



Key Messages and Talking Points for School Psychologists Regarding School Safety

The nationwide response to the school shooting in Parkland, Florida represents a potential turning point in how policy makers are responding to calls for efforts to improve school safety and prevent school violence. The need for more school psychologists and other school-employed mental health professionals has been at the forefront of the national conversation, as has the need for more effective gun safety laws. It is imperative that we effectively use this momentum to increase the availability of school psychologists and access to comprehensive school mental and behavioral health services and work toward implementing coordinated and comprehensive school safety efforts. Such efforts must address the continuum of school safety issues, not just the most rare, yet most highly publicized incidents like mass shootings. Addressing mass gun violence must include preventing access to firearms by individuals at risk of hurting themselves or others.

Your voice is critical to this advocacy. The following talking points reflect NASP policy and best practice. They can be used to advocate for:

- a comprehensive approach to school safety;
- increased access to mental and behavioral health services;
- improved ratios for school psychologists, as well as more effective use of existing school psychologists; and
- limiting inappropriate access to firearms.

Select and adapt talking points to address your particular context. Talking points are organized by each broad issue and may overlap. Depending on the context of your community, you may not need to engage in advocacy in all of these areas. Following the talking points are suggested specific ‘asks’ that you could make of your building principal, superintendent/school board, state/federal policy makers, and other audiences. Related NASP resources containing additional, more in-depth information are provided at the end of this document.

COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL SAFETY

Key message: Effective school safety requires a comprehensive approach that balances physical and psychological safety.

- Schools play a critical and irreplaceable role in keeping students safe and supporting mental health. Efforts to prevent violence must align with efforts to improve school climate, overall safety, and learning. These are not separate endeavors and must be designed, funded, and implemented as a comprehensive school-wide approach.

- School crisis prevention and intervention planning and training should reinforce students' and staff members' effective behavior in the event of an emergency, improve collaboration between the school team and emergency responders, and align with ongoing school safety and violence prevention efforts.
- We cannot turn our schools into barricaded fortresses. Balancing psychological and physical safety is critical. Overly restrictive measures can make students feel less safe and undermine the learning environment.
- Effective school safety efforts must include:
 - Positive climates that facilitate trusting relationships among students and staff and between peers
 - Trained multidisciplinary school safety and crisis teams that regularly assess safety needs and response/recovery readiness
 - Positive approaches to discipline that don't rely solely on exclusionary and punitive disciplinary practices
 - Availability and access to comprehensive mental and behavioral health services provided by school-employed mental health professionals (e.g., school psychologists, school counselors, and school social workers) and strong school–community partnerships with community mental health agencies and providers
 - Trained school resource officers who are a part of the school safety and crisis team
 - Threat assessment/suicide risk protocols that include regular review
 - Clear and easily accessed systems (both anonymous and not) for students and others to report safety concerns and threats

Key message: Lockdown drills are the gold standard in imminent threat or active shooter drills and should remain the centerpiece of options-based drills.

- Schools should consider the potential costs, benefits, and consequences of different approaches to active shooter drills.
- Drills should be considered in a hierarchy, with simple discussion-based exercises conducted before complex simulation-based drills are practiced.
- Effective active shooter drills do not require a full-scale simulation of an armed assailant attack, which can risk traumatizing students and staff.
- Children model their reactions from adult behavior, so effective drills should result in staff who inspire calm and confidence in students, and who reinforce effective decision-making in the event of a threat.
- Participation in simulation-based drills should be optional, should be appropriate to individual development levels, and should take into consideration prior traumatic experiences, special needs, and personalities.
- School-employed mental health professionals should be involved in every stage of preparation of such all drills and exercises.

Key message: Arming teachers may pose more risks than protections when it comes to school safety. Possession of a firearm should be limited to commissioned school resource officers with extensive law enforcement training and the sworn authority to enforce public safety.

Among potential risks are:

- An individual with a gun but not a uniform could be mistaken for the shooter.
- Firearm skills degrade quickly and require constant practice under high stress conditions.
- Having a permit to own a gun does not mean an individual is psychologically equipped to shoot another person in a high stress active shooter situation.
- Discharging a firearm in a crowded, chaotic school setting is extremely risky.
- The time and costs associated with training and arming school staff diverts critical human and financial resources away from strategies known to help decrease violent behavior and improve safety.

Key message: School psychologists play a critical role in creating safe and supportive learning environments that promote student well-being and learning.

- School psychologists develop, implement, and evaluate policies and practices that promote safe school environments for all students.
- They are critical members of school crisis prevention and response teams who:
 - develop and lead crisis prevention and response policy and practices at the district and school levels, including regular practice and review of safety plans;
 - assist with the recovery of students and staff after a crisis;
 - help evaluate the psychological trauma risk; and
 - provide appropriate short- and long-term interventions and respond to demonstrated psychological needs of those impacted by a crisis.
- School psychologists conduct risk assessments (e.g., suicide and threat assessment), implement intervention procedures, and provide resources for students, staff, and families in need.
- They provide education for students, staff, and parents on the symptoms, warning signs, and risk factors of depression and youth suicide.
- They help promote a trauma-sensitive school environment that is responsive to the needs of the children and youth who have experienced stress, adversity, or trauma at home or in the community.
- They deliver professional development to increase school and staff capacity to improve school climate and safety.
- They foster effective collaboration with law enforcement, fire and rescue, outside mental health agencies, and cultural liaisons to improve coordination and efficient response and recovery.

Key Asks

- Sustained funding for comprehensive school safety and violence prevention efforts
- Sustained efforts toward reducing the ratio of students to school psychologists and other school employed mental health professionals
- Development and enforcement of positive discipline policies, including restorative justice practices, and the prohibition of zero tolerance policies
- Ongoing professional development for key members of the school safety and crisis response team (e.g., PREPaRE training)

- Requirement that each school maintain a school safety and crisis team comprised of principals, school psychologists (or other school-employed mental health professionals), school resource officers (or other school security personnel), and other school staff as appropriate
- Requirement that all schools/districts have crisis and emergency preparedness plans that are consistently reviewed and practiced
- Limits on which personnel are able to be armed in schools to commissioned school resource officers or other trained law enforcement officials

COMPREHENSIVE MENTAL AND BEHAVIORAL HEALTH SERVICES

Key message: Comprehensive school mental and behavioral health services improve student learning and safety.

- Providing ongoing access to mental health services promotes school safety by helping to create a positive learning environment in which students feel connected to their school community. The continuum of school mental health includes promoting wellness, resiliency, skill building, and help-seeking behaviors. These are critical to student well-being and to identifying students who may need more intensive services or for those who require immediate intervention.
- With appropriate treatment and early intervention, especially early intervention, people who experience adverse childhood experiences or struggle with mental health issues can lead rich, full, and productive lives.
- Comprehensive school mental and behavioral health service delivery systems must include:
 - adequate access to school psychologists and other school-employed mental health professionals;
 - universal screening for all students, coupled with the availability of appropriate early intervention services for students identified as being at risk;
 - a continuum of interventions that include mental wellness promotion, early intervention, and a continuum of more targeted and intensive interventions for students with increasingly significant needs;
 - professional development (e.g., mental health first aid) for school staff, parents, and community members to help them recognize signs of mental health concerns in students and ways to connect them with the appropriate supports in the school and community;
 - evidence-based threat assessment and suicide risk protocols and teams; and
 - collaborative partnerships with community agencies and providers to help meet the needs of students with the most significant needs.

Key message: The vast majority of people with mental illness are not violent, and in fact, people with mental illness are more likely to be victims of violence than the perpetrators.

- Longitudinal research has concluded that:
 - less than 5% of the gun-related killings in the United States were perpetrated by people diagnosed with mental illness, and

- less than 3–5% of U.S. crimes involve people with mental illness.
- In most cases, the presence of a diagnosable mental illness alone does not predispose someone to extreme or calculated violence. Implying so risks undermining the important efforts to reduce stigma around mental health problems and disabilities, and may discourage individuals and families from seeking appropriate treatment.

Key message: School psychologists are uniquely positioned in schools to facilitate the development, delivery, and monitoring of prompt and effective mental and behavioral health services.

- School psychologists have expertise in data collection and interpretation. They can develop and monitor universal mental health screening processes to identify students in need of mental and behavioral health services, or concerns affecting the entire school community.
- School psychologists facilitate comprehensive needs assessments to develop strategies to address the mental and behavioral health needs of their school communities.
- School psychologists support the implementation of evidence-based efforts to prevent school violence, improve school safety, and foster safe and supportive learning environments.
- School psychologists improve quality and effectiveness of family engagement and school community mental health partnerships.
- School psychologists provide counseling to individual students and groups of students.
- School psychologists provide mental health first aid, and they provide professional development related to student mental and behavioral health to school staff.
- School psychologists implement suicide and violence prevention policies and practices, including suicide risk and threat assessment.
- School psychologists provide culturally responsive counseling to students.
- School psychologists consult with administrators, teachers, and staff to increase knowledge and use of culturally competent practices.
- School psychologists facilitate effective communication and collaboration with community agencies/providers to support the availability of the full continuum of mental health services.

Key message: Sustainability matters. Recovery from a crisis is not an event but a process that can take a long time. When all of the initial outside responders go home, school-employed mental health professionals are still thereto support students and staff every day for the long term.

- Some districts mistakenly consider outsourcing mental health services to community providers as way to save money. This approach runs contrary to both long-term sustainability and availability of services to all students, as well as the services’ relevance to the learning environment.
- School psychologists provide psychoeducation, consultation to school administrators, ongoing monitoring of students and staff experiencing or at risk for trauma reactions, and coordination with community services to support the immediate and long-term recovery from a crisis event.

Key Asks

- Sustained investments in comprehensive school mental and behavioral health service delivery systems that encompass mental wellness promotion, early identification/early intervention, and a continuum of increasingly intensive interventions
- Sustained efforts toward reducing the ratio of students to school psychologists and other school employed mental health professionals
- Universal screening and early intervention for students identified as being at risk for mental health issues
- Development of school–community partnerships based on collaboration between school psychologists (and other school-employed mental health professionals) and community agencies and providers
- Required professional development for all school staff on how to recognize the signs of mental health concerns in youth
- Training for families and communities on how to recognize the signs of mental health concerns and how to report them to the proper adults
- Effective utilization of school psychologists in the school setting to include mental and behavioral health provider

GUN SAFETY LAWS

Key message: Improving access to mental health services is important, but doing so is not a substitute for enacting gun laws that limit inappropriate access to firearms.

- A known risk factor for homicidal and suicidal behavior is access to weapons, including high powered firearms. Such access is known to be highly associated with increased risk of injury and death among youth. We need effective laws and policies that:
 - keep guns out of the hands of those who would hurt themselves or others,
 - limit access to weapons intended to cause mass destruction in a short amount of time, and
 - ensure that the only armed persons at schools are highly trained professionals, such as school resource officers.
- Homicidal behaviors are the result of a complex combination and interaction of risk factors that may be environmental, biological, or both.
- Although gun violence in schools is extremely rare, research indicates that the majority of youth homicides, both school-associated and non-school associated, are by firearms and nearly half of youth suicide deaths involve the use of a gun.
- Armed school security is a local decision. Only school resource officers or other commissioned law enforcement officials should be armed on a school campus.

Key message: Efforts to prevent gun violence should not focus only on high profile mass shootings but should address the far more common issue of gun violence that some communities experience on a regular or even daily basis.

- According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, nearly 34,000 deaths result from gun violence each year, approximately two thirds of which—or 23,000—are the result of suicide.

- For youth ages 15–24, the gun homicide rate in the United States is 49 times higher than in other countries.
- Exposure to gun violence is highly associated with diminished social, emotional, and academic well-being among youth.
- Research indicates a clear connection between local availability of guns and gun-related violent behaviors, with estimates of close to 2 million children and adolescents having access at home to loaded, unlocked guns.

Key Asks

- Oppose efforts to arm teachers or to allow those with conceal/open carry permits to be armed on school grounds
- Enforce background check requirements for all gun purchases to ensure that those who should not have access to a weapon are unable to purchase them
- Implement and enforce extreme risk protection orders and other mechanisms that allow law enforcement to remove weapons from individuals who have been deemed to be a threat to themselves or others
- Require significant training and gun safety courses to obtain a conceal/open carry permit
- Implement and enforce efforts to ensure that weapons are properly stored and secured
- Pass and enforce laws that ban assault weapons

IMPROVING ACCESS TO SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS

Key message: Effective school safety measures require adequate access to school psychologists and other school-employed mental health professionals.

- It is not enough to simply provide training for schools and staff on how to identify students at risk; there must be a system and a plan in place for providing identified individuals with needed services that includes ensuring adequate access to school psychologists.
- School psychologists are specially trained to provide mental and behavioral health services in schools. They are also skilled in consultation and connecting students with additional community services as needed.
- High ratios and shortages prevent school psychologists from providing mental health support to all children in need.
- Effectively addressing the school psychology shortage requires a comprehensive approach that includes:
 - filling existing available positions,
 - increasing the number of Full Time Equivalent (FTE) school psychologist positions,
 - coordinating with local universities to offer high quality practicum and internship sites,
 - finding ways to reallocate existing school psychologists' time (e.g., reduce paperwork) so that they are able to provide more mental supports, and
 - ensuring a competitive salary and benefit package to recruit and retain high quality school psychologists.

Related Resources

- Framework for Safe and Successful Schools, <https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources/school-safety-and-crisis/a-framework-for-safe-and-successful-schools>
- Resolution on Efforts to Prevent Gun Violence, <https://www.nasponline.org/x40582.xml>
- Statement: Preventing Mass Violence Requires Access to Mental Health Services and Reduced Access to Firearms, <https://www.nasponline.org/about-school-psychology/media-room/press-releases/preventing-mass-violence-requires-access-to-mental-health-services-and-reduced-inappropriate-access-to-firearms>
- Statement: NASP Opposes Arming Teachers, <https://www.nasponline.org/about-school-psychology/media-room/press-releases/nasp-opposes-arming-teachers>
- School Crisis Prevention and Intervention: The PREP_aRE Model, <https://www.nasponline.org/professional-development/prepare-training-curriculum>
- Best Practice Considerations for Schools in Active Shooter and Other Armed Assailant Drills. <https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources/school-safety-and-crisis/best-practice-considerations-for-schools-in-active-shooter-and-other-armed-assailant-drills>
- Media Outreach Through Newspapers, https://www.nasponline.org/assets/Documents/Research%20and%20Policy/Advocacy%20Resources/media_ps.pdf
- Effective Communications Messaging for School Psychologists, <http://www.nasponline.org/research-and-policy/advocacy-tools-and-resources/communications-strategies-and-resources/effective-communications-strategies>
- School Psychology Advocacy Resources <https://www.nasponline.org/research-and-policy/advocacy-tools-and-resources/general-advocacy-resources>