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aged 10 to 14

Matters

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Protecting Against Hidden Risks in Extracurricular Activities

Extracurricular activities can provide valuable experiences for students, but careful planning is essential to ensure that both students and the adults who supervise them are protected.

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Extracurricular activities enrich students' lives and often provide them with opportunities they otherwise might not experience. But they require planning to protect against hidden risks. School districts are obligated to provide a safe environment and proper supervision for students during any school-related activity, regardless of whether it takes place on- or off-campus. To ensure safety, it is important to recognize that the policies and rules of the district apply to all students and staff when they are participating in extracurricular activities.

The Eight Principles of Supervision

One of the most common legal actions taken against schools today alleges negligent supervision of students. Although it is not possible to guarantee the total well-being of students, principals must ensure that every effort is made to ensure that they are safe. These eight principles of supervision provide basic guidance for educators and volunteers alike:

- Vigilance;
- Alertness;
- Planning;
- Practice;
- Communication;
- Knowledge;
- Discipline; and
- Movement.

Knowledge of these eight principles is essential for all involved in extracurricular activity, including coaches in athletics, drama, and debate; band leaders; cheerleading moderators; field trip leaders; and chaperons. Infuse these principles into daily routines, along with specific school district practices and guidelines, to protect against claims of negligent supervision.

Look for them when discussing trip planning and working with volunteers.

Planning Ahead

Planning is the key to appropriate supervision during off-campus activities. The venue and its layout will help determine the number of supervisors necessary and what type of supervision is reasonable. For example, when the venue is an amusement park, more staff and a smaller staff/student ratio will be needed than when the venue is a concert hall. The expectation of a safe environment for students during an off-campus activity should be no less than during classroom instruction. When supervising an event, consider the following:

- Maintain an adequate staff/student supervision ratio;
- Review behavioral rules and safety measures with students, parents, and staff prior to the event;
- Understand district policies, such as those prohibiting bullying and sexual harassment, and enforce them at the event. All district policies are to be followed at all school-related activities.

Getting Good Volunteers

As budgets are squeezed, educators rely more on volunteers to assist with students in the classroom, on field trips, and as chaperons at after-school events. Involving volunteers in school activities is a great way to engage community members. However, it is imperative that principals ensure that each candidate meets district standards before having contact with students. Remember, too, that volunteers require supervision at all times; they are not replacements for school employees.

All volunteers and chaperons must be interviewed for their positions and undergo a complete background examination,

including fingerprinting and reference checks. Until all aspects of the intake process are complete, do not allow prospective volunteers to interact with students in any way.

Once a volunteer has been approved, provide an orientation program as you would for any new employee. Volunteers need to be trained in recognizing and preventing sexual harassment and bullying, and in other safety topics. They should review school policies and procedures and receive copies of those documents, along with an employee handbook. They also should sign a statement indicating that they have received and reviewed these materials.

Never allow a volunteer to:

- Provide first aid or medical treatment unless the volunteer is a licensed doctor, registered nurse, nurse practitioner, or emergency medical technician;
- Discipline students;
- Instruct students; or
- Consume alcohol before or during interactions with students.

Volunteers and chaperons can be real assets to your school. Thorough screening, training, and active supervision will ensure that they do not become liabilities.

Getting Them There Is Half the Battle

Maintaining safety and security during bus rides to and from off-campus events takes planning, organization, and vigilance. When supervising on a bus, staff should be mindful of the following:

Good supervision entails movement. Be sure supervising adults walk all the way up and down the bus aisle on a regular basis to observe student behavior.

Adequate lighting on a bus is important. At night, interior lights should be turned on briefly when walking the aisle. Assigned seating may be necessary to deal with disruptive students. Don't be afraid to make it mandatory for such individuals to sit near staff for better control.

Minimize the Risk of False Accusations

The nature of extracurricular activities exposes educators and students to many risks. While false allegations are extremely rare, they can arise when the supervising adult fails to use good judgment. Here are some steps to minimize the risk of such allegations:

Avoid being alone with a student. Sometimes educators find themselves alone with a student in a classroom, outside after an activity, or in an office. When this occurs, they should take steps immediately to position themselves in an open area with good visibility to others.

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Limit personal discussions with students. It is fine to be a listening ear and empathetic to students' problems, but educators must always remain in charge and have a strong sense of professional boundaries. Educators should never talk to students about their own personal issues. Such personal information can be used to create false allegations, and might even end up on the Internet.

Educators should never transport students in their personal cars. When transporting a student cannot be avoided, the student should ride in the back seat or as far away as possible. The educator should contact the student's family before leaving, estimate the time it will take to arrive at the student's home, and even contact the student's family along the way as added protection. District policies restricting transporting students must be followed to the letter.

Stay Awake and Remember the Eight

Supervising off-campus activities can be a challenging exercise for all involved. What staff must realize is that the time put into supervising is time well spent. It enables students to receive a well-rounded education in an environment that is safe for all.

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