Strategic School Safety Leadership: Security and Emergency Preparedness in Uncertain Times

National Student Safety & Security Conference & Workshop

2024

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Kenneth S. Trump, Ed.D.
President
National School Safety and Security Services
Cleveland, Ohio

ken@schoolsecurity.org

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KENNETH S. TRUMP

Kenneth S. Trump, Ed.D., is the President of National School Safety and Security Services, a Cleveland-based national firm specializing in school security, emergency preparedness, school safety litigation consulting, and safety/crisis communications consulting and training. Ken began his career as an officer, investigator, and youth gang unit supervisor for the Cleveland City Schools' safety division, and as a suburban Cleveland school security director and assistant gang task force director. Ken has served more than 30 years in the school safety profession working with school and public safety officials from all 50 states and internationally. As a civil litigation expert witness, Ken has worked on the nation's highest profile school mass shooting cases and other wrongful death, sexual assault, and other violence cases.

Ken completed the Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) program at Johns Hopkins University School of Education where his research focused on the intersection of school administrator strategic crisis leadership with school safety communications in highly ambiguous and uncertain contexts. Ken earned a B.A. degree in Social Service (Criminal Justice concentration) and Master of Public Administration degree from Cleveland State University. Ken is the author, co-author and/or editor of three books, five book chapters, and more than 450 articles on school security and emergency preparedness issues. He is one of the most widely quoted school safety experts in national and international media.

Ken is a four-time invited Congressional witness on school safety and emergency preparedness issues, and has testified before the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. Ken has testified on school security and emergency preparedness to the Connecticut Governor's Sandy Hook Advisory Commission, Oklahoma School Security Commission, New Jersey School Security Task Force, National Lieutenant Governors Association, Council of State Governments, Education Commission of the States, and other public policy agencies.

For more background, see
www.schoolsecurity.org/about-us/kenneth-s-trump-school-safety-expert/

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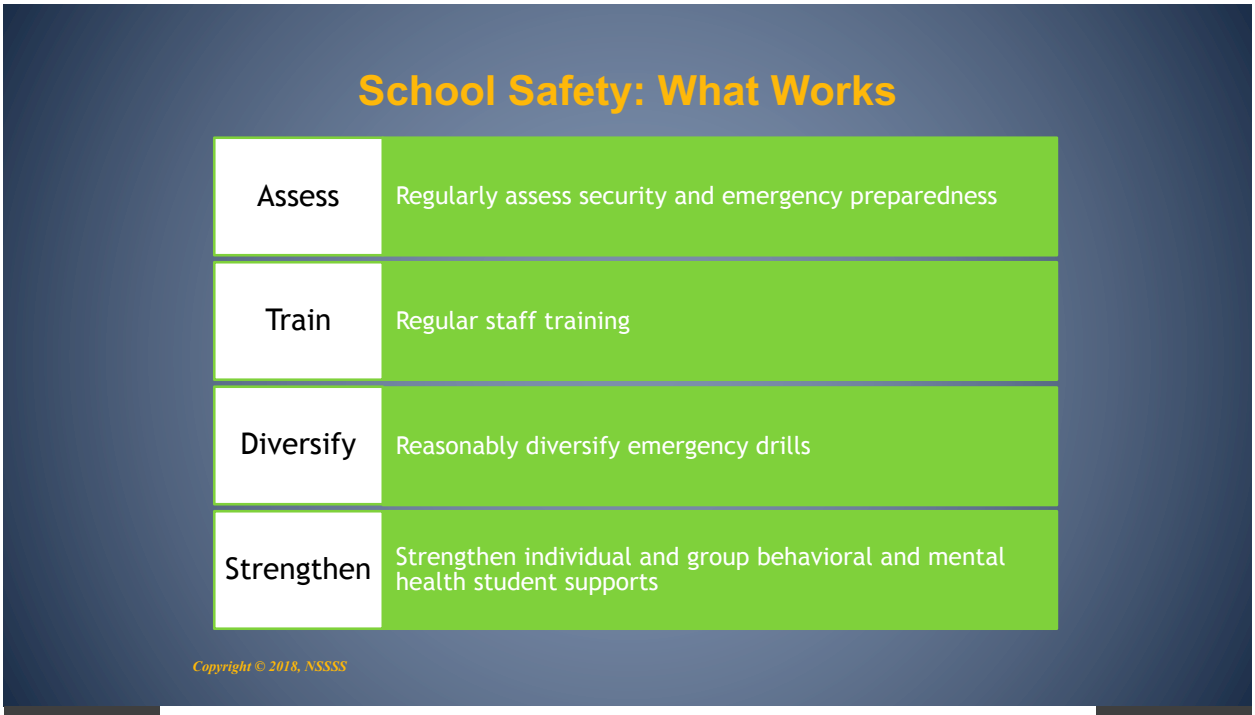
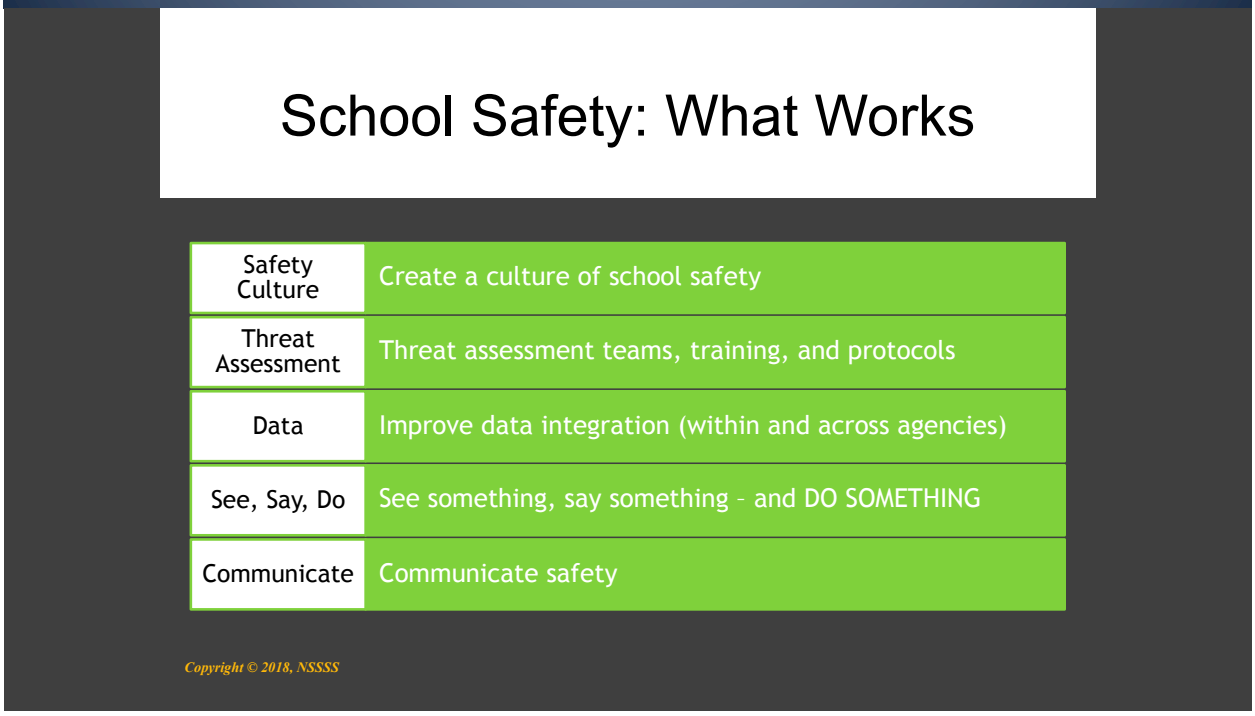
Reality in School Emergency Preparedness

1. You cannot script every crisis
2. There is no perfect checklist or template
3. No single individual has all of the answers
4. There is no quick fix solution
5. The answer is NOT the app
6. The good news: We are better at preventing tragedies
7. School safety is about people, not products and hardware

Uptick in gun incidents in schools

1. Security theater is counterproductive
2. Security & preparedness assessments
3. Relationships, ears to the ground
4. Rapid response to neighborhood/ group/ gang conflicts
5. Strengthened intelligence with police, probation, and community partners
6. Promote anonymous reporting tools
7. Strengthen student supports
8. Engage students





STRATEGIC SCHOOL SAFETY LEADERS

Simplify complex school safety issues by identifying what is most important

Kenneth S. Trump and Christine A. Eith

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A 51-year-old man with a violent history followed two female students into their high school during morning student arrival. The students alerted their principal, and when confronted, the man said he was there to "hurt kids."

During the school day, a stranger was found in a middle school restroom offering needles to students.

A 35-year-old man was arrested after telling police that "a frequency" asked him to kill 50 middle school students to get another student out of a "trapped parallel dimension."

These are real-life examples of the growing incidences of "unknown unknowns" — school security threats that are difficult, if not impossible, to predict or include in a school emergency plan. Boards and superintendents must be forward-focused, strategic school safety leaders and communicators about school safety issues.

Below are ways to cut through the noise to identify what is important and to simplify complex school safety issues.

AVOID 'SECURITY THEATER'

The worst time to make sweeping changes in school safety, security, and emergency preparedness policies and practices is immediately after a high-profile incident, when emotions are running high. Change can be good, but the best change often comes with friction, debate, inclusivity, and collaboration. Board members and superintendents need to take a tactical pause — a deliberate break to look, listen, and analyze — before making dramatic changes to school safety policies and practices.

Boards and superintendents face enormous pressures to create visible, tangible indicators of increased security after their schools experience gun confiscations, shooting incidents, or other high-profile violence. This often results in target hardening measures such as security technology and hardware. While these measures may provide boards and administrators with a short-term solution for political and school-community relations problems, research is scant on their effectiveness. In fact, some studies point to their unintended adverse impact on student perceptions of safety.

An analysis of school safety civil litigation suggests that while the facts and merits of each case varies, a common thread is that allegations focus on claims of failures of human factors — issues of people, policies, procedures, training, communications, etc. — not allegations of failures of security hardware, products, and technology. Taking a tactical pause can lead to more meaningful, strategic school safety decisions.

Be educated consumers of school safety information

The number of voices, viewpoints, and vendors grows as school shootings continue. Victims of school shootings form advocacy groups to push for what they see as the solution based upon their unique experiences. Security hardware, product, and technology vendors increasingly call for school "target hardening."

School safety conferences are regularly filled with sessions narrowly focused on single-incident high-profile school shootings. While we can glean lessons from each of these tragedies, the next incident will likely follow a different fact pattern. School leaders should exercise restraint in making abrupt changes to safety policies and practices based upon the fact pattern of one high-profile incident.

Boards and administrators need to be educated consumers of school safety information. Security vendors are making claims with checklists and guidelines of school security "standards" that they often create without widespread input of superintendents, principals, teachers, and others in education. Vendors also lobby for laws and funding that benefits the security vendors' industries, often with questionable benefits to students.

As the end of federal pandemic relief dollars nears, boards and superintendents face tough decisions about sustainability of security hardware and services, as well as student social and emotional support services, purchased with these funds. Will they be sustained in district operating budgets? If cuts are made, at the expense of what other needs? How do you communicate these cuts to your community?

CREATE AN INCLUSIVE CULTURE OF SAFETY

School safety is not the sole responsibility of principals or school safety officials. Support staff, students, parents, and others in the school community must be engaged.

Teachers often are left out of safety discussions. Research shows teachers are more likely to cite common issues, like bullying, as a main safety concern compared to active shooters. Yet the rise in school violence remains a consistent worry. The current teacher shortage coupled with the dramatic reduction in the pipeline of pre-service teachers highlights the dramatic need for school boards to listen to the experiences of their teachers.

Teachers have been leaving their jobs, with some

leaving the profession, due in part to an increase in job demands, stress, and safety issues. Teachers also are facing a rise in threats from students, including an increase in weapons being brought into school. Some are concerned for their personal safety if they correct student behavior. They express fear of retribution from students and parents, and they feel nothing is being done to protect them.

Teachers often feel ignored in the development and implementation of safety plans. They should have input on whether these safety plans are effective, as teachers are often the ones seeing the direct impact of policy changes. Even the best policies, if not effectively implemented, will fail.

Boards should both encourage and expect superintendents to include teachers in the design of safety and security policies to ensure that those who are most affected by the risk of violence are heard and are informing the process.

SIMPLIFY SCHOOL SAFETY

Many schools lack vibrant school safety or crisis teams and, in some cases, have no teams at all. Research indicates the value of shared mental models for preventing and responding to safety incidents.

Many schools now have 80- to 130-page emergency plans. Yet typically, no one from the superintendent to the school custodian knows what is in the plans. The documents often best serve plaintiff attorneys who use them against administrators in school safety lawsuits.

School teams should meet state and other legal mandates for school emergency planning. But it is unrealistic to expect teachers and support staff to memorize volumes of information from emergency plan templates. School leaders should simplify school safety by first emphasizing and training three areas:

1. Situational awareness: Being fully mindful, focused, and situationally aware when supervising students and campuses.

2. Recognizing abnormalities in patterns: Detecting individuals and behaviors not normally a part of their daily school context, such as strangers in halls or unknown cars on campuses.

3. Cognitive decision-making under stress: Educators typically make decisions collaboratively and need empowerment, training, and practice on making split-second safety decisions individually.

Focus less on memorizing voluminous plans and templates, and instead simplify school safety by emphasizing skills that cross many potential threat scenarios.

TRAIN ADMINISTRATORS TO BE STRATEGIC SCHOOL SAFETY LEADERS

Superintendent, principal, teacher, and support staff turnover is occurring at record paces. As a result of time demands, school safety professional development time is shrinking. If school leaders want to commit to school safety, it requires an allocation of time and leading by example.

Professional learning is more than allocating a half hour for teachers to review a few pages of the school's emergency plans. Support staff such as bus drivers, secretaries, custodians, and food service support staff often receive little or no training. Shorter exercises provide great opportunities for school staff to create shared mental models for violence prevention, preparedness, and response.

Be sure to debrief drills and actual incidents with all stakeholders. Discuss with teachers to know what happened and how students experienced the drill. Identify additional supports needed from nonteaching staff to support students in their recovery if a drill is traumatic.

Research shows high-reliability organizations thrive on learning from failure. It's important to allocate time for meaningful school safety planning and professional learning.

COMMUNICATE ABOUT SCHOOL SAFETY

Research tells us that superintendents and principals struggle in communicating about school safety. School leaders do many great things to create safe schools, but they often do not do their best at communicating about them. One principal captured this safety communications challenge in telling us: "I don't know what to say, how to say it, or when to say it."

Boards, superintendents, and principals should create strategic school safety communications plans. Dedicate time at each board meeting to share information with the public on district safety initiatives. Schedule time at every district leadership team meeting for principals and central office administrators to discuss safety issues. Incorporate five minutes at the end of every school faculty meeting to discuss one aspect of school safety. Take 60 seconds once a week for the principal to share a safety message during public address announcements to students.

There are meaningful steps boards and superintendents can take for school safety leadership and accountability. To do so, boards and superintendents must shift from being reactive to being strategic school safety leaders.

Board and administrator school safety leadership and accountability

Boards and administrators should ask:

- Are school safety, security, and emergency preparedness policies aligned with actual practices? Are there outdated policies? If so, can these policies be eliminated or updated to reflect current contexts?
- Are we doing what we say we are doing? What is the fidelity of implementation of school safety policies, regulations, and procedures?
- Trust but verify: How do we know if there are disconnects between policy and practice? In what internal and external assessment and audit practices can we engage to evaluate our safety, security, and emergency preparedness?

Steps boards can take for school safety accountability:

- Incorporate school safety, security, and emergency preparedness goals into the superintendent's contract. For example, one district required its superintendent to have an external expert school security and emergency preparedness assessment during the contract period.
- Create a permanent board school safety committee.
- Create quality discipline and crime data collection mechanisms, and provide the data to the board for oversight and discussion in executive session.
- Resist doing school safety "on the cheap" by incorporating costs into operating and capital improvement budgets and planning for sustainability of ongoing security hardware and school safety programs.
- Create criteria and protocols for vetting school security vendors and proposals.
- Create a policy requiring a comprehensive school safety plan focused on prevention, intervention preparedness, response, and recovery.
- Create a policy requiring school safety, security, and emergency preparedness professional development training for administrators, teachers, and support staff.
- Engage legal counsel to:
  - Provide regular updates on state and federal mandates on school safety, security, and emergency preparedness.
  - Review potential liabilities of school emergency and other safety plan content.
  - Identify district safety responsibilities and potential liabilities with district-sponsored charter schools and other contracted programs.

Boards and central office administrators should have:

- Safety plans for board meeting security and emergency preparedness.
- Threat assessment protocols for threats made by and to adults.
- Safety/crisis teams, drills, and other best practices as required of their schools for central office and support service sites.

Kenneth S. Trump is the president of National School Safety and Security Services in Cleveland, Ohio. Christine A. Eith is an assistant professor in the School of Education at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland.

A Holistic Approach to School Safety

Is it possible and practical to balance metal detectors and mental detectors?

BY CHRISTINE A. EITH AND KENNETH S. TRUMP

Following last year's tragic school shooting in Parkland, Fla., we saw school leaders come under immense pressure to strengthen safety measures. Anxious parents, understandably nervous and fearful of high ambiguity, demanded school safety changes.

In stressful times, the emotional climate reaches a feverish pitch as school system leaders and their governing boards rush to make a difference. Their reactions are to do something, do it fast and do it differently.

Not surprisingly, we saw questionable decisions in the past year where school leaders made choices — for instance, investing in bulletproof backpacks and whiteboards — that made people *feel* emotionally safe but did not make students safer.

Educators should pause to examine whether they are striving to make people feel safer or making schools safer. It's a balancing act to create a safe school and preserve the learning environment. School safety discussions require a proactive approach to thorny problems and rigorous conversations with stakeholders, data analysis, research, a review of best practices and pragmatic implementation considerations.

Our insights and advice about best practice are based on more than 30 years' experience. One of us (Trump, no relation to the president), has spent decades as a safety and security expert for districts during which time he has published three books and 450 articles. The other (Eith) spent nearly two decades researching school safety issues, including analysis of juvenile crime statistics for the U.S. Department of Justice.

Outside Influences

Special-interest groups such as gun control and gun rights advocates have developed their definitions of a safe school, while the security industry is actively lobbying to define safe schools based on stronger "target hardening" by increasing security hardware and equipment. While advocates, activists and others outside of K-12 education often are well-intentioned, many of their ideas are not always well-considered as to their potential for implementation in school contexts.

State legislators, state education agencies and homeland security officials also are creating school safety requirements to shape the definition of a safe school. Many of these definitions focus heavily on security hardware and products or tactics that do not always transfer easily to child-oriented settings. In fact, forensic analyses of

Lockdowns at School: Differing Views Over What Works

Lockdowns became a staple in school emergency plans following the massacre at Columbine High School in 1999. Lockdowns move students and staff out of the way of potential harm as quickly as possible. This often means going into locked classrooms, offices or other locations considered more secure than open hallways or common areas.

Differing perspectives recently have gained attention as to whether lockdown drills are adequate or if other approaches should be incorporated into school planning. Many representatives from law enforcement or homeland security advocate for options-based training, which encourages school staff and students to run, hide or fight in an emergency.

Other experienced school safety experts oppose such tactics, arguing that running from a shooter versus locking down creates target-rich environments and risks greater losses of life, and teaching to attack gunmen presents greater safety and liability risks. School leaders considering options-based training may wish to consult with their school attorneys and insurance carriers for their opinions on potential risk and liability exposures.

Lockdown Measures

The basic steps in a typical lockdown include:

- **Initiate a lockdown call.** During lockdown drills, notices often come from school public address systems typically located in main offices. Consider, however, in a real emergency, the main office could be compromised. Having multiple locations and/or methods for initiating lockdown notifications should be a part of planning.
- **Move quickly into a secure room or location.** Avoid common areas such as open cafeterias, hallways, stairwells, gyms and restrooms.
- **Turn off the lights.** The goal is to make the room appear as if no one is inside. Lights on could be one of the first indicators that someone may be hiding inside a room.
- **Move as far away from the doors and windows as possible.** Post-Parkland discussions in Florida have referred to "hard corners," a law enforcement tactical phrase to describe room locations where it would be harder for a shooter to hit a target when shooting into a classroom from outside of the doorway. While hard corners is not a phrase typically used in schools, the strategy of moving away from classroom doors and windows has been the lockdown guidance given with the same intent for years.
- **Minimize your physical exposure.** When possible, seek protective cover. Exactly where the most appropriate or available hard corners exist and how to minimize physical exposure will vary greatly within every school.
- **Remain calm and quiet.** Noise attracts the attention of persons with ill intentions who otherwise might not detect people in a locked room. Teaching students and staff to be quiet while in lockdown is one of the most important but often underemphasized points in lockdown training.
- **Wait for an all-clear signal.** What an all-clear signal will be and how it will be delivered may vary school to school. This should be discussed with local first responders prior to an actual incident.
- **Debrief for lessons learned.** Small lessons learned can make a big difference in a real emergency. While school crisis teams may do more formal debriefings, all staff and students should be asked for input from all drills to learn what worked well and how drills can be improved.

Diversified Drilling

School facilities vary greatly. The specifics of how lockdowns will unfold need to be discussed and practiced at each school.

Just as with fire drills, students and staff become proficient and efficient in locking down through practice. It is important for administrators to reasonably diversify lockdown drills. Having lockdown drills only when it is convenient for staff and students does not equate to reasonable and realistic practice.

Diversifying drills by conducting them during lunch periods, between class changes and at arrival or dismissal times can add challenges into the mix to get staff and students to better think on their feet in a real emergency.

— CHRISTINE EITH AND KENNETH TRUMP

school security lawsuits show that allegations tend to focus on the alleged failures of people, policies, procedures and systems, not failures of security technology and gadgets.

Some states are enacting requirements that all schools establish a safe schools committee to develop strategic and continuous school improvement plans, create increasingly complex crisis and emergency preparedness documents and/or ramp up physical security hardware and police staffing.

Educators must speak up and speak out about safety issues, to ensure the needs of kids and schools are met. A holistic safety plan needs to consider how school leaders can influence and educate their communities and legislators on best practices in school security.

Safe School Defined

As a first step, superintendents should develop a definition of school safety with community input because no universal definition exists to guide this work.

Frequently, school safety is defined by the absence of negative incidents (such as bullying or bomb threats) or focused on emergency preparedness. The latter is in line with the focus of Department of Homeland Security initiatives and moving toward the definition of schools as targets — where a school is one that is prepared for emergencies.

Changing the lens and focusing on safety as an environment that is free from fear, intimidation, violence and isolation can lead to an educational climate that fosters inclusion and acceptance for every child. Incorporating reasonable and balanced security and emergency preparedness measures can contribute to sustaining a secure climate in which to implement student behavioral and intervention supports.

Defining behavioral expectations that are clearly communicated, consistently enforced and fairly applied can help schools move in the direction of a definition of a safe school that is both measurable and prevention-focused rather than solely reactive. Having superintendents and principals motivate and engage faculty, staff, students, parents and the broader school community in implementing comprehensive school safety plans promotes ownership, engagement and sustained commitment.

Indicators of a safe school are many and may include:

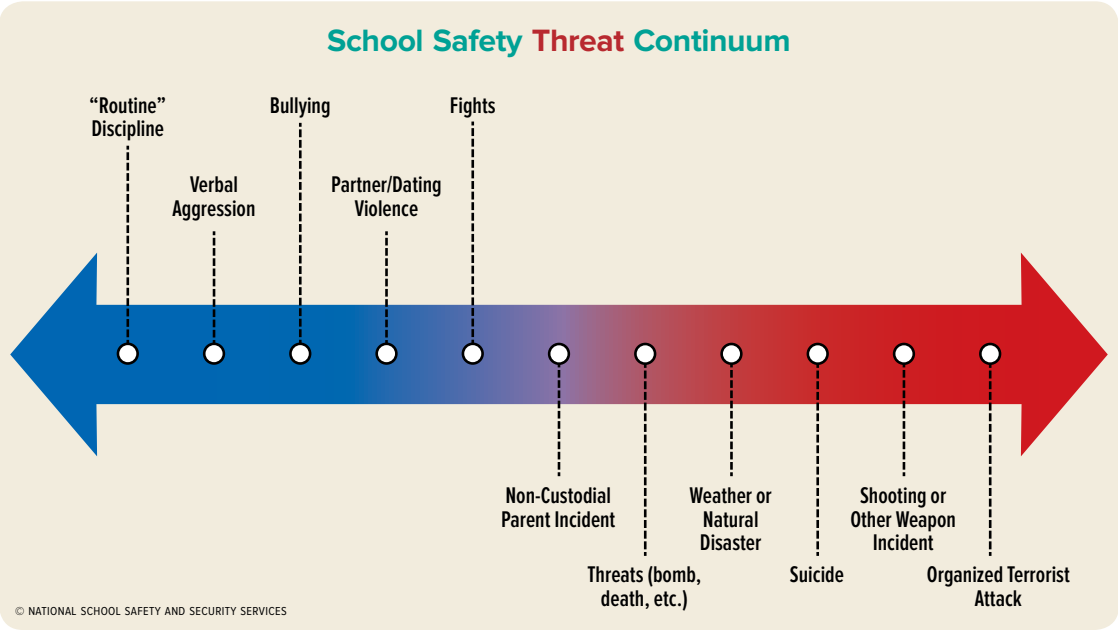
- high academic standards,
- positive and respectful relationships,
- systematic conflict resolution strategies (e.g., peer mediation or meditation),
- a clean and orderly physical setting that enhances school pride,
- school personnel who listen to stakeholders,
- teachers and administrators who care about their students and have positive interactions and mutual respect for students,
- commitment to civility and positive classroom culture,
- behavioral and mental health intervention supports,
- opportunities and guidance for student before- and after-school programs and activities involving the whole community, and
- reasonable security and emergency preparedness measures.

Christine Eith

This is not an exhaustive list. The key is for school leaders and their stakeholders to identify those indicators that define a safe school and then create a safety plan that is individualized, comprehensive and balanced.

District Initiatives

Following the attack in Parkland, Fla., in February 2018, the St. Tammany Parish Public Schools in Louisiana initiated a new approach that balanced adding a school resource officer with a mental health professional for student supports in each of the district's 55 schools. In northeast-



ern Ohio, educators in the Copley-Fairlawn City Schools worked with their first responders and outside consultants to revisit their emergency preparedness while contracting with outside mental health agencies to provide intensive interventions with high-risk students.

Meanwhile, the 1,700-student Girard, Ohio, City Schools, bordering Youngstown, Ohio, engaged school safety consultants to evaluate the district's building security and emergency guidelines while providing professional learning opportunities on security and best practices in emergency preparedness to support staff, including food service, transportation and office personnel.

In Roanoke, Va., Superintendent Rita Bishop and her leadership team worked with school security and emergency preparedness experts to assess district-level safety programs and facilitate tabletop exercises for all secondary and elementary administrators, first responders and district support staff. Also, in Virginia's 82,000-student Loudoun County Public Schools, Superintendent Eric Williams and his district staff re-evaluated Loudoun's already-exemplary threat assessment program and strengthened its safety communications messaging with parents.

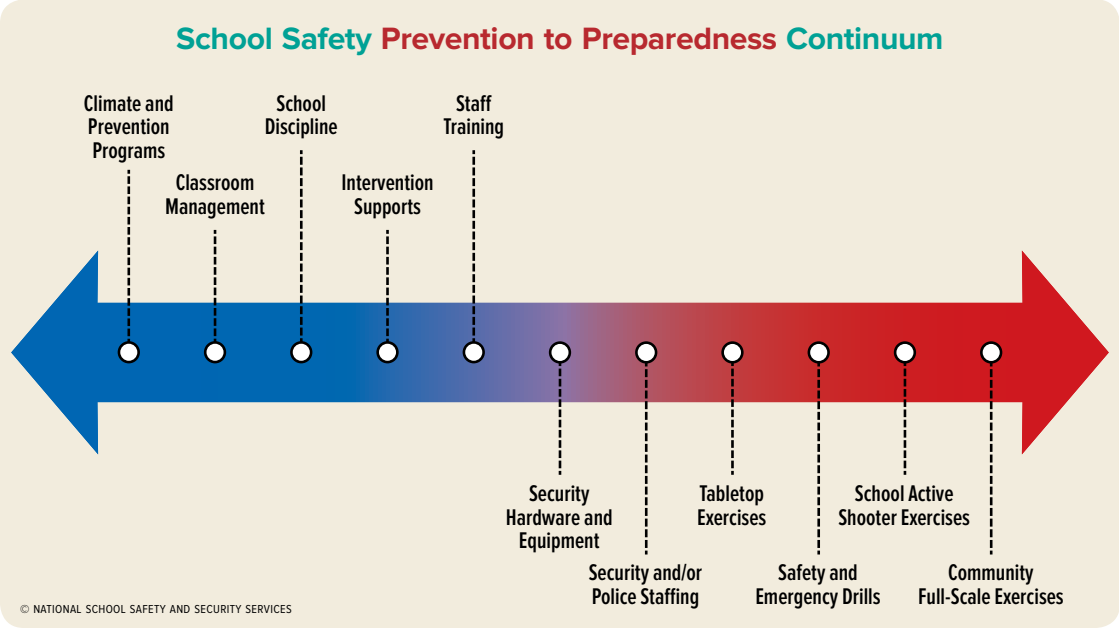
While each of these districts took somewhat different approaches, the common thread is that the leadership took a proactive stance to work with internal and external stakeholders to examine school safety definitions and priorities. They reinforced safety communications with parents. They identified components of a comprehensive plan that needed strengthening. In short, they took the lead in defining what safe schools are for their school community.

What's Enough?

Grappling with the piles of research (or the paucity of it), the pitch of vendors and special-interest lobbyists and the sometimes-conflicting opinions of consultants on how to best keep students and staff safe is no simple task. A team of people with varied perspectives and areas of expertise to distill the facts and make rational decisions about school safety is recommended. How can you strike a balance between a safe school and a positive learning environment?


Kenneth Trump

Research published in 2013 in the *American Journal of Criminal Justice* shows that a heavy focus on school security equipment can have an unintended consequence of increasing student fear and anxiety. At the same time, the student who is assaulted in the back hallway on the way to his restorative justice circle group will not benefit from the "softer side" of school safety interventions if he cannot safely get to the session.



School safety discussions should be balanced between mental detectors and metal detectors. A team should consider options that include communications capabilities, visitor management systems and single-entry points — as well as school counseling needs and violence prevention programs.

Much focus now is on protection from active shooters. But threat assessment is only one dimension of school safety. Building trusting relationships between students and adults is key. School leaders typically find out about a weapon or a plot in school from a student who comes forward and tells a trusted adult. When schools emphasized personal communication and relationships with students, the reporting improved and incidents declined.

Evaluating Threats

School shootings are low-probability but high-impact occurrences. While shootings are important threats to include in school safety planning, many other lower-impact but higher-probability threats to safety occur widely in schools.

A continuum of threats to school safety might begin with the disciplinary issues most school administrators deal with year-round and then progress in seriousness to bullying, fighting, noncustodial parent issues, bomb threats, weather and natural disasters, student or staff suicides or even an organized terror attack upon schools. School shootings must be viewed as an important threat, yet only one point on a broad continuum of potential threats.

If we view threats to school safety on a continuum, then it is appropriate to plan school safety prevention and preparedness measures on a continuum, as well. Yes, schools must prepare for school shootings, but they also must address the many other potential threats by having school climate and prevention programs, behavioral and mental health interventions, reasonable physical security measures, staff training exercises and participation in broader community preparedness planning.

School leaders should therefore recognize the continuum of threats to the safety of their schools and respond with a continuum of prevention and preparedness measures. This type of comprehensive and balanced approach to school safety is supported by decades of research and experience.

Research consistently shows that schools should take a comprehensive and balanced approach in designing their school safety programs. But it also shows that schools struggle in implementing and sustaining such programs over time.

The first step toward creating a meaningful and evidence-based school safety program is to define what a safe school is for your school community. ■

CHRISTINE EITH is an assistant professor in the School of Education at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Md. E-mail: ceith@jhu.edu. Twitter: @christine_eith.
KENNETH TRUMP is the president of National School Safety and Security Services in Cleveland, Ohio.

October 2019 | Volume **77** | Number **2**
Making School a Safe Place

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Why Social Bonding Is a School-Safety Priority

Christine Eith and Kenneth Trump

In enhancing school security, school leaders should not overlook the importance of connection.

Imagine being a 6th grader at a new school. After five months of attending class, three of your four teachers still regularly misspell your first name. While most your classmates work for several days in a succession on projects for a state competition, you and two other students not involved from the onset of the projects are directed to silently read a book all day in another room. And when, one day in the cafeteria, a student in your class knocks you to the ground and you hit your head, the principal tells your parents, "Don't feel like your child is being systematically targeted. David bullies everyone and has been suspended three times for it. If he doesn't shape up …."

How connected would you feel to your new school?

Set aside student-to-student behavior for a moment. Look at the adult behavior in this real-life example presented to us last spring. Are we, as classroom educators and administrators, creating the social bonds and connectedness for students that research tells us is critical for creating safe schools?

As school-shootings and other acts of higher-profile violence continue to be perpetrated on school campuses, and in our communities, many schools are looking to security hardware and preparatory emergency drills to create a greater sense of safety. But while physical security measures are clearly important, they play only one part in making schools safer—and in isolation they can have the opposite effect. Schools must also focus more closely on the individuals they are trying keep safe, and the overall well-being that comes from a climate which promotes connection to school and pro-social activities.

There are very sound and evidence-based approaches to increasing school safety that cost much less and have greater return on investment than intensive security upgrades. They focus on building connection, inclusion, and commitment within the school environment.

Too often, it is only after a terrifying, high-profile act of violence takes place in school that we begin to ask the question about the root causes of such incidents. How can we be more proactive in creating conditions in our schools that might reduce student withdrawal and isolation, or better support students undergoing social-emotional issues?

Social Bonding and Connectedness

A big part of the answer is that we must focus more on connectedness within schools. Empirical evidence over the last 20 years underpins the importance of school connectedness, also known as social bonding, to creating positive school climates. In schools where bonding is prioritized, research clearly shows a reduction in discipline citations, better student-teacher relationships, and a lower-levels of fear and anxiety related to negative stereotypes (Goyer et al., 2019).

Sociologist Travis Hirschi (1969) broke out four elements of the social bonding process: attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief, with each element contributing to the overall socialization and well-being of individuals within society. How do each of these elements translate to the school environment? Here are some ideas:

> *Attachment*, the connection between individuals within the school environment, is often associated with pro-social connections with peers, teachers, and or one or more adults within the school; this could include bus drivers, counselors, or school resource officers. This is often fostered by reciprocation of friendships among peers and a perception of consistent care by adults. Consistently letting a student know you care and are interested in them as an individual is a key to building this connection.
>
> *Commitment* is the investment one has in school activities and one's own learning. This can be seen through the time and energy a student puts into his friendships, schoolwork, and engagement with teachers and school staff.
>
> *Involvement* is about engagement in conventional activities; the more opportunities a student has to engage in school activities, including "special" projects assigned by the teacher, or other extracurricular activities, the more likely one will feel engaged and connected to school and their peer group. (Even the opportunity to clean off the whiteboard or pass out an activity can mean the difference in a student withdrawing versus being attached and involved.)
>
> Finally, a student's *belief* in the shared norms and behaviors of the school will more likely lead to rule following and not causing disruptions. Observing, rather than just being told that rules are equally applied to all students, is key to building belief.

In boosting social bonding in schools, we must also consider teachers' and administrators' ability to support one another. Indeed, the quality of adult connectedness has exponential benefits to students' academic and socioemotional growth (Schonert-Reichl, 2019). Teachers must also be given the time to build reciprocal relationships and share successes as well as challenges in order to feel safe and supported in their buildings. In short, the greater the positive connections among teachers, students, and administrators, the greater the perception of safety within their school environment.

Social Bonding and Perceptions of Safety

While there is no uniform definition of a "safe school," we do know that schools exhibiting positive relationships between teachers and students, as well as among teachers, administrators, and staff, are more likely to be perceived as safe (May, 2018). This safety is built on social connection and engagement, as well as a trust in equitable opportunities for involvement and enforcement of the rules. The result is a reduction in social isolation and loneliness, which have been identified as threats to safety and well-being, especially when externalized, and are often identified as key turning points for individuals who commit acts of violence. Indeed, in the literature on school violence, the most common characteristics identified as risk factors for violent behavior speak to a lack of connection or attachment. They are:

> Poor or deteriorating school performance.

Change in school attendance.

Feelings of isolation.

Withdrawal (in person or on social media).

Inability to set goals.

It is important to note that violent behavior is not always an external action. It can also result in feelings of depression or anxiety and self-harm. This is especially evident in middle school and the early transition into high school. In school safety consultations we've conducted, middle school teachers consistently identify "anxiety" as their top safety concern over potential school shootings. School administrators, meanwhile, reported increased concerns about suicide ideation and having completed substantially more suicide-risk assessments over the last 12 months than in years past.

School Safety Plans with Heart

Climate and cultural improvement start at the top. Superintendents, central office leaders, and principals set the tone and context for teachers and support staff. In our urgent efforts to make schools safer, it is critical for school leaders to balance the focus on hardening school security with initiatives to increase connectedness and reduce isolation in schools.

Increasing connectedness within a school does not need to be a capital investment. The key investments are time and attention. Increasing connectedness can begin with steps that foster a climate that promotes the elements of social bonding within schools' overall safety efforts:

Greet students by name each day. Be visible outside of school as buses arrive and in school hallways to enthusiastically welcome students to school each day. Engage students by name as they enter the school and their classrooms. Converse with students during lunch periods and recess rather than simply observing them from a distance. Show students you recognize and know them as individuals. As building and district administrators, be sure to personally acknowledge and engage with teachers and support staff as well.

Include social-emotional agenda items in school safety and crisis committee meetings. Supervision, drills, and first-responder relations are important items for committee agendas. But be sure to also discuss strategies for strengthening social-emotional safety at each meeting, too.

Engage school support staff in school safety planning and training. Your school secretary will be the first person to receive a bomb threat call or deal with upset parents. The school custodian may be the first to encounter a stranger on campus. Cafeteria staff engage with many students each day. School bus drivers are often the first and last school employees to interact with students daily. Support staff need to feel connected to their school and to the instructional and administrative staff. Be sure to include these and other school support staff on safety committees and crisis teams, and in school safety training programs.

Use tabletop exercises to build stronger connections among administrators, teachers, support staff, first responders, mental health support teams, and other stakeholders. Having diverse teams work through hypothetical emergency scenarios can strengthen mutual respect and bonding. The process of collaborative problem-solving, even under a bit of stress, helps build team bonding and relationships that need to be in place if a real crisis strikes your school.

Collectively debrief safety drills, exercises, and incidents that occur at school. Dedicate time to talk to students and parents about the school safety plans and encourage teachers and students to talk about the experiences. Engage with parents and students to let them know what to expect and allow them to be seen as individuals who have feelings about this topic. More important, make sure there is time after a drill for teachers and students to talk about what they just experienced and how and why this is part of the schools' plan to keep them safe. Building this time in will help facilitate connectedness and strengthen social bonds through

recognizing that these drills are stress inducing and can trigger emotions that could prevent students and teachers from focusing on the work for a short time.

Engage students in school safety planning and promote student ownership of school spaces. Have students conduct their own school safety assessments to identify physical spaces and issues on campus that raise their safety concerns. Ask for their input on what specific steps they would take as principal or superintendent in charge of their schools. Use hallway and classroom walls, display cases, and other school spaces to showcase student artwork, writing, and awards to create student ownership of the school.

Ensure that students have access to social and mental health supports while in the school building. Committing well-being resources to serve students reinforces the safety of the schools and offers students who do not feel safe or need additional support resources to build stronger attachments and foster their well-being. Teachers spend a significant time with their students each day and having a safe place to refer a student who may need support demonstrates to that student that (1) the teacher cares and (2) there is a safe place to find help.

Engage parents in school-safety planning. Communicate to parents at the beginning of school the types of school safety drills their children may experience during the school year. Dedicate at least one parent organization meeting to discussing child and school safety concerns and resources. Include at least one paragraph about safety issues and resources in every parent newsletter. Dedicate a page on the school's website to highlight your school's focus on student safety and safety resources for parents and students.

Promote open communication, collaboration, and respectful behavior. Clearly articulate behavior and academic expectations and follow through with equitable supports and responses. It is important that students see that behavioral expectations are upheld equally for all students to ensure a belief in the rules. Students who also observe cohesion and connection among the adults in the school are more likely to find the space safe and will be more likely to build healthy attachments.

Recognize students as learners and unique individuals who want to contribute to the learning environment. Encourage opportunities for pro-social, reciprocal engagement among peers in the classroom, during field trips, and through extracurricular activities. Some of the most successful teachers we have worked with have built trust and connection with students by remaining curious and asking questions about who they are as individuals. Ensuring that students have the opportunity to engage in their learning through social interaction and involvement will foster commitment to learning and also provide the opportunity for teachable moments in the course of shared experience. Teachers who welcome every student into the classroom, engage each student in their class, and show that every student has value even through assigning jobs or responsibilities before or after class can find a more cohesive and safe classroom.

A Safer Environment

Social bonding is a necessary and critical condition for safe schools. While it does not require any specialized technology or hardware, it does require leadership and a personal commitment to the well-being of our school communities. The idea that we not just know one another, but care enough to engage with one another, is powerful. When we build effective bonds, it helps us to support one another through challenges and collaboratively build a safe and healthy environment.

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Tech doesn't solve all safety concerns

Administrators must also train staff and develop prevention strategies to better protect school buildings

By Ken Trump

Bomb threats sent to teachers through an international proxy server. Computer-generated shooting threats called in to your school office. An irate parent with a gun reportedly headed to your school. A chemical spill at a nearby factory.

How can administrators prepare staff with best practices and reasonable emergency plans? How can you communicate safety to your parents in a social media world on digital steroids?

Don't lose sight of the big picture

As school safety issues move from schoolhouses to courthouses and courts of public opinion, school leaders often struggle to distinguish between fads and best practices.

Media attention may dwell upon active shooters, but your school's bigger safety threat may be a non-custodial parent abduction or a hazardous material spill on a highway near campus.

The risks can be considered along a continuum. Routine disciplinary misbehaviors, verbal aggression, bullying, and fighting may be more likely threats to your school. Weather and natural disasters, bomb and shooting threats, weapons incidents and other higher-impact challenges present less likely, but still possible, dangers.

School safety and emergency preparedness planning can also be viewed on a continuum. Prevention programs, student intervention supports and professional development must be parts of preparedness efforts. Security equipment and hardware, tabletop exercises, emergency drills and participation in full-scale exercises—including those focusing on active shooters—may also be on that expanding continuum.

Security equipment and hardware play a role in school safety, but they should not be substitutes for a comprehensive safety strategy.

Balance hardware with people

As an expert witness in school safety litigation, it is not uncommon for me to see wrongful deaths, serious injuries from violent assaults, sexual assaults and other cases. School safety lawsuits typically involve allegations of failures of people and procedures—not alleged failures of security equipment and hardware.

It is those procedural perfect storms and cascading human errors that often come into question after an incident.

Security equipment and hardware play a role in school safety, but they should not be substitutes for a comprehensive safety strategy. It is a lot harder to show parents your effective, but less visible, strategies like staff training, emergency drills or planning activities with crisis teams and first responders.

Focus on fundamentals

Time, not just more money, is needed for meaningful school safety and emergency preparedness planning. Administrators can focus on practical safety fundamentals such as:

- Student supervision. Discuss supervision with teachers and support staff. Talk about supervision at drop-off and pick-up areas, in hallways during class changes, in restrooms and stairwells, during breakfast and lunch periods, and in other common areas and hot spots.
- Diversify drills. Conduct lockdown drills during lunch periods, between classes or as students arrive in the morning. Use reverse fire drills to time how quickly students and staff return inside after exiting the school. Block an exit, without announcing it to students and staff, to see how they would respond under different conditions.
- Plan for evacuations and extended sheltering in place. Identify walking distance to various evacuation sites. Visit those sites and plan how you would set up operations in an emergency.
- Practice the "five-minute rule." Take five minutes at the end of each faculty or cabinet meeting to discuss one aspect of your emergency plans. Create a culture of regular safety conversations.
- Create and test crisis communications plans. Parent-notification mechanisms, media-response plans and social media strategies are a part of many school preparedness measures today. DA

Ken Trump (ken@schoolsecurity.org) is the president of National School Safety and Security Services.

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AI AND SCHOOL SECURITY

Districts are turning to artificial intelligence measures for school safety and security efforts

Robin L. Flanigan

The number of school shootings with casualties in U.S. schools continues to break record highs. According to the K-12 School Shooting Database, there were 305 shooting incidents on school grounds in 2022, compared to 250 in 2021 and 115 in 2020. If current trends continue, the database projects that number to be closer to 340 in 2023.

A ubiquitous security tool in schools, security cameras allow for forensic review. However, they don't detect threats in real time. That's why school districts—especially after the May 2022 elementary school massacre in Uvalde, Texas—increasingly are turning to artificial intelligence to prevent school violence. Yet, these investments aren't without questions about privacy, effectiveness, false alarms, and other concerns.

"You can't always control what happens, but you can control the response," says Tom Poehlmann, director of safety, security, and operations for Delaware's Appoquinimink School District.

Appoquinimink school officials had been monitoring artificial intelligence security trends for years. Then a couple of incidents during athletic events in 2022-23, including the discharge of a gun during a fight outside a basketball game, caused them to turn to artificial intelligence for a potential solution.

"Most times, school officials try to make the right decision, but we are human, and sometimes we just don't," Poehlmann says. "By and large, however, people appreciate action over inaction, and we have tried to take action in order to mitigate the chances of this happening again."

A 'NEAR UNANIMOUS' VOTE FOR ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Virginia's Prince William County Public Schools led extensive discussions—at school board meetings, town halls, and advisory councils comprised of school officials and parents—before installing weapons detection scanners in all 34 middle and high schools by the end of September.

The scanners are manufactured by Evolv Technology, whose security technology is used in approximately 650 schools nationwide. The system uses algorithms and different signatures of potential weapons to identify threats even when concealed, allowing for quicker and less invasive entrances.

"It was near unanimous that people wanted it," School Board Chairman Babur Lateef says of the purchase, which will cost about $10.7 million over four years and be paid from the operating budget. "And I'm talking folks who are advocates on both the far right and the far left of our political spectrum."

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Prince William County Public Schools, with 90,000 students, was wrestling with a worrisome statistic. In 2019-20, it found 25 weapons in schools; that number soared to 71 in 2021-22, dipping only slightly to 61 in 2022-23.

In addition, a schoolwide survey found that 88% of elementary students and 76% of secondary students reported feeling safe at school during the 2022-23 school year. The district's goal for that statistic is to reach at least 90%.

Lateef points out that even with the added security, the new technology is not without fault: "Evolv was clear that this is not a perfect system, and we are very clear that this is an added layer of security—and that none of our layers are perfect."

CRITICS CHALLENGE EFFECTIVENESS

There has been "little to no significant research" on the use of artificial intelligence for school security and safety in these "highly ambiguous and uncertain times," according to Ken Trump, president of National School Safety and Security Services, a national consulting firm based in Cleveland, Ohio. [See Trump's article on page 24]

"When there are high-profile school security incidents, there's an enormous amount of pressure on school administrators and board members to do something and do it fast," he says. "That may temporarily address a political and school community relations problem, but it typically does not solve a school safety problem."

School officials have a daunting challenge when interpreting and understanding what companies are offering in AI in general, and particularly as it relates to security technology, according to Donald Maye, head of operations for IPVM. The industry research group reports on physical security technology, including weapons detection.

Some companies are so "aggressive and wildly misleading with their marketing claims that they're deceptive," he says.

Maye urges companies to be forthcoming about security system weak points such as AI-related false alerts, which happen because technology can't always differentiate between a gun and a computer or binder, for instance. IPVM, through its own testing and Freedom of Information Law requests, found that false alerts happen regularly.

Trump says he wishes more school districts made AI-related security decisions based on their own needs, rather than on panic or trends. He has seen clusters of school districts snapping up weapons detection systems after hearing about a nearby school district doing the same thing.

"Does it make sense to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars, or potentially millions, for a novel high-tech product out of fear of an active school shooter—which most schools will never experience—and sustain those costs for all years moving forward?" Trump asks. "Or are you going to take a tactical pause in your thinking and have a comprehensive assessment of security threats, risks, and vulnerabilities, then spend limited resources on addressing issues more likely to impact day-to-day school safety?"

AI-BASED SECURITY SYSTEMS GROW RAPIDLY

A pioneer decades ago in what became known as the emergency mass notification market, Omnilert launched an artificial intelligence-powered visual gun detection technology in late 2020. The market for that technology began to develop in early 2022, and just over a year later sales had risen twentyfold.

Schools make up half of the company's customer base. One of its latest contracts is with Maryland's Baltimore County Public Schools. The district plans to integrate the software with its 7,000 existing cameras, representing one of the largest deployments of visual gun detection technology in the country.

"When a gun is sighted, it takes less than a second for the detection to be made and [the technology] immediately sends images and precise location to a human in the loop

for verification," says Dave Fraser, CEO of Omnilert, based in Leesburg, Virginia.

That human could be at an Omnilert monitoring center, part of the customer's security team, or a third-party monitoring service of the customer's choice. Once verified, the information is sent immediately to first responders, and automated lockdowns—which can include locking doors, sounding alarms, and notifying those in harm's way—can be initiated.

More than one weapons-detection company has employees with ties to school violence.

Omnilert's director of artificial intelligence, Chad Green, lost a family member in the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, which took the lives of 20 students and six adults.

At Evolv, Director of Education Jill Lemond was assistant superintendent of student services at Michigan's Oxford Community Schools when four students were murdered, and seven other people injured during a mass shooting at Oxford High School in November 2021. Afterward, Lemond, who had been working with the police, was put in charge of all security for the district. That's how she first connected with Evolv, which donated three weapons detection systems to the high school. She went to work for the company in October 2022.

Evolv technology screens about 250,000 students a day—a tenfold increase over the past year, according to Lemond.

As for privacy concerns, Lemond says that AI images are never shared. They belong solely to the district and allow for enhanced security without making students open or empty their bags as they walk through the door.

'WE HAD A PROBLEM AND WE HAD TO ADDRESS THE PROBLEM'

Appoquinimink's incidents spurred investments in Evolv and ZeroEyes, an artificial intelligence gun detection and situational awareness platform used with existing security cameras. If a gun is detected, the software instantly sends images to a center staffed 24 hours a day, seven days a week, by specially trained U.S. military and law enforcement veterans. If the threat is viable, a visual description, gun type, and last known location is dispatched to local staff and first responders in as little as three to five seconds.

"I'm not reactionary and I'm not panicky," says Poehlmann, in charge of security for the 13,000-student district. "We had a problem and we had to address the problem."

For the 2023-24 school year, Appoquinimink is paying roughly $124,000 for three devices—one for each high school stadium—and about $45,000 for 120 camera streams where athletic events take place.

White Plains City School District in New York also is using ZeroEyes in each of the 7,000-student district's indoor and outdoor security cameras.

Any decision having to do with security needs to be "measured to make sure we're preserving a warm, welcoming climate and culture" in schools, says White Plains Superintendent Joseph Ricca. AI allows that to happen "without being obtrusive."

To that point, students at Santa Fe High School in Santa Fe, New Mexico, warmly received a 400-pound surveillance robot—with the ability to adopt artificial intelligence—from the start of a recent pilot, slated to end this fall. The all-terrain robot, from Team 1st Technologies based in Albuquerque, patrols the sprawling grounds 24/7. It can send messages of potential threats to authorities and allow a remote security team to speak to an intruder.

"Some of the kids will wave to it, talk to it, give salutations to the robot—it's kind of comical," says Mario Salbidez, executive director of safety and security for Santa Fe Public Schools, which has 11,500 students. "It's nice to see they seem to be accepting the robot on their campus."

If the robot winds up a permanent fixture—at a cost of less than $9 a day—students will have the opportunity to name it. In the meantime, Salbidez is hoping to add a robot to another district high school.

NEVER GIVING UP

District officials know that no security measure—not even one powered by artificial intelligence—can guarantee a safe environment all the time.

But they can't relax efforts to keep trying to do just that, according to Prince William County's Lateef.

"What always comes up, both from the teachers and the parents, is 'If a shooting happens, can you say to us you did everything you possibly could to prevent that from happening?'" Lateef says. "That's the magic question."

Robin L. Flanigan (robin@thekineticpen.com) is a freelance writer in Rochester, New York.

Preventing trauma during emergency exercises

Tabletop drills provide a safer environment to make sound decisions

By Ken Trump

School leaders everywhere have experienced parent, staff and student anxiety about school safety following the tragic attack at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida.

While these emotionally charged climates are understandable, making knee-jerk decisions with a "do something, do anything, do it now" mantra can lead to high-risk, high-liability actions that administrators and boards may regret down the road.

How can administrators avoid having school emergency plans collect dust on a shelf at one extreme, while not going over the top with hastily planned drills that do more harm than good at the other extreme?

Dramatic drills can be costly

Full-scale exercises and drills can be helpful to see how multi-agency emergency response plans might play out in a real-life crisis.

Properly planned exercises and drills can be labor-intensive, and can take months to plan, organize and execute.

Poorly planned exercises may be implemented more quickly, but they can come with a cost. One insurance company has reportedly paid out more than $1 million in claims for injuries school officials have suffered during active-shooter training over the last two years. A company spokesperson said most injuries involve sprains, broken bones or cuts caused by falls while participants were running.

Tabletop exercises provide a simulation of emergency situations in informal, stress-free classroom training environments.

Several years ago, an elementary school principal broke bones in her shoulder during options-based, active-shooter school training, while another teacher suffered a permanent disability to his hand and arm during a similar training program. Some of these injuries have resulted in lawsuits.

Leaders must also consider the potential psychological impact that highly dramatic drills and exercises may have on their students. We know of situations where teachers and support staff have been traumatized during active shooter drills. Prior life experiences with trauma and other psychological triggers can influence these responses.

Tabletop exercises provide options

One key word when considering school drills is "reasonableness." Leaders can push the envelope some by diversifying their drills but must also beware of crossing the line of reasonableness. "Do no harm" is a good measure for making sure that school emergency exercises and drills are meaningful without causing trauma.

Tabletop exercises provide a simulation of emergency situations in informal, stress-free classroom training environments. Exercise facilitators—often professionals experienced in school emergencies and crisis situations—provide a scenario to stimulate discussions that help participants assess their existing plans.

Tabletop exercises also allow school participants to examine the team roles, responsibilities, tasks and overall logistics that may be associated with managing real-life emergencies and adjust their school plans.

It is important to have the right players at these exercises. Diverse participants—including district and local crisis team members, first responders, mental health professionals, communications staff, school support staff, and other school-community stakeholders—can enrich the process.

Bringing these diverse perspectives together in a half-day professional development setting can lead to substantial changes in school emergency plans.

Hypothetical scenarios addressing common crisis incident elements—such as parent-student reunification, mobilization of transportation and food services, medication and nursing triage, media communications and staging, and other issues—can lead to substantial improvements in creating school emergency plans.

Plans that are tweaked based upon tabletop exercises held today can lead to better responses should a tragic event occur tomorrow. DA

Ken Trump (ken@schoolsecurity.org) is the president of National School Safety and Security Services.

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Emergency Preparedness and Students with Disabilities

It's important to understand and plan for the often-complex needs of students with disabilities during emergencies

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Laura Sharp

Licensed Clinical Psychologist and School Psychologist

William J. Zee

Chair of the Education Law Group at Appel, Yost & Zee

Emergency preparedness is a crucial aspect of ensuring the safety and well-being of all students, including those with disabilities. These students present with unique needs and challenges that require specific attention in emergency planning.

Students with disability-based supports are a diverse group of individuals with a wide range of specific needs. This includes students with physical disabilities, sensory impairments, cognitive limitations, or emotional and behavioral disorders. It is essential to understand and plan for the often-complex needs of these students. Specific considerations include:

1. **Communication barriers:** Many students with disabilities have communication difficulties, making it challenging for students to understand and follow instructions during an emergency. Some rely on assistive communication devices or sign language.
2. **Mobility issues:** Students with

physical disabilities may require mobility aids like wheelchairs or walkers, and evacuation plans must accommodate such needs.

3. **Sensory disabilities:** Students with sensory processing disorders may be overwhelmed by sirens, alarms, or bright lights during an emergency, leading to greater confusion.
4. **Medication and medical equipment:** Some students rely on medication or medical equipment in school. An effective emergency plan must include provisions that address these.
5. **Emotional and behavioral challenges:** Students with emotional or behavioral disorders may react differently during crises, requiring trained staff to manage their unique responses.

To better ensure the safety and empowerment of students with disabilities, schools must develop comprehensive and inclusive emergency plans. Some key components of such plans include:

1. **Individualized emergency plans:** Each student with a disability should have an individualized emergency plan tailored to their specific needs developed in collaboration with parents, caregivers, and specialists. These plans can be stand-alone documents referenced in the student's Individualized Education Program (IEP).
2. **Clear communication strategies:** Personnel should be trained in effective communication strategies that consider each student's unique needs. Visual supports, tactile cues, and simplified language can aid in conveying crucial information during a crisis.
3. **Specialized training:** Staff members should receive specialized training on assisting students with disabilities during emergencies.
4. **Accessible facilities:** School facilities must be accessible to all students, including those with mobility challenges. This includes ramps, elevators, and accessible restrooms. Plans should include contingencies for loss of power, multiple exit routes, and visual obstructions.
5. **Sensory considerations:** Sensory overload can be minimized by providing sensory-friendly spaces, ear protection, or sunglasses.
6. **Medication and medical equipment:** Establish protocols for the safe storage and administration of medication. Emergency generators that power essential medical equipment also should be considered.
7. **Evacuation plans:** Evacuation plans must account for the diverse needs of students with disabilities. Assign trained staff to assist with evacuations, especially for students with mobility, communication, and sensory needs.
8. **Reunification protocols:** Establish clear procedures for reuniting students with disabilities with their families or caregivers after an emergency. Consider prioritizing the reunification of students with disabilities, and then reallocating staff to assist with the reunification of the larger student population.

Empowerment is a vital aspect of emergency preparedness for all students but especially for those with disabilities. This involves fostering independence and self-confidence in anticipation of a crisis. Practices that can help empower students with disabilities include:

1. **Self-advocacy skills:** Instruction in basic self-advocacy skills, such as communicating needs and understanding individualized emergency plans.
2. **Personalized preparedness kits:** Work with parents and caregivers to create personalized emergency kits for each student. Include comfort items, sensory tools, and any necessary medications or medical supplies. Go kits for evacuation; and stay kits for sheltering in place should be created for each student.
3. **Inclusive drills and exercises:** Conduct regular emergency drills that include students with disabilities and staff who support them.

Emergency preparedness for students with disabilities is not just a legal obligation; it is an imperative that we must embrace to ensure the safety of all students. Through recognition of unique student needs, development of inclusive plans, and efforts to empower all students to take an active role in their safety, we can best ensure that our most vulnerable students are not in increased danger during times of crisis. A well-prepared and inclusive approach to emergency planning will protect their physical well-being and promote a sense of belonging and self-confidence within school communities.

Laura Sharp (lmsharp@iu12.org) is a licensed clinical psychologist and school psychologist. She is the supervisor of pupil personnel services at the Lincoln Intermediate Unit, New Oxford, Pennsylvania, and co-founder of Lotus Educational Services. William J. Zee (wzee@ayzlaw.com) serves as the chair of the Education Law Group at Appel, Yost & Zee, Pennsylvania.

CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS IN A DIGITAL WORLD

When the tweets and media calls reflect panic, what's a leader to do?

Kenneth S. Trump

A bomb threat e-mailed to a teacher. A warning of a shooting delivered through an international proxy server. Threats posted on Facebook or the latest social media app. Even a threat scribbled on a restroom wall can trigger texting and thus start rumors racing through the school community.

With a tide of threats now being delivered through digital media, the accompanying misinformation and panic hits many school communities. How can leaders protect student and staff safety while upholding their credibility—and the school's reputation?

As a consultant who works with school districts to strengthen their preparedness for—and response to—school safety threats, I find there's often potential for a communications crisis to unfold alongside a real or perceived school safety crisis. As well as a plan for responding to security incidents and crises, today's principals and district leaders need a communications plan and a social media strategy to help manage communication.

"Swatting" and Other Trends

If you believe *swatting* is a discipline practice from years past, think again. Although paddling may be gone from most schools, *swatting*—hoax calls made to police, schools, and others to generate a SWAT-like response from safety forces—is increasingly happening in schools. For instance, imagine that your local police were anonymously notified that a mass shooting and hostage-taking was in progress at your school. Dozens of public safety cars would zoom to the scene—where no such activity was occurring. Recent incidents include a bomb threat that forced the unscheduled landing of an airplane carrying a major corporation executive and a middle-of-the-night massive police response to the home of a technology company executive.

The prankster usually finds the location of another person (often by tracing their online presence), then contacts 911, spoofing the technology to make it appear the 911 call is coming from the swatting victim's location. Sometimes swatting is done for revenge; recently it's been associated with players in the online gaming community who are getting back at another player.

Swatting is just one example of how

electronic threats are creating new challenges for leaders. My security consulting firm recently investigated the current picture of violent threats to schools. We looked at more than 300 documented school bomb threats, shooting threats, hoaxes, and acts of violence in 43 states during the first six months of the 2013–14 school year. Our research revealed a disturbing trend. Thirty-five percent of threats were sent through social media (including texts or e-mails) and other electronic forms of communication. The next highest percentage of threats were made through bathroom graffiti (15 percent); over the phone (11 percent); verbally (10 percent); or through a note found in school (9 percent).[1]

The cost of these threats is staggering—in taxpayer dollars for police response, lost instructional time, and anxiety among everyone involved. Not only are more threats being delivered to schools electronically, but once a threat is received, school administrators face the rapid spread of information throughout the broader school community about that threat—by students, parents, and media. Rumors and misinformation that used to spread in days now spread in minutes.

How to Plan a Sane Response to Threats

Don't Rush to React

Rapid transmission of threats and dissemination of rumors places a heavy burden on school officials. Parents show up at schools to remove their children. Media calls pour in almost instantly.

Our analysis of responses to electronically delivered threats found that far too many school leaders and safety officials make knee-jerk reactions to threatening messages, such as prematurely evacuating or closing schools. Such reactions set leaders up for a much steeper challenge in managing both the incident and their communications responses. And by rushing to react, leaders risk exposing children to greater danger than kids would face if leaders had implemented threat assessment protocols to help them respond less out of fear and more out of rational analysis.

Strong school public relations can be defined as good behavior, well-communicated. This holds true for actions on safety. Before they can come up with effective communications strategies, school leaders must have a threat response plan that is grounded in best practices, such as assessing threats carefully and not making a knee-jerk evacuation after a less-than-credible bomb threat. When threats are deemed less credible, keeping schools open under heightened security may actually keep kids safer than shutting down schools and sending them into the community.

Responses like these may seem counterintuitive, but they are a safer, more rational response to vague or weak-sounding threats. These practices often conflict with the intense pressures administrators feel from emotional parents and staff. Such pressures can lead school administrators to respond emotionally as well.

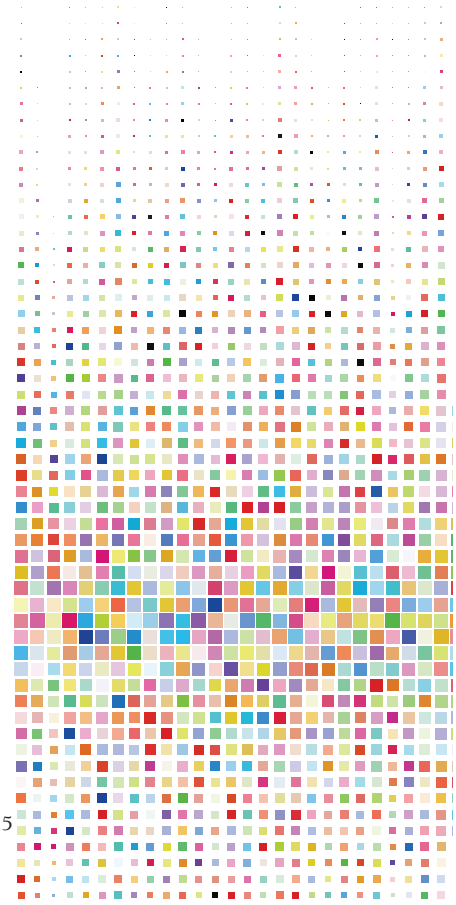
Strong school public relations can be defined as good behavior, well-communicated. This holds true for actions on safety.

Create a Protocol

A threat assessment protocol, which school leaders create in collaboration with first responders, can help ensure consistency, rationality, and thoroughness in responding to student- and adult-originated threats. Although each school district and school should have its own threat assessment teams and protocols, each protocol should follow these principles:

- Treat all threats seriously.
- Investigate the incident promptly and efficiently.
- Use support staff and external resources as part of a multidisciplinary threat assessment team. This team will often include school administrators, counselors, school psychologists, school resource officers, school security staff, and some teachers. This small team will be different from a school safety/crisis team, focusing only on behavioral issues and threats and not on broad school safety planning.
- Take appropriate disciplinary and criminal enforcement steps.
- Document threats and actions taken.
- Enhance security measures, as appropriate, to ensure the safety of all students, staff, and facilities while threats are being investigated.
- Have a formal debriefing process following each incident. Talk through what worked and what areas in threat assessment and safety plans you might improve.
- Train school personnel, along with public safety and other community partners, on threat assessment best practices and protocols. All staff should receive general training on threat trends and assessment procedures. Your school's administrators, counselors, and psychologists—and your threat assessment team and crisis team if you have one—need more detailed training.
- Educate and inform parents about school and public safety and what to expect if threats or critical security incidents occur, including how parents will receive information at the time of an incident (such as through school social media channels).

It's important to talk with students about the proper use of social media and the often-unintended consequences of forwarding messages about threats or rumors, albeit with good intentions, without first talking with school leaders. Help students understand the seriousness of making threats. A bomb threat isn't a prank, but a serious matter that disrupts instructional time, strains public resources needed for true life-threatening situations, and may lead to expulsion and felony criminal charges. Swatting, for instance, brings down the heavy hand of the law. Once identified, a perpetrator will likely face felony charges and—if the perpetrator is a student and the case has a connection to his or her school—disciplinary consequences.



Threat assessment involves analyzing the behavior of the person making the threat, rather than using a "profile" checklist of specific characteristics. A good protocol will include a variety of questions focusing on the motivation, context, and other factors of the threat being assessed, including

- What was the motivation? Can you identify any reasons that the threat was made?
- What exactly was communicated in the threat? How was it communicated—and to whom?
- In what context did the threat occur? For example, was it in the heat of a fight? Or in a document that featured detailed planning of how to carry out the threat?
- Has the person making the threat previously engaged in threats or planned or committed violent acts?
- Does the threat maker have the ability to carry out the threat?
- Is there evidence of detailed planning or steps taken to implement the threat?

How to Communicate for Safety

Because of the uptick in electronic school threats, my consultants and I now incorporate an evaluation of a school's crisis communications and social media strategy as part of our school security and emergency preparedness consultations. In the last two years, our interviews with district-level administrators and building crisis teams have been dominated by discussions of the adverse impact of social media on safety-related matters. Clearly, school leaders must have not only traditional school emergency preparedness plans, but also crisis communications and social media plans that will let them hit the ground running when a threat—or an actual incident—strikes their school community.

Proactive planning can empower school leaders to prevent, contain, and respond to school threats. There will always be a gap between the misinformation spreading through a school and the factual information delivered by school administrators facing a safety crisis. But when you have strategies to create effective messages and deliver those messages through multiple channels, you can shrink that gap.

Here is some practical guidance that media and communications consultants have offered to help prepare school staff to communicate effectively before, during, and after a critical incident.

Develop a Crisis Communications Plan

How you communicate during a crisis can save lives, cut down on confusion, support your staff, and protect the image of your school. Crisis communications plans should incorporate all media, including traditional print and broadcast media, social media, the school website, mobile apps, and online news.

This plan should be separate from the school's emergency plan. Identify the likely methods that people in your school community will use to receive information, and spell out who will create and deliver incident-specific messages. Having the principal provide scripted information to school office staff who answer phones can help with rumor control. Using the school's mass notification system to alert parents of the initial threat—and providing an update later, when additional accurate information is available—can reduce parents' anxiety.

Make the Most of Your Website

Your school website and social media channels are more than window dressing. They are the official voice of the school. School websites will be one of the first places to which parents, the media, and local people turn for information when a threat or incident hits your school. Too often, our evaluations find that school websites lack a basic structure and content for proactively communicating about safety and getting out accurate information.

Rumors and misinformation that used to spread in days now **spread in minutes.**

School websites should contain regularly updated stories and images. A site should have at least one page dedicated to school safety information (such as highlights of programs sponsored by school resource officers—or specific counseling services) and what to do in an emergency. School leaders should be communicating about safety issues, including proactive efforts for emergency planning, before an incident occurs to build a foundation of community confidence.

Some proactive school districts have a web page dedicated to providing accurate information to address rumors and misinformation in the school community. The National School Public Relations Association (www.nspra.org) provides an excellent network for school district communicators and offers members access to resources for building effective school websites.

The Duncanville Independent School District in Texas maintains a vibrant website at www.duncanvilleisd.org. This site has an information-packed "Safety and Security"area that offers information on school resource officers, the district's code of conduct, visitor procedures that ensure safety, guidelines for talking to children about traumatic events, ways to report bullying, and more. The district engages with its school community through social media, and its website taps into its multiple social media channels. The site has a newsroom and public information area where it posts regular updates along with photos and videos.

Develop Digital Media Strategies

An important part of developing a strategic communications plan is figuring out who your audiences are and how they prefer to receive information. Leaders should conduct surveys or gather this information in other ways. Don't be surprised if the results are fragmented; some in the school community may strongly prefer social media and electronic communications, whereas others will request traditional communications channels such as letters or phone calls. School leaders are almost guaranteed to find themselves creating multiple communications channels and repeating messages.

Schools now have opportunities to build community engagement and to gain followers who'll bypass traditional media sources and go directly to district channels to find timely and accurate information. Consider creating a regular blog to build followers. You should use other social channels, too, to attract readers. For instance, the Roanoke City School District in Virginia uses Twitter to post updates on weekend high school football game scores, which has led to substantial numbers of people following the districts' social media channels.

Build Relationships with Key Communicators

School communications staff and district leaders cannot, and should not, communicate in isolation when an incident strikes their school. School

public information officers should proactively build relationships with their counterparts in police, fire, and other first responder agencies, as well as with local governmental leaders.

Administrators are well advised to create formal plans for managing a joint information center during high-profile incidents. At such a center, school representatives and first responder agencies collaboratively provide ongoing public information to the school community. Local emergency management agencies should be able to provide guidance on how to set up a joint information center.

Talk About Safety Early and Often

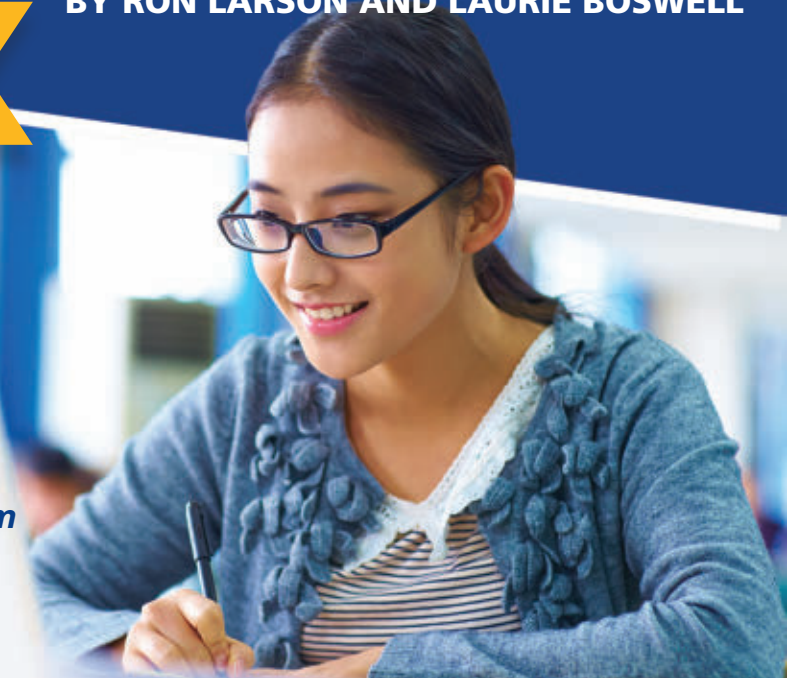
Every time you communicate with parents or the community, provide bits of school safety information. Nuggets on school safety should permeate newsletters, parent association meetings, faculty professional development sessions, morning announcements, and other interactions. You might share fast facts and tips on Twitter or encourage school staff to role-play scenarios involving school safety and violence.

The emerging trends and challenges associated with electronic threats to schools provide school administrators with a challenging climate and many tricky decisions to make. But this doesn't mean school leaders should hide from the public light in hopes that the problem will go away. And it certainly doesn't mean they should evacuate students or close schools as soon as any threat, even one that doesn't seem credible, arrives at a school. Even in a world on digital steroids, the best strategy is for school leaders to think, plan, and communicate safety long before an incident reaches their schoolhouse. EL

[1]For 18 percent of the threats reported in our research, police refused to say how the threat was delivered. We also found that a few threats (2 percent) were made to schools by individuals outside the school community—often to distract police from community-based crimes or exact revenge against someone.

Author's note: For details on my consulting firm's school threat studies and free resources, visit www.schoolsecurity.org.

Kenneth S. Trump (ken@schoolsecurity.org) is president of National School Safety and Security Services, a national school safety consulting firm in Cleveland, Ohio.



Communicating Safety

When a crisis occurs, do you have a plan for letting parents, media, and the community know what is happening in your district?

Kenneth S. Trump

The caption under a picture of a lone wolf trying to blend in the middle of a pack of hounds reads: "When you are in deep trouble, say nothing and try to look inconspicuous."

This advice may work well for the wolf, but it is not a good practice for school boards and administrators to follow in communicating school safety and crisis issues to parents, the media, and the broader school community.

Parents will forgive you if test scores go down one year. But they are much less forgiving if something happens that could have been prevented. As school leaders, your reputation and credibility are at stake.

Actual incidents and rumors of violence disrupt school communities. Overnight, attendance can decrease dramatically. Threats, rumored or real, can result in school closures. Student text messages and cell phone calls help to fuel rumors and misinformation, often creating more anxiety and panic than actual threats themselves.

A number of superintendents and boards have been plagued by security and crisis-related incidents that triggered local news stories that did not go away quickly. How you communicate with internal and external constituents can contribute significantly to your success in responding to, and recovering from, a school safety incident.

Getting out in front of problems

Parents send their children to school under the impression that all possible steps—from prevention to security to preparedness—have been taken. When an incident occurs,

Jonathan Evans

many parents then question whether the trust they have placed in school leaders has been violated.

Effective school-community relations can be defined as "Good behavior, well communicated." To effectively communicate about safety issues, you must make sure your schools have well-developed and exercised safety and crisis plans and your staff is trained to implement the plans.

"Getting out in front" on safety issues is also important, because parents and the media increasingly know the tough questions to ask. School board members and administrators historically have taken a "downplay, deny, deflect, and defend" approach, but that simply will not suffice today.

Parents basically want to know the answers to two broad questions:

- What measures are in place in my child's school to prevent or to reduce the risk of crime, violence, and other safety hazards?
- Are school officials prepared to respond and manage incidents that can't be prevented?

Prevention measures can include improvements to school climate, violence prevention programs, mental health and other student support services, proactive security measures, staff training, and numerous other strategies. Preparedness measures include crisis plans that are well developed and exercised, staff members trained on these plans, strong partnerships with first responders and community agencies, and related efforts.

Board members, superintendents, principals, and other school representative should be able to articulate district and building-level measures that are in place at any time—before, during, or after a crisis. Telling parents and the media that school safety is "our top priority" is not enough. Parents and reporters are much more educated consumers of best practices, and generalities will not suffice.

What not to say

Proactive school leaders view communicating about safety as a positive public relations tool, not a communications disaster. By talking about safety issues before a crisis occurs, you can enhance your credibility prior to an actual incident.

What not to say can be as important as what to say. After a student died during a school-sponsored event a number of years ago, a high school principal said: "Look at the amount of times we've had something tragic occur and compare it to the number of times when nothing has happened. ... It's

Safety communications tips

Stay out in front

- Model prevention, security, and preparedness best practices daily.
- Create a board subcommittee or work group on school safety.
- Dedicate board meeting time for safety updates.
- Create a school safety committee within the district and building-level parent organizations.
- Develop a crisis communications plan in addition to traditional emergency plans.
- Host parent awareness training on school and youth safety topics.
- Encourage student-led activities to promote school safety.
- Use student school newspapers to promote safety stories.
- Incorporate safety into annual professional development programs.
- Spend three to five minutes at each faculty meeting reviewing safety and crisis plans.
- Include safety communications in parent newsletters.
- Create district and building Web pages with school safety information.
- Promote methods for students and parents to report concerns.

Manage rumors and threats

- Anticipate your district will someday face a fast-spreading rumor or threat.
- Have a solid crisis communications plan in place before an incident.
- Maintain well-trained threat assessment teams and evaluation protocols.
- Educate students on reporting rumors about threats to adults.
- Report threats to police and work collaboratively to evaluate the threats.
- Train administrators to monitor for and respond to rumors.
- Have and enforce policies prohibiting and/or restricting cell phone use.
- Provide accurate, timely, and redundant communications to dispel rumors.
- Avoid closing schools unless school and public safety officials believe it is required due to a credible threat.

During and after a crisis

- Provide timely updates of accurate information to key constituencies.
- Use multiple mechanisms (websites, news media, letters, mass notification systems, etc.) to communicate the same messages.
- Work with public safety and community partners to send consistent messages.
- Show compassion and support those impacted by the crisis.
- Highlight actions and plans that worked well during the response.
- Tell the truth. Acknowledge and explain mistakes and lessons learned.
- Hold community meetings and allow parent, student, and staff concerns to be heard.
- Identify steps for preventing and preparing for future incidents.

like traveling in an airplane. There are occasions when a plane crashes, but traveling on an airplane is the safest way to travel."

This statement shows no compassion for the victim, and sends a message of a school culture of "downplay, deny, deflect, and defend," where officials are more concerned about protecting images. This is not a message today's parents and media expect to hear.

Some other examples of sound bites commonly used by boards and administrators include:

■ **"We have a new zero-tolerance policy against school violence."** Zero tolerance has become such a rhetorical and political buzz phrase that it has lost meaning. It also begs the question: "What did you have before now, a 50 percent tolerance for violence?" School leaders should instead speak about specific prevention and preparedness measures in place.

■ **"This is an isolated incident."** Amazingly, board members and administrators still use this phrase following high-profile stabbings, shootings, and even deaths. Calling a tragic act of violence with major injuries an "isolated incident" shows no concern or compassion for victims and their families or about school safety in general. Instead, it suggests more concern about protecting image over protecting children.

■ **"Schools are the safest place in the community."** This statement is often used to downplay safety concerns after high-profile incidents. Such a statement belittles the seriousness of an incident. It also fails to acknowledge concerns and questions that parents have.

School leaders cannot always divulge details that violate student privacy rights, impede ongoing criminal and administrative investigations, or jeopardize safety. But in general, parents expect and deserve honest, truthful, and timely communications about the safety of their children at school.

Managing rumors and threats

Today's students are part of "Generation Text" because text messaging, cell phones, e-mails, and other communications are integral to their interactions. Many parents use these methods for communicating with their children and peers as well.

Today's tech-savvy students and parents, for better or worse, have a distinct advantage in getting their messages out much faster than do school officials. While school leaders typically need time to investigate rumors and verify information, many students and parents will forward to each other information they mistakenly believe to be true.

Bad news spreads quickly and a delay in your response can result in an expedited flooding of phone lines, hundreds of parents at the school office trying to pick up their children, and media trucks on the front lawn. A good crisis communications plan can help you reduce delays and deliver timely and accurate messages when a rumor breaks.

Text messaging and cell phones also play a major role in spreading misinformation during real school emergencies, not just in times of rumors. School office phone lines are almost guaranteed to overload. Parents and media will typically be at the school doorstep in very short order. And all of this will be going on in addition to the actual crisis situation itself.

School administrators typically know that addressing parents and the media are two of the most demanding aspects of managing a crisis. Once the incident itself has ended, parent demands and media inquiries often create "the crisis after the crisis." Depending on the incident's nature, school leaders should be prepared to respond and discuss safety issues for weeks or even months.

Ironically, two of the weakest areas in many school crisis plans are how to reunite and communicate with students and parents and how to deal with the media. Evaluations and tabletop exercises conducted by school safety experts consistently find huge gaps in planning in these areas, and an unrealistic understanding of the scope and magnitude of what is required to manage such dynamics.

Combined with great overconfidence by school staff, problems that occur in parent and media management during a crisis can create shockwaves that will require extensive communications and confidence rebuilding with both groups in the months ahead.

Maintaining your credibility

Successful communications during and after a crisis require that you listen, respond to concerns, and show compassion. Be truthful above all else. Messages must be accurate and timely and communicated with redundancy through multiple mechanisms.

Plan to partner with credible, authoritative, and independent experts as part of your recovery process. Be prepared to work with law enforcement, fire departments, emergency medical services, emergency management agency officials, mental health agencies, local government officials. and other groups. You might want to consider hiring an independent consultant who can bring neutral opinions and expertise to your district.

The time to prepare for a future crisis is now. School safety is a leadership issue. By making prevention, security, and preparedness an ongoing district priority, boards and administrators can protect children and staff, the district's reputation, and the credibility of the district's leaders. ■

Kenneth S. Trump is president of National School Safety and Security Services (www.schoolsecurity.org), a consulting firm based in Cleveland, Ohio.

Protecting Elementary Students from Harm

High-profile missing student case highlights need for security plans.

THE CASE OF KYRON HORMAN, a second-grade Oregon student missing from school since June 4, 2010, has generated international attention. The seven-year-old never arrived in his classroom after attending a science fair with his stepmother at his Portland elementary school.

An unusual student disappearance, unexcused student walk-away, or report of a stranger at an elementary campus creates anxiety, fear, and often panic in a school community. Underreaction or delayed reaction can heighten parental stress. Overreaction and knee-jerk decisions can result in over-the-top security measures creating the perception of, but not necessarily the reality of, increased safety.

Prevention Measures

School administrators can take a number of steps to protect elementary students.

1. Enhance supervision. Good supervision practices prevent students from causing harm to themselves or others. They also reduce the risks of harm being perpetrated against students by third parties with ill intentions.

I recently conducted a security assessment at an affluent private school for 45 minutes prior to the start of the school day. No staff members supervised the drop-off areas. Although a number of school employees walked past us, no one asked us who I was or why I was there. This lack of supervision is often present in cases where preventable accidental or intentional harm occurs to students.

Supervision is also a frequent focus of litigation cases against school officials. Administrators and staff should maintain clearly delineated supervision plans for all times students are on campus. Heightened attention should be given to higher-risk times such as student drop-offs and pick-ups, cafeteria meal times, class changes, student restroom breaks, before and after-school activities and throughout special events.

Kyron Horman has been missing since June 4.

2. Stay on top of custody issues. Noncustodial parent issues top many elementary school principals' concerns. Many schools require copies of court orders for student files when custody conflicts arise. Secretaries are often highly alert and flag the files of students with custody orders. Staff members with a need-to-know are made aware of these cases. Having current photos of students in high-risk custody situations is also prudent, as is having a photo, physical description and vehicle description for high-risk noncustodial parents.

3. Train students not to open exterior doors for strangers or persons they know during the school day. Students may recognize other students, parents and school staff trying to get inside, but they may not know if these individuals are barred from the school or have ill intentions. This training is increasingly done at elementary schools, but all schools should have this conversation with students.

4. Establish a buddy system. Many elementary schools send students in pairs for restroom breaks or for other out-of-classroom purposes.

5. Reduce building access, manage visitors and train staff. Reducing the number of open doors, creating a visitor sign-in and management system and training staff to greet, challenge and report strangers improves school access control.

Preparedness and Response

Administrators must prepare for potential responses in advance of an actual incident. Steps can include these:

1. Establish protocols for notifying parents when students do not arrive at school and parents have not notified the school of an absence or tardiness.

2. Anticipate police questions about custody circumstances when a child is missing.

3. Train staff on how to observe and report concise descriptions of people, automobiles, weapons observed, verbal statements and threatening behaviors.

4. Develop nonverbal de-escalation strategies for intervening with students at a high risk for walking away. Create plans for notifying parents and police to assist in retrieving students who cannot be stopped from leaving school grounds.

5. Practice lockdown drills during nontraditional times, including lunch periods, class changes and around student arrival and dismissal times.

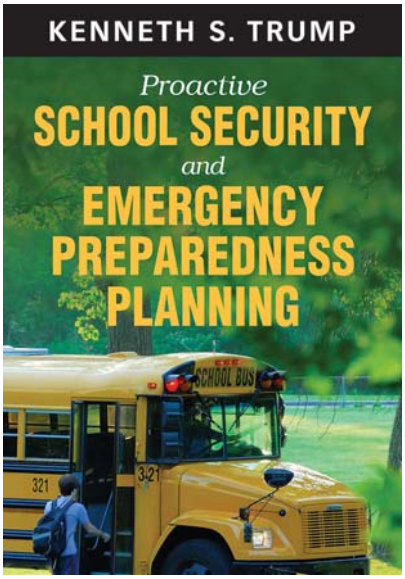
6. Create mass parent-notification systems, media protocols and related crisis communications plans for short-notice use in an emergency.

7. Establish plans for engaging mental health support following traumatic events. **DA**

Kenneth S. Trump, MPA, is president of National School Safety and Security Services (www.schoolsecurity.org), a Cleveland-based national consulting firm. He also blogs at www.schoolsecurityblog.com.

PROACTIVE SCHOOL SECURITY AND EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS PLANNING

BOOK by Ken Trump



Proactive School Security and Emergency Preparedness Planning introduces dedicated full chapters on managing bullying, preparing schools for terrorism, managing school safety on tight budgets, parents and school safety, and managing media and parent communications in the post-crisis stage of school emergency planning. These five chapters offer practical, common-sense frameworks and steps school leaders can take to proactively manage and respond to highly visible, emotional, and political aspects of school safety leadership in today's security-sensitive school community. The guidance in these chapters will help school leaders navigate complex school safety issues while operating under unprecedented budget constraints.

Educators and safety officials will also benefit from subchapter sections on hot topics that have emerged over the years since my first books. Administration building and board meeting security, after-hours school security; athletic and large event security; cell phones; Election Day security; elementary school security; Federal Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and school privacy exceptions; Tasers and school police; training staff on school security and emergency preparedness; transportation security; diversifying emergency drills; tabletop exercises; and financial and continuity of operations plans are among the new and expanded subchapters. Readers who found my earlier publications helpful in covering a wide range of school security issues will find more best practices and issues to consider with the addition of these topics.

To order, visit www.corwinpress.com or www.amazon.com

Questions? Contact Ken Trump at ken@schoolsecurity.org