Advocacy Toolkit: Framework for Safe and Successful Schools
Examining the Current Landscape of School Safety

Current Conversations Surrounding School Safety

The dialogue about how to reduce violence, make schools and communities safer, improve school climate, and increase access to mental health services has moved to the forefront of the national conversation. Decisions about ways to improve school safety are being debated at the national, state, and local level by a variety of stakeholders. Proposed solutions to improve school safety fall into two main categories; physical safety and psychological safety. Federal and state policymakers have considered legislation that includes extreme proposals such as arming all teachers, providing students with bullet proof backpacks, and barricading school entrances. Other legislation has proposed measures that address the social, emotional, and mental health needs of students. Additionally, there are a number of federally funded initiatives intended to improve school safety and reduce violence. Effective school safety efforts should address *both* physical and psychological safety and utilize evidence-based practices. Reasonable building security measures, such as secure doors, lighted and monitored hallways, and check in-check out systems for visitors, are important. We need to ensure that the conversation moves beyond simply increasing school building safety measures and instead focuses on addressing the continuum of needs and services that lead to improved safety, well-being, and learning for children and youth.

As school psychologists, we must work to ensure positive outcomes for the students and families we work with. Many states and districts will be passing new policies or regulations intended to improve school safety; some of these decisions will be made quickly, without consideration for research or effectiveness. There is no one better than you, the school psychologist, to help balance the conversation between physical and psychological safety to ensure leaders make informed decisions.

The current deliberations around psychological safety are focused on:

Lack of access to mental health services. Only a fraction of students with emotional and behavioral needs actually receive mental health services, and among those that do, the majority access those services in school. In addition, many children and families have difficulty accessing affordable mental and behavioral health care in the community.

Improving school and community partnerships. We cannot meet the needs of children and families if we operate in silos or alone. Schools and communities can leverage their resources to provide a more comprehensive system of care that meets the needs of students in the school, home, and community. School-community partnerships that are collaborative in nature and utilize school-employed mental health professionals as well as community providers produce the most positive results.

Emergency preparedness and crisis response. Many schools and communities do not have detailed plans about how they would respond in the event of an emergency. Crisis planning is an essential component of school safety. Effective school crisis plans encompass more than a reaction to a tragic event. These plans address prevention, preparedness, intervention and recovery and should include coordination between school based resources and community resources (e.g. first responders).

Increasing awareness of the mental health needs of children and youth. Recent high profile events have drawn attention to significant mental health issues that often accompany violent behavior. There is growing recognition that early identification and intervention are critical in reducing the occurrence of these events.

Addressing Comprehensive School Safety Utilizing the Framework for Safe and Successful Schools

Efforts to improve school climate, safety, and learning should not be viewed as separate endeavors. Rather, these efforts must be designed, funded, and implemented as a comprehensive school-wide approach. Ensuring that mental health and safety programming and services are appropriately integrated into an overall multi-tiered system of supports is essential for successful and sustainable improvements in school safety.

Key features of the framework include:

- Begin with proactive principal leadership.
- Allow school leaders to deploy human and financial resources in a manner that best meets the needs of their school and community.
- Provide a team-based framework to facilitate effective coordination of services and interventions.
- Balance the needs for physical and psychological safety.
- Employ the necessary and appropriately trained school-employed mental health and safety personnel.
- Provide relevant and ongoing professional development for all staff.
- Integrate a continuum of mental health supports within a multi-tiered system of supports.
- Engage families and community providers as meaningful partners.
- Remain grounded in the mission and purpose of schools: teaching and learning.

School safety and positive school climate are achieved by effective comprehensive and collaborative efforts requiring the dedication and commitment of all school staff and relevant community members. Schools require consistent and effective approaches to prevent violence and promote learning, sufficient time to implement these approaches, and ongoing evaluation.

What is the role of the school psychologist?

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) has long been a leader in promoting safe, supportive learning environments that protect both the physical and psychological safety of students and staff. School psychologists are uniquely positioned to advocate for evidence-based initiatives to improve school safety and ensure that students have access to the supports they need to be successful both inside and outside of the classroom.

The Framework for Safe and Successful Schools provides policy and practice recommendations to guide best practices in school safety. School psychologists are encouraged to utilize this toolkit to advocate for a comprehensive and balanced approach to create and sustain genuinely safe, supportive schools that meet the needs of the whole child.