

School Safety: What Really Works

Ensuring students' safety is a complex, ongoing concern of every educator, and knowing the effective practices regarding school safety is essential.

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Normally this column begins with a brief scenario illustrating the relevance of the issue being addressed to schools, learning, and principal leadership. In this case, such an illustration seems unnecessary, even inadequate. The heartbreaking deaths of 20 children and 6 school staff members at Sandy Hook Elementary School provides an all too real and painful reminder of the challenge of keeping schools safe.

The tragedy is far from the only horrific example of the most extreme stakes at hand, but because of its very nature, it shook the country to its core, perhaps no more so than for educators. Just as every parent saw themselves in the unbearable loss and grief of those families, every principal, teacher, and school psychologist saw themselves in the Sandy Hook staff's determination to safeguard the students in their care and felt the loss of those valued professionals.

In the days and weeks that have followed, principals across the country have felt the weight of responding to members of their school community seeking guarantees that "it won't ever happen here."

Leadership During Crises

Crises can bring into stark perspective the core meaning of "principal leadership": the responsibility to guide the school community through challenges when the stakes are high and there is no simple solution. A sense of anxiety and urgency are normal responses to crises and are often felt most strongly when there are no guarantees. The challenge is to not let increased anxiety over this most recent tragedy obscure the proven fundamentals of school safety and violence prevention. Effective school safety is a day-in, day-out commitment that infuses every aspect of school life with an unwavering focus on supporting learning as well as student well-being. Moreover, school safety and crisis

response are interconnected, and principles of comprehensive prevention and preparedness not only minimize incidents of violence but also support response and recovery when the unpreventable occurs.

Perhaps most important, school safety planning must be conducted and communicated within the context that schools are among the safest places for children and youth. Principals must reinforce this message for their staff members, families, and students, particularly in the aftermath of a high-profile incident.

Violent deaths at school are extremely rare. In the 2009–10 school year, the odds of a young person ages 5–18 years being the victim of a homicide at school, on their way to school, or at a school-sponsored event was 1 in 2.5 million (US Center for Disease Control, 2012). The odds of being killed in the community were 1 in 21,000. Far more common threats to student well-being come in the form of scuffles in the hallway, bullying and harassment, and risky behaviors. We need to ground our focus on school safety in preventing these more-prevalent risks.

Created in collaboration with the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) and the School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA) to facilitate partnerships between principals and school psychologists and to remove barriers to learning. Additional resources are available at www.nasponline.org/resources/principals.

Guiding Principles

Crises often bring opportunities to strengthen positive capacities. School leaders can take this opportunity to review their schools' safety initiatives and crisis plans, reinforce what is working well, and enhance efforts that are lacking. The following effective school safety principles reflect broad consensus among school safety experts, with much of the research-to-practice base having been developed by school psychologists over the past decade. School psychologists have broad knowledge of the issues and should be core members of school safety and crisis teams.

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.

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 that do, the majority access those services in school. In many schools, however, the availability of school-based mental health professionals remains inadequate. Principals 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 testing and direct counseling as well as work with families and teachers to provide cohesive interventions and supports. They are trained to do so within multitiered systems of support, such as response to intervention, which is important to promoting learning and sustainability of supports over time. Equally important, school-employed mental health professionals coordinate with community services to ensure that all students receive the support they need.

Use data for planning and selecting programs and interventions. School safety measures should be



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Tips for Reinforcing School Safety

- Create a safe, supportive school climate (e.g., schoolwide behavioral expectations, caring school climate programs, positive interventions and supports, and psychological and counseling services).
- Put violence prevention programs (e.g., bully-proofing, social skill development, conflict mediation) in place.
- Encourage students to take responsibility for their part in maintaining safe school environments, including student participation in safety planning.
- Reiterate the school rules and request that students report potential problems to school officials.
- Remind students of the importance of resisting peer pressure to act irresponsibly.
- Create anonymous reporting systems (e.g., student hot lines, suggestion boxes, and “tell an adult” campaigns).
- Control access to the school building (e.g., designated entrance with all other access points locked from the exterior).
- Monitor school guests.
- Monitor school parking lots and common areas, such as hallways, cafeterias, and playing fields.
- Include the presence of school resource officers, security guards, or local police partnerships.
- Use security systems.
- Develop crisis plans and preparedness training.
- Develop threat assessment and risk-assessment procedures and teams for conducting the assessments.
- Hold regular school preparedness drills (e.g., intruder alerts, weather, fire, lockdown, evacuation).
- Create school-community partnerships to enhance safety measures for students beyond school property.
- Cite school safety incident data. Recent trends have found that school violence nationwide is declining. Many school districts have local data that support this trend. When possible, citing local data helps families and students feel more at ease.

Source: National Association of School Psychologists. (2006). *Tips for school administrators for reinforcing school safety*. Retrieved from www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety/schoolsafety_admin.aspx

geared to the specific needs and culture of the school community. A 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.

Enhance efforts to create and maintain positive school climates that promote learning, psychological health, and student success. Principals 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.

Establish and maintain trained school safety and crisis teams. By all accounts, the crisis planning and training received by the Sandy Hook staff helped them save the lives of their students and colleagues. Training should include ongoing prevention and early intervention as well as

The School Psychologist's Role in School Safety and Crisis Response

- Collect and use assessment data to understand students' problems and to select and implement evidence-based instruction and mental health services.
- Use systematic decision making to consider the antecedents, consequences, functions, and potential causes of behavioral difficulties that may impede learning or socialization.
- Provide developmentally appropriate mental health services, including individual and group counseling, behavioral coaching, classroom and schoolwide social-emotional learning programs, positive behavioral support, and parent education and support.
- Develop and implement behavior change programs at individual, group, classroom, and schoolwide levels that demonstrate the use of appropriate ecological factors (e.g., classroom, family, and community characteristics) and behavioral approaches (e.g., positive reinforcement, social skills training, and positive psychology) to student discipline and classroom management.
- Promote the recognition of risk and protective factors that are vital to understanding and addressing systemic problems.
- Participate in school crisis teams and use data-based decision-making methods, problem-solving strategies, consultation, collaboration, and direct services in the context of crisis prevention, preparation, response, and recovery.
- Develop, implement, and evaluate prevention and intervention programs that are based on risk and protective factors that are precursors to severe learning and behavioral problems.
- Collaborate with school personnel, parents, students, and community resources to provide competent mental health support during and after crisis situations.
- Promote wellness and resilience by collaborating with other healthcare professionals to provide basic knowledge of behaviors that lead to good health for children; facilitating environmental changes that are conducive to good health and adjustment of children; and accessing resources that address a wide variety of behavioral, learning, mental, and physical needs.
- Participate in the implementation and evaluation of programs that promote safe and violence-free schools and communities.
- Facilitate communication and collaboration among diverse school personnel, families, community professionals, and others.

Source: National Association of School Psychologists. (2010). NASP model for comprehensive and integrated school psychological services. Retrieved from www.nasponline.org/standards/2010standards/2_PracticeModel.pdf

response and recovery. Teams should include key administrators, security personnel, school mental health professionals, and other relevant staff members. Plans and training should facilitate collaboration with first responders and community providers. A primary goal should be to reinforce learning as well as safety. Key to this is ensuring that all members of the team are integral members of the school community.

Improve screening and threat assessment procedures to identify and meet the needs of individuals at risk for causing harm to themselves and

others. This function is performed by the school safety team, ideally under the guidance of the school mental health professional. It should be incorporated into a multitiered approach that includes universal mental health screenings and interventions as well as more intensive approaches for students deemed at risk. Collaboration and communication with other education, mental health, and law enforcement agencies are essential to an effective process. This process should be incorporated into school safety plan and training.

NASP Resources

A Framework for School-Wide Bullying Prevention and Safety
www.nasponline.org/resources/bullying/Bullying_Brief_12.pdf

National Emergency Assistance Team
www.nasponline.org/safety_crisis

NASP School Safety and Crisis Resources
www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety/schoolsafety.aspx

PREPaRE School Crisis Prevention and Intervention Training Curriculum
www.nasponline.org/prepare



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.

Conclusion

A school psychologist was killed at Sandy Hook alongside her principal. Mary Sherlach exemplified the role that school psychologists and other school mental health professionals serve in schools. She served students through her work in conflict resolution, positive school climate, crisis intervention, and student instruction. Had she not died, she would now be providing crisis response and recovery services as part of her school safety and crisis team. This would include providing support for teachers and guiding them to help students return to class and a fledgling sense

of normalcy; assessing and providing support to students with trauma reactions; educating and supporting families; coordinating services provided in school by community crisis and trauma experts; and consulting with the principal on the characteristics and stages of recovery for students and staff members, including providing care-for-the-caregiver support.

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. **PL**

REFERENCES

- US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. (2012). *Youth violence: Facts at glance data sheet*. Retrieved from www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/YV-DataSheet-a.pdf

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