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Rethinking School Safety: Communities and Schools Working Together

There is no more important endeavor than safeguarding the welfare of our children and youth. Creating safe and supportive schools is central to this purpose and must be a national priority. School safety is not achieved with a single program or piece of security equipment. Rather, effective school safety starts with prevention; provides for students' mental health; integrates physical and psychological safety; and engages schools, families, and communities as partners. We know what works, but schools need the resources—financial and human—to implement and sustain the practices that will truly make our children and schools safe from the inside out.

Safety and learning go hand-in-hand. Safety is essential to student well-being and learning. Students who do not feel supported and safe at school, both physically and psychologically, cannot learn to their fullest potential. We enable students' ability to learn when we ensure that they: (a) come to school feeling safe, welcomed, and respected; (b) have a trusting relationship with at least one adult in the building; (c) understand clear academic and behavioral expectations; and (d) have access to needed mental health supports. Effective school safety programming, such as bullying prevention and positive discipline, is equally as important to school success as high quality instruction, and should be fully integrated into school planning, attitudes, expectations, policies, and practices through the use of a multitiered system of supports.

- Research supports the critical role of nurturing environments in fostering successful development and preventing psychological and behavioral problems. Such environments positively impact children and adolescents by minimizing their exposure to biologically and psychologically toxic events, reinforcing prosocial behaviors, limiting problem behaviors, and fostering psychological flexibility (Biglan, Flay, Embry, & Sandler, 2012).
- Research has shown that the availability of caring adults at school and the fair and consistent enforcement of school discipline are associated with less bullying and victimization (Gregory et al., 2010).

Genuine security encompasses both physical and psychological safety. Our schools must not resemble fortresses. We cannot barricade against all possible harm; trying to do so is counterproductive to maintaining a healthy learning environment and is an ineffective use of resources. Excessive building security (e.g., metal detectors, armed guards) can actually decrease students' sense of safety and does not necessarily guarantee protection. To truly improve school safety, reasonable physical security such as locked doors, lighted hallways, and visitor check-in systems must be combined with reasonable psychological safety efforts that promote a positive school climate. These efforts include establishing

trust among staff, students, and families; and creating an environment where students feel empowered to report any safety concerns. Importantly, supporting students' psychological safety helps build their resilience and ability to cope when a crisis does occur in any setting.

- There is no clear research evidence that the use of metal detectors, security cameras, or guards in schools is effective in preventing school violence (Addington, 2009; Borum, Cornell, Modzeleski, & Jimerson, 2010; Casella, 2006; Garcia, 2003). In fact, research has shown that their presence negatively impacts students' perceptions of safety and even increases fear among some students (Bachman, Randolph, & Brown, 2011; Schreck & Miller, 2003). In addition, studies suggest that restrictive school security measures have the potential to harm school learning environments (Beger, 2003; Phaneuf, 2009).
- School staff can earn the trust and cooperation of students when they use relationship building to prevent discipline problems. Research supports this approach to discipline, whereby adolescents' perceptions of school staff as trustworthy authority figures foster cooperative behaviors and minimize defiant ones (Gregory & Ripski, 2008).

Student access to mental health supports is essential to ensuring school safety. Supporting students' mental health can lead to improvements in behavior, school climate, adult–student relationships, and academic success, all of which contribute to overall school safety. Children and youth spend six or more hours per day in school, making schools an ideal setting to provide access to mental health services. It is critical that students have access to well-trained professionals, caring adults, and support services that can help to facilitate and build upon existing school–family relationships. Schools can play a critical role in supporting students' mental wellness, positive behavior, and resilience by ensuring access to mental health supports.

- Research has shown that school mental health services are integral to student success because mental health directly affects the development and learning of children and adolescents (Fleming et al., 2005; Welsh, Parke, Widaman, & O'Neil, 2001).
- School mental health services have been found to improve aspects of the school climate; reduce special education referrals (Bruns, Walrath, Glass-Siegel, & Weist, 2004); and produce declines in disciplinary referrals, suspension, grade retention, and special education referrals and placement among at-risk students (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

School-employed mental health professionals are critical to school safety and student learning. All services provided in schools should be appropriate to the learning environment. Just as children are not simply small adults, schools are not merely private clinics with chalkboards. Being trained to work within this setting is essential to providing mental health services that are effective, cost-efficient, sustainable, and integrated with the child's learning needs. School psychologists, school counselors, and school social workers provide a range of services that reinforce safe school environments. These include implementing prevention programs; helping staff recognize the signs of a struggling student; conducting risk, suicide, and threat assessments; providing counseling; making referrals; and coordinating with community service providers when needed. Additionally, in the aftermath of a crisis, school-employed mental health professionals 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.

- Results from nearly 500 studies support the importance of having qualified professionals in schools: The impact of promotion and prevention interventions is at least two to three times higher when programs are implemented by qualified personnel who have expert knowledge of the relevant issues (Durlak & Dupre, 2008).

- School staff rate the services provided by school psychologists as very important, including assessment, special education input, consultation, counseling, crisis intervention, and behavior management (Watkins, Crosby, & Pearson, 2007).

Effective school safety addresses prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery. School safety and crisis response occur on a continuum. Effective school safety programs begin by identifying potential areas of risk and implementing physical and psychological safety prevention measures. Emergency planning, response, and recovery should build upon these ongoing school safety and mental health services, and be relevant to the learning context. The safety and crisis team should be fully engaged in reinforcing students' positive behavior and good decision-making, helping teachers better recognize students in need, assessing at-risk students and providing appropriate interventions and referrals, and evaluating the effectiveness of ongoing safety efforts. Crisis and emergency preparedness plans must be consistently reviewed and practiced, which is more easily facilitated by an actively engaged team that links the school to the broader community. Not only does such comprehensive prevention and preparedness strengthen the immediate response to crisis events, it facilitates short- and long-term recovery for students and staff.

- Positive school engagement plays an important role in promoting and enhancing school violence prevention efforts (Tillery, Varjas, Roach, Kuperminc, & Meyers, 2013).
- In a study of the impact of various school safety measures, only having adults in hallways resulted in a significant reduction in the odds of being physically bullied or having property vandalized (Blosnich & Bossarte, 2011).
- In addition to their expertise in learning and mental health, research suggests that more than 98% of practicing school psychologists have had some type of crisis intervention training (Adamson & Peacock, 2007).

Schools, families, and communities must partner together to create safe, supportive schools.

Collaboration is critical to maintaining school safety. Schools are the center of most communities, and students and families do better when relevant resources and services are coordinated. On a day-to-day basis, safety and mental health programming are guided by school personnel, including administrators, school-employed mental health professionals, and school security officers. This includes intervening with at-risk students and responding to most crises. However, community providers like first responders and social service and mental health agencies play a vital role in providing services that meet more intense or targeted needs, such as suicide risk referral, gang involvement intervention, and emergency response. Establishing ongoing, trusting relationships reduces gaps in services; limits confusion and wasted resources; improves emergency planning, preparedness, and response; supports family engagement; and improves student outcomes.

- Students' safety and well-being are improved by coordination and integration of programs and activities provided by schools, mental health agencies, law enforcement, and juvenile justice systems (Rollison et al., 2013).
- Research emphasizes the need for improved interagency collaboration in the delivery of mental health and support services to students (Pires, Lazear, & Conlan 2008). Improvements in coordination and integration of activities can minimize duplication of services, preserve scarce resources, and better identify and serve students at risk for or already affected by violence and substance use (Rollison et al., 2013).

Legislative and Programmatic Priorities

Physical and psychological safety are necessary to ensure student learning. Schools should employ reasonable security measures in conjunction with efforts to create safe, supportive conditions for learning. To make sure that all of our schools are safe, we need public policies that:

- Ensure safe, supportive conditions for learning
- Provide comprehensive and coordinated learning supports that promote positive behavior and support student's social-emotional and mental health needs
- Ensure access to qualified school-employed mental health professionals
- Ensure appropriate crisis and emergency preparedness and response training
- Ensure effective school-family-community partnerships

Several pieces of legislation introduced in the 113th Congress directly address these priorities:

Helping Educators Support All Students Act, S.648 This bill would support teacher and school professional training on awareness of student mental health conditions.

Mental Health Awareness and Improvement Act of 2013, S. 689. This bill would allow schools to increase implementation of school-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports and early intervening services, encourage school-community mental health partnerships, reauthorize mental health awareness training, suicide prevention programs, and children's recovery from trauma.

Partnerships for Achieving Student Success, H.R. 1854. This bill would authorize grant funding for university-school district partnerships to increase the number of school psychologists, counselors, and social workers in schools.

Reducing Barriers to Learning Act, H.R. 1940. This legislation would establish an Office of Specialized Instructional Support Services in the Department of Education and provide grants to state educational agencies to reduce barriers to learning.

Safe Schools Improvement Act of 2013, H.R. 1199 & S. 403. These bills establish policies that prohibit bullying and harassment in schools. They also encourage the use of positive and preventive approaches to school discipline that minimize students' removal from instruction.

Authorized and Proposed Programs

There are several grant programs authorized by current statute or proposed by the Obama Administration that can assist schools in creating and implementing policies and practices to improve school safety. We ask that Congress fund these initiatives.

Elementary and Secondary School Counseling Program (Authorized). This grant provides funds to school districts to establish or expand school counseling services. This is the only federal grant that provides funds to hire qualified school counselors, school psychologists, and school social workers.

Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (Authorized.) This grant program helps schools and districts create, strengthen, and improve emergency management plans at the district and school-building levels, including training school personnel on emergency management procedure and coordinating with community agencies.

Safe Schools Healthy Students Initiative (Authorized). This program provides grants to support local educational agencies (LEAs) in the development of community-wide approaches to creating safe and drug-free schools and promoting healthy childhood development. Programs are intended to prevent violence and the illegal use of drugs and to promote safety and discipline. Coordination with other community-based organizations (CBOs) is required. This program is jointly funded and administered by the Departments of Education, Justice, and Health and Human Services.

Project School Emergency Response to Violence (Authorized). This program funds short-term and long-term education-related services for LEAs and institutions of higher education (IHEs) to help them recover from a violent or traumatic event in which the learning environment has been disrupted.

Comprehensive School Safety Program (Proposed). Coordinated by the Department of Justice, in conjunction with the Department of Education, this would provide funds for hiring school employed mental health professionals, school resource officers, and other school safety activities.

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