Comprehensive Approaches for Preventing School Violence and Promoting School Safety

NASP affirms the inalienable right of every student to attend safe, secure, and peaceful schools that balance physical and psychological safety. These are foundational conditions necessary for school psychologists as educators and mental health professionals to foster all students’ robust psychological, cognitive, academic, and social development. Exposure to school violence negatively impacts students’ well-being. It diminishes educators’ efforts to achieve their primary mission of educating all students and helping them reach their full potential—and it is a sobering concern for caregivers and families. School campuses should be locations that minimize exposure to all sources of injury and harm, be it tragic campus shootings, racism, harassment, discrimination, chronic bullying, cyberbullying, name-calling, sexual harassment, or social exclusion. All forms of violence adversely impact students’ development and can have lifelong detrimental mental health effects.

NASP’s (2020) professional standards highlight school psychologists’ professional preparation and expertise to provide systems-level services that promote safe and supportive school environments, provide direct services to students, and ensure evidence-based crisis response when violence does occur. These preventive and responsive services consider students’ social–emotional well-being, mental and behavioral health, and academic achievement. School psychologists contribute to implementing and evaluating culturally responsive prevention programs that promote physically and psychologically safe, nonviolent schools in supportive communities. They contribute to safe, caring, and nurturing school environments by recognizing and addressing risk and protective factors vital to understanding and addressing systemic problems and working with local, state, and federal officials to advance evidence-based school safety and violence prevention policy and practice.

RATIONALE

Broadly, school violence encompasses overt aggressive behaviors such as physical fights on campus, bullying (including cyberbullying), physical assault, bombing, arson, and other deliberate means of causing harm to staff and students, such as tragic campus shootings. In addition, school violence includes covert behaviors that increase fear and diminish school safety, such as threats of injury at school, weapons possession, and harassment. One example of covert harm is the use of microaggressions that are associated with racist ideologies and create hostile school environments (Allen, 2012). Expressions of systemic racism, homophobia, and transphobia create hostile environments that alienate students and increase the risk of violence and crime. These ideologies also influence school safety methods and violence prevention practices because they are associated with the disproportionate use of ineffective and harmful target-hardening strategies (e.g., metal detectors, increased surveillance, bulletproof windows, armed school personnel) in low-resourced schools (Bailey et al., 2023; Chambers, 2022; Zimmerman & Astor, 2021).

National school violence prevalence indicators have insufficient specificity for local communities and individual schools to evaluate violence and safety conditions and monitor efforts to improve them. For this reason, local and state education agencies need to:

- identify site-specific valid school violence and safety indicators,
- establish a robust system to monitor the indicators, and
- implement procedures to interpret and use this information to evaluate prevention and intervention efforts.

NASP recognizes the responsibility of schools to implement policies and practices to decrease school violence and increase school safety. At the same time, the focus on violence does not imply that youth are prone to violence. For
example, juvenile crime has decreased substantially in the past 2 decades. Between 1996 and 2020, the arrest rate per 100,000 adolescents declined by 75.7% for males and 67.7% for females (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2020). NASP acknowledges the persistent efforts of educators, caregivers, families, students, and communities to advance school safety. Safety, security, and peace emerge daily from school community members’ caring mutual support and collaborative action in prevention programming.

VIOLENCE PREVENTION AND SAFETY STRATEGIES

Efforts to reduce school violence are most successful when they use multiple strategies appropriate for each school’s unique needs.

Creating School–Community Safety Partnerships

School safety planning involves a culturally responsive, comprehensive, multitiered system approach in collaboration with community partners. School psychologists assist community-wide efforts that strengthen protective factors that reduce violence, including tutoring, mentoring, life-skills training, case management, increased parental involvement, improved connections with schools, and other opportunities for supervised recreational activities. They facilitate community organizations’ capacity-building through education, training, grant writing, evaluation, and evidence-based best practices.

Establish Comprehensive School Crisis Response Plans

NASP developed the PREPaRE School Crisis Prevention and Intervention Curriculum (Brock et al., 2023) to provide school-based professionals with the expertise to form multidisciplinary crisis teams and develop comprehensive crisis prevention plans that respond to incidents, minimize traumatic reactions, and support mental health needs. School psychologists are critical members of school crisis response teams and can facilitate the developing and implementation of comprehensive crisis prevention and response plans.

Enhance Classroom and School Climate

NASP advocates that schools consider the U.S. Department of Education’s (2023) school climate guiding principles. These principles acknowledge that school safety programs endeavor to transform campus conditions by creating a climate of acceptance and understanding and improving the quality of relationships among students and staff (Steffgen et al., 2013)—relationships that foster a sense of belonging within the school community. School psychologists help coordinate individualized instruction and remedial support when needed to reduce academic failure and frustration. School psychologists can also help guide programs to (a) decrease racism and other forms of intolerance, (b) increase appreciation of diversity, (c) improve levels of trust among school community members (Savage & Schanding, 2013), and (d) promote other strategies that facilitate social–emotional skills that enhance positive, adaptive interpersonal relations among all students and educators (Durlak et al., 2011).

Promote Positive School Discipline and Support

NASP urges school personnel to eliminate exclusionary discipline practices and to recognize the harmful consequences of zero-tolerance policies, particularly for students of color. School discipline should be grounded in cultural competence, acknowledging the role of structural oppression. It should include equitable policies and practices that provide social, emotional, and behavioral support for all students, such as culturally responsive school-wide positive behavior support, equity-sensitive social–emotional learning (SEL), and restorative practices (Gregory et al., 2021). School resource officers and other school law enforcement should have no role in implementing discipline procedures.

Implement Student-Affirming Threat Response Processes

NASP advocates that each school implement universal student self-care check-in surveys to help them connect with appropriate campus wellness support services. Universal wellness surveys provide information about all students’
positive developmental trajectories and connect them to services that foster their complete mental well-being. An essential violence prevention strategy is helping all students realize optimal social–emotional development.

NASP endorses establishing trained, multidisciplinary threat assessment teams (e.g., principal, teachers, school mental health professionals, and law enforcement) that implement a school-validated threat assessment approach to explore, better understand, and respond to the unique needs of the students making and receiving threats (Cornell & Rufa, 2023; Maeng et al., 2023; SchoolSafety.gov, n.d.). In supporting the developmental interests of students involved in an expressed threat, NASP endorses using equitable positive school discipline methods, such as solution-focused approaches that apply behavior management principles and strategies (Bear et al., 2022; Maeng et al., 2020). NASP also acknowledges the importance of engaging with and partnering with school police as first responders when preparing emergency management protocols.

**Promote Antiracism and Antidiscrimination Strategies to Prevent Violent Behavior**

The school psychologist’s role includes promoting social justice by denouncing and rejecting discriminatory and racist practices while advancing safe and inclusive learning environments for the entire student body. Self-examination and reflection help strengthen our commitment to antiracist strategies. Curricula targeting bullying and resources providing insight into cultural differences can also combat discriminatory violence against subgroups such as students of the LGBTQI2-S community and students from various religious backgrounds (National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments, n.d.). Facilitating conversations among different demographic groups can promote empathy and cultural humility. School-wide events to prevent discrimination-related violence acknowledge the mutual benefits of recognizing campus cultural diversity (Cabral et al., 2018).

**Implement Multitiered Systems of Support to Meet All Students’ Needs**

NASP advocates using multitiered systems of support (MTSS) to prevent violence and promote safety and wellness (Cowan et al., 2013). At the universal level for all students, NASP endorses two strategies. The first strategy is positive behavioral interventions and supports, which is associated with reduced exclusionary discipline and improved school and classroom climates (Noltemeyer et al., 2018). The second, complementary strategy is SEL, which improves social competence, reduces disruptive behavior, and increases academic achievement, emphasizing equitable outcomes for youth from diverse racial and socioeconomic backgrounds (Taylor et al., 2017). MTSS also includes identifying and supporting students exhibiting early warning signs of disruptive behavior and intervening with students who experience significant school behavioral adjustment problems. For students experiencing social and psychological distress, an MTSS framework integrating mental health, academic, and behavioral supports across settings is most effective when coordinated among school-based mental health professionals and community-based service providers.

**Reduce Firearms Access**

Firearms are significant in school and community violence. Most school-associated homicides involve firearms (Frederique, 2020), and gun-related deaths are the number one cause of death among adolescents, disproportionately males and Black children (Peterson et al., 2021). In 2021, an average of 12 youth ages 10–19 died daily from gunshot wounds (Bailey et al., 2023). Multiple lines of research demonstrate a clear connection between local gun availability and gun-related violent behaviors. Close to two million children and adolescents have access at home to loaded, unlocked guns (Flannery et al., 2021; Interdisciplinary Group on Preventing School and Community Violence, 2022). NASP supports holistic policy approaches to decrease the potential for the injury or death of students, staff, and other community members on school campuses, on the way to and from school, and at school-sanctioned events. NASP (2022a) supports legislation that works toward:

- eliminating inappropriate youth access to guns,
- restricting access to guns for individuals deemed at risk of hurting themselves and others,
- improving awareness of safe gun practices, including secure storage of firearms, and
- restricting the presence of guns in schools to only commissioned school resource officers.
ROLE OF THE SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST

NASP supports a cohesive multidisciplinary approach to violence prevention and school safety promotion. Efforts to foster comprehensive school safety require collaboration among administrators, teachers, school psychologists, other mental health professionals, school resource officers and local law enforcement, caregivers, students, and community agencies. School psychologists provide essential support for efforts to alleviate campus conditions that diminish safety and respond to violence when it occurs. School psychologists, collaborating with others, implement multilayered, preventive, and responsive services to enhance all students’ learning and behavioral and mental well-being. These collaborative efforts include violence prevention, protection, mitigation, response, and recovery efforts that balance psychological and physical safety. School psychologists have the professional training and expertise to support a school community’s grieving, coping, and healing in the aftermath of violence on a school campus (NASP, 2022a). These efforts emphasize clear communication, fostering positive personal connectedness, and implementing evidence-based support services (Interdisciplinary Group on Preventing School and Community Violence, 2022). School efforts should include increasing students’ access to positive, healthy school resources such as peer buddy systems, tutoring and mentoring opportunities, family involvement, purposeful efforts to celebrate diversity, and support for ostracized students. Groups focusing on bullying, grief and loss, self-esteem, conflict resolution, and positive coping methods may also be beneficial.

Teachers and other educators, including school psychologists, are resources providing support for children and adolescents. Students’ relationships with adults in the school setting help them manage developmental challenges (Allen et al., 2018). It is crucial to consider the role of positive student engagement in promoting and enhancing school violence prevention efforts (Tillery et al., 2013). Having school-based mental health professionals, such as school psychologists, is an indispensable resource for preventing violence and promoting school safety.

SUMMARY

NASP vigorously advocates for school psychologists to assume a pivotal role in implementing evidence-based policies and practices that balance physical and psychological safety, and establish and increase levels of safety and security while promoting student wellness and thriving psychological, social, emotional, and academic development. Comprehensive violence reduction programs focus on prevention. They influence student attitudes toward violence, teach practical conflict resolution skills, and create nurturing climates that promote cultural competence, tolerance, and connectedness among students and staff. Effective school safety programs collaborate with and complement violence prevention efforts involving local law enforcement, juvenile probation, public health personnel, and other parent and community groups. When an entire community commits to reducing violence, the health and well-being of its children and adolescents are enhanced.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

School psychologists play a critical role in supporting school safety by using their skills across the domains of practice to promote best practices to ensure schools are psychologically and physical safe and to advocate for policies and practices that benefit and empower all students. It is a school psychologist’s ethical obligation to advocate for those who cannot stand up for themselves and work to change harmful laws and policies that conflict with ethical standards, are not rooted in evidence, and cause harm to the children we serve. Advocacy can take place at the micro level (e.g., advocating for individual students; groups of students; changes in school policy, procedures, and climate; or for changes in district policy and regulations) and at the macro level (advocating at county, state, or federal levels). As school psychologists develop knowledge and skills about school safety, they can use their skills to:

- Eliminate zero-tolerance policies and replace exclusionary discipline with effective, positive, restorative practices.
- Prohibit anyone other than commissioned law enforcement (including school resource officers) to be armed on a school campus.
- Require the development and enforcement of a memorandum of understanding (MOU) when school security, school police, or school resource officers are present in schools. This MOU should contain elements outlined in
the NASP (2022b) Policing in Schools Resolution and clearly articulate the specific roles and responsibilities of such personnel and prohibit their involvement in implementing discipline procedures.

- Require each school to have a properly trained multidisciplinary behavior threat assessment and management team that includes administrators, psychologists, teachers, and other relevant personnel.
- Support ongoing professional development for and the implementation of evidence-based and comprehensive approaches to school safety, including, but not limited to, evidence-based threat assessment and management procedures; suicide prevention and response; violence prevention; crisis preparedness, response, and recovery; developmentally appropriate safety drills (e.g., lockdown drills or armed assailant drills); reporting systems; and effective coordination with law enforcement and other first responders.
  - Expand rigorous research on school safety and security methods, including:
  - Behavior threat assessment and management policy and practices
  - Psychological impact of active shooter/armed assailant drills on students, staff, and families
  - Student surveillance systems and other technology intended to prevent school violence
  - Target hardening and physical security measures
  - Use of school police and school resource officers
  - Violence prevention initiatives, including those authorized by the STOP School Violence Program
- Amend the Federal Civil Rights Data Collection to include, at a minimum: number of behavioral threat assessments conducted, demographic information of students who underwent a behavioral threat assessment, members of the school behavioral threat assessment team, and outcomes of the behavioral threat assessment.
- Ensure adequate access to school psychologists and other school-employed mental health providers, and work toward recommended ratios of such professionals.
- Ensure that all school safety plans address physical and psychological safety and address the unique needs of students with disabilities.
- Ensure annual (at least) collection and review of school-wide climate and safety data, including examination of any physical security measures used. Such data collection should include the perspectives of staff, students, and families.
- Develop and implement procedures (including anonymous reporting) for students, staff, and families to report potential threats or other concerning behaviors and a transparent process for responding to such reports.
- Promote mentoring programs and other efforts to ensure that all students have a positive relationship with at least one adult.
- Work with invested parties to promote laws that align with the positions noted above and advocate to prevent and oppose laws that diminishes school safety and have harmful effects on student mental health.

REFERENCES


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