



After the Newtown shootings, school leaders are reconsidering their safety and security plans. A lawyer who has worked with districts involved with shooting tragedies offers sound advice on how to go forward

Plan for Safety

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After the shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn., school boards all over the country have focused attention on how they might prevent such a tragedy at their own schools. As these important discussions take place, we reflect on national school safety and emergency management efforts and available resources.

Over the years, school shootings and incidents of violence have led to a comprehensive and committed approach among school districts, national and state school associations, law enforcement, and community partners to prevent incidents of violence in our schools and to properly handle them, should they occur.

In 1994, the U.S. Congress passed the Gun-Free Schools Act, requiring school officials to develop “get tough” policies

relative to school violence. The federal Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act also funded anti-drug and anti-violence programs, and provided guidelines for emergency management. Following the 1999 Columbine High School shootings, school and law enforcement officials developed school crisis plans, and experts trained teachers and school staff to handle potentially violent situations.

Many states also passed laws directing school boards to develop, adopt, and annually review districtwide school discipline policies. State education departments and school boards associations introduced model policies for crisis management and violence prevention to assist school districts on these important issues.

School-based violence prevention programs also emerged, such as Gang Resistance Education and Training

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(GREAT), which teaches young people about the perils of gang affiliation. Behavioral programs and programs aimed at preventing bullying and fostering positive school climate now exist in many states. Safe-school resource centers now help in the development and dissemination of best practices and methods of violence prevention.

Safe School Initiative

In 2002, the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Secret Service created the Safe School Initiative, which included a comprehensive study of school shootings that occurred in the U.S. from 1974 to 2000. This study examined the thinking, planning, and other behaviors of students who carried out school shootings. Attention was paid to identifying pre-attack behaviors and communications that could help in preventing future attacks.

The study concluded that no simple solution existed to stop school shootings. However, it indicated that some future attacks could be prevented “if those responsible for safety in schools know what questions to ask and where to uncover information that may help with efforts to intervene before a school attack can occur.”

Notably, the study found that students involved in school shootings did not act impulsively. Instead, they hatched an idea, created a plan, secured the means to carry out the plan, and then followed through with the attack. Because the time between the decision to commit the attack and the actual incident is often short, the study noted, any indications a student may pose a threat should be acted upon immediately by school administrators and law enforcement.

The study concluded that, prior to most incidents, someone (friends, schoolmates, siblings) knew about the attacker’s plans, but the information was rarely conveyed to an adult. Recognizing the importance of timely information to prevent incidents, the study—and a subsequent 2008 U.S. DOE/Secret Service report, commonly known as “The Bystander Study”—recommended that schools break down barriers that discourage students from reporting this information. These reports emphasize that schools should create a “fair, thoughtful, and effective system to respond to whatever information students do bring forward.”

The Safe School Initiative concluded that no accurate or useful profile exists to determine which students may pose a threat. It recommended that school administrators should focus on whether a student engages in behaviors that suggest possible violence, so that they can intervene. The study emphasized that school officials should add preventative measures to any emergency planning already in place. Those measures should include “protocols and procedures for responding and managing threats.”

The report also highlighted 10 components and tasks for creating a safe and connected school climate.

1. Assess the school’s emotional climate. Survey students, faculty, parents, administrators, and school board members regarding the school’s emotional climate. The survey’s findings can help increase safety and respect within the school.

2. Emphasize the importance of listening in schools. A school should foster a culture of “two-way” listening between students and staff to prevent and reduce violence. Listening must be expanded beyond academics so students can express the “disenfranchisement, hurt, or fear that they may feel.”

3. Take a strong but caring stance against the code of silence.

4. Work to change the perception that talking to an adult about a student contemplating violence is “snitching.”

5. Prevent bullying.

6. Empower students by involving them in planning, creating, and sustaining a culture of safety and respect.

7. Ensure that every student feels that he or she has a trusting relationship with at least one adult at school. Administrators should make sure that at least one adult at school knows what is happening with each student.

8. Create mechanisms for developing and sustaining safe school climates.

9. Be aware of physical environments and their effects on creating comfort zones. In large schools, administrators should consider changes in the school’s physical characteristics that would permit the assignment of teachers and students to smaller, intersecting, and supportive groupings within the building.

10. Emphasize an integrated systems model. Include students, teachers, administrators, school board members, parents, law enforcement personnel, and after-school and community-based groups when developing a safe school environment plan.

Community partners

These reports—and our nation’s experience with school violence—lead to the conclusion that creating comprehensive community partnerships is the recommended approach to effective school safety. This approach recognizes that an effective educational environment includes minimizing threats of violence and inappropriate behavior such as bullying, and that schools can prevent violence and address conduct through appropriate action. It provides a framework for schools to impact behavior and learning, identify students in need, provide appropriate assistance, and build trust between students and adults that allows for open communication.

Recognizing the importance of school safety, many states passed laws that require schools to have emergency management plans with mandated lockdown, fire, and other practiced drills and procedures, anti-bullying mea-

tures, and school safety teams to address incidents of behavior and violence. Laws and guidelines also call for these plans to be developed in collaboration with community partners. This approach recognizes the important connections among school, law enforcement, fire, medical, and other community organizations to share information, resources, and ideas for the development of an effective emergency management system.

Schools in many states also must use an “all hazards” approach with their emergency plans, reflecting the guidance of federal agencies to prepare for and address a wide array of emergencies from natural disasters and weather events to health crises, environmental concerns, and incidents of bullying and violence.

Importantly, preparing for all hazards using a structured, practiced approach to crisis management provides schools with the ability to act reasonably and promptly, whether faced with a severe storm or an armed intruder.

Phased approach

The national guidelines for school emergency management also emphasize a phased approach to effective emergency management. For example, the U.S. Department of Education’s publication, *Practical Information on Crisis Planning: A Guide for Schools and Communities*, provides critical concepts and components of good crisis planning using the recommended four phases of emergency management: mitigation/prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery.

Emergency concepts used for many years by fire and police agencies, such as the National Incident Management System (NIMS) and Incident Command Structure, are becoming part of the emergency planning for schools and higher education institutions. Local education agencies that receive certain educational grants also must comply with NIMS and other federal guidance involving crisis prevention. In addition, standards and guidelines issued by the National Fire Protection Association, OSHA, and FEMA, among others, impact how schools now approach emergency management.

When it comes to safety, districts have a responsibility to take reasonable steps to prevent or reduce exposure to damage and injury for students and employees. They must be prepared when an emergency occurs. When putting a school safety plan together, consider these items:

- A safety audit to identify critical issues and improve safety.
- A safety team to assess emergency planning.
- Community partner collaboration on appropriate emergency management policies and procedures.
- A review and possible revision of your current emergency management plan to reflect state and

federal requirements and guidance.

- A threat assessment team and protocol to address threats involving students.
- Security features as part of building design, construction, and remodeling.
- An incident command system to clarify roles and responsibilities and promote efficient crisis response.
- Safety training and the conducting of drills and exercises.
- Access to maps and facilities information for first responders.
- Accountability and student release procedures in the event of an emergency.
- Preparation for the needs of special education students in emergency planning.
- Insurers, architects, and legal counsel consultations to address safety and liability issues.

After Newtown

Since the tragedy in Connecticut last December, school districts are incorporating many of these recommendations into their emergency management planning. A number of resources are available to assist schools as they address safety and violence prevention issues. For example, the U.S. Department of Education Emergency Planning website (www.ed.gov/emergencyplan) and the Emergency Response and Crisis Management Technical Assistance Center (www.ercm.org), provide substantive guidance on appropriate emergency management planning using national guidelines.

The Comprehensive School Safety Guide from the Minnesota School Safety Center (<https://dps.mn.gov>) also provides valuable assistance, including a self-assessment checklist, for emergency planning teams formulating or revising their emergency plans and procedures. These and many other resources provide practical programming for school staff to prevent and mitigate incidents of violence. It also recommends a specific, coordinated approach should an incident occur.

Working together, schools and community partners can focus their emergency planning using time-tested national guidance. This approach should include efforts to build a positive school climate to establish relationships of trust and respect among students and staff in order to encourage them to share information about threatening behavior before an incident occurs. ■

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