Framework for Safe and Successful Schools Toolkit

Sample Key Messages for Safe and Successful Schools

The following are examples of some key messages for improving school safety and increasing access to mental health supports for children and youth. These overarching key messages and corresponding “mini-messages” can be used to advocate for implementation of the Framework for Safe and Successful Schools. They are designed primarily for use with school administrators, educators, and policy makers at the state or local level but they can be adapted as needed for other audiences. When communicating with stakeholders, be sure to adapt messages to fit their perspective. Depending on the context of your advocacy, you may choose to focus on one, or several of the following overarching key messages. However, in all cases, be sure to emphasize the important role of the school psychologist in implementing comprehensive school safety efforts.

Key Message 1. Effective school safety efforts require a comprehensive, whole-school approach.
School safety is more than purchasing a packaged program or buying an expensive piece of security equipment. To be truly effective, school safety efforts must systemically integrate existing programs and resources.

- Comprehensive school safety integrates school climate, effective discipline, social-emotional learning, positive behavior, mental health, and academics through a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS).
- Utilizing an MTSS framework emphasizes prevention and early intervention and helps minimize redundancies and gaps in services.
- An MTSS framework ensures that schools are maximizing the use of available resources including financial and human resources.
- Comprehensive school safety efforts address all forms of harmful behavior including bullying, harassment, fighting, self-harm, as well as violent behavior and crises.
- Effective MTSS systems incorporate the expertise of administrators, teachers, specialized instructional support personnel (e.g. school psychologists), and other educators.

Key Message 2: School safety strategies must balance physical and psychological safety measures.
The primary mission of schools is to promote student learning. Children and youth who do not feel safe at school will not learn to their maximum potential.

- Excessive building security (e.g., metal detectors, security cameras, increased police presence) does not promote a sense of safety or student well-being; in fact, it makes kids feel less safe.
- Reasonable physical security such as locked doors, lighted hallways, and visitor check-in systems must be combined with efforts to promote a positive school climate.
- Schools must build an atmosphere of trust among staff, students, and families where students feel connected and part of a close-knit and community, and in which they feel empowered to report any safety concerns.
Key Message 3: School mental health services are essential to creating and sustaining safe schools.
All services provided in schools should be appropriate to the learning environment. School mental health supports that encompass social–emotional learning, mental wellness, resilience, and positive connections between students and adults are essential to creating a school culture in which students feel safe and empowered to report safety concerns.

- Access to school based mental health services is associated with increased academic achievement and problem solving skills in students.
- School employed mental health professionals (school psychologists, school social workers, and school counselors) are uniquely trained to provide mental health services within the school environment.
- Providing a full continuum of supports to students that fosters a welcoming and supportive school environment is proven to be among the most effective school safety strategies.
- Student support services should be provided by professionals trained to work within the school system to ensure that service are effective, cost effective, and sustainable.
- Following a crisis, school employed mental health professionals can help provide supports that facilitate a return to normalcy, are sustainable, and can help to identify and work with students with more intense or ongoing needs.

Key Message 4: Positive discipline practices help improve school safety and school climate.
Discipline practices should function within an overall MTSS in concert with efforts to address school safety and school climate.

- Positive discipline practices help students feel respected and supported, which improves school climate and school safety.
- Overly harsh and punitive measures, such as zero tolerance policies, have been shown to lead to reduced safety and school connectedness.
- Effective school discipline strategies incorporate family involvement, employ culturally competent practices, and result in the well being of all students and staff.
- Effective school discipline practices require collaboration among parents, administrators, teachers, and specialized instructional support personnel.

Key Message 5. Schools need school safety and crisis plans that are consistently reviewed and practiced.
School safety and crisis response are not separate endeavors, but rather they exist on a continuum. Training, planning, and professional development should encompass ongoing prevention and early intervention efforts as well as response and recovery plans in the event the unpreventable occurs.

- School-based multi-tiered approaches could include universal mental health screenings and interventions as well as more intensive approaches for students deemed at risk for violence to themselves or others.
- All plans and training should facilitate collaboration between school personnel, first responders, and community providers.
- Consider integrating the NASP PREPâRE training, a proven model that utilizes existing staff resources, is sustainable, and supports learning as well as effective safety and crisis response.
Key Message 6. Safe and successful learning environments are fostered through collaboration among, administrators, teachers, school-employed mental health professionals and community-based providers through an interdisciplinary team approach. Effective school safety efforts require the dedication and commitment of all school staff and relevant community members. Close interdisciplinary collaboration is both facilitated by and helps to support an MTSS framework.

- All schools should have an active school safety team that focuses on overall school climate as well as crisis and emergency preparedness, response, and recovery.
- School psychologists have specialized training in child development, mental health, learning, and school systems and law. Our unique expertise lies in how these elements interact to shape children's behavior, learning, and overall adjustment.
- School crisis teams should include school administrators, school mental health professionals, and other school staff to ensure that efforts are sustained over time.
- A school psychologist, school counselor or school social worker should be assigned to coordinate school-based services with those provided by community providers.
- Community providers could include representatives from local law enforcement, emergency personnel, or community mental health providers.

Schools require consistent and effective approaches to prevent violence and promote learning, sufficient time to implement these approaches, and ongoing evaluation.