harm comes to anyone.

Screen new employees. One district learned the importance of security checks the hard way: It unknowingly hired a security officer who had raped a girl, and with a year, he raped a girl in the district. Increasingly, school administrators and board members are realizing the importance of requiring district wide record-screening and background checks of potential school employees. Crimes are being committed, and school districts are being sued because they did not seek pertinent data that would have revealed past crimes and misbehaviors.

Thorough background checks take time, and sometimes a position must be filled immediately--before the check can be completed. But at the very least, your local police

department should be able to check an applicant's record with the National Criminal Information Center within 24 hours.

The National School Safety Center (NSSC) has developed guidelines for background checks in a manual that includes an appropriate background disclosure statement, release form, and employer disclosure statement. For information about obtaining copies, call NSSC at (805)373-9977.

Evaluate employees, and remove those who are incompetent or pose a risk to children. School boards are responsible for the performance of every employee under their supervision. In addition to establishing job performance criteria and an equitable system of periodic observations and evaluations, your board should develop a system for recognizing and dealing with employees who are arrested for criminal offenses. Every case involving the arrest of a school employee demands the board's full attention and review.

Action can be taken at the local or state level. For example, although not required to do so by state law, the Indianapolis Public Schools has a district wide policy requiring school officials to run two criminal background checks on all employees annually, one every six months. And Idaho has a state law that provides for background checks on new employees and authorizes background checks on current employees who have been on the job for five years or less.

Stay in touch with students. When something terrible happens in school, students often tell reporters, "I was afraid something like this would happen." If you know what kids are worrying about, you might be able to do something about it--and prevent a tragedy.

Visit schools, talk with kids, see what their typical days are like, listen to their worries, and encourage parents and teachers to do the same. Typically, students will not volunteer information about being victimized or worried about school safety to their teachers, school administrators, law enforcement officials, or even their own parents. If adults want to find out what is going on, we have to ask.

Here are some good ice-breakers: "Are there areas of the campus you avoid?" "Do you know of any initiation rites for new students?" "Are drugs easily available on campus?" "Have you ever seen a weapon at school? The important thing is to get the dialogue going and establish a climate of trust. If we listen, students will offer some incredible insights, and we just might end up with safer schools.

A safe school quiz

How safe are the schools in your district? The National School Safety Center (NSSC) has developed this quiz to help gauge the situation at individual school:

1. Has your community crime rate increased over the past 12 months?
2. Are more than 15 percent of your work orders vandalism-related?

3. Do you have an open campus?
4. Has an underground student newspaper emerged?
5. Is the transiency rate increasing in your community?
6. Do you have an increasing presence of graffiti in your community?
7. Do you have an increasing presence of gangs in your community?
8. Is your truancy rate increasing?
9. Are you suspension and expulsion rates increasing?
10. Have you had increased conflicts about dress styles, food service, or types of music played at special events?
11. Do you have an increasing number of students on probation at your school?
12. Have you had isolated racial fights?
13. Have you reduced the number of extracurricular programs and sports at your school?
14. Are parents withdrawing students from your school because of fear?
15. Has your professional development budget for staff been reduced or eliminated?
16. Are you discovering more weapons on campus?
17. Do you lack written screening and selection guidelines for new staff members?
18. Are drugs easily available in or around school buildings?
19. Does your annual staff turnover rate exceed 25 percent?
20. Have you had a student demonstration or other signs of unrest within the past 12 months?

Scoring

If you've answered Yes to four or fewer questions, your school has no significant safety problem. Yes to between five and nine questions indicates you have an emerging school safety problem and should develop a safe-school plan. If you've answer Yes to between 10 and 14 questions, your school has a significant potential for violence, and a safe-school plan should be a top priority. If you've answered Yes to more than 14 questions, you are sitting on a ticking time bomb. Begin working on your safe-school plan immediately. Get help from local law enforcement agencies, consultants, maybe even architectural designers.

You can also call on the NSSC, which provides training and technical assistance to schools nationwide, including school-site safety assessments, crime prevention, and safe-school planning. For further information, contact NSSC at 4165 Thousand Oaks Blvd., Suite 290, Westlake Village, CA 91362; (805)373-9977.--R.D.S.