

# Keeping School a Safe Haven

**O**n a recent school day, first-grader Jayce hid in the supply closet for 35 minutes, took his teacher's cell phone to call 911, and then used a yardstick as a sword to clear everything off classroom tables while other students worked on a math lesson.

This episode is just one example of the kind of severe behavioral issues principal Jillayne Flanders and her staff deal with on an increasing basis at Plains Elementary School in South Hadley, Massachusetts. With a population of 350 students under age seven, the school admits preschoolers with the greatest special needs—a group Flanders says has grown recently in both number and challenge. Flanders points to family economic stress as a probable cause, noting that free- and reduced-price lunch enrollment at Plains Elementary has leapt from 20 percent to 44 percent in the past few years.

Even in schools without special populations of at-risk students, principals are seeing a burgeoning need for schoolwide student mental health support. Across the country in California, principal Sunghie Okino at Los Alamitos Elementary School in Los Alamitos also notes that in the past two to three years, students' ability to deal with stressful situations has diminished. Yelling, hiding under a desk, or knocking over furniture are some of the behaviors she says are happening more often, especially with the youngest students.

The most recent data from the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics points to the issues of student mental health and school safety as ongoing and highly crucial, even before the 2012 Sandy Hook tragedy jolted us to attention. It shows 31 school-associated violent deaths in the 2010-2011 school year, and almost 1.5 million nonfatal crimes in 2012, including violent incidents, bullying, and theft for students between the ages of 12 and 18.

According to a Centers for Disease Control (CDC) study, students who feel more connected to school are more likely to have positive health and education outcomes. The report shows that a close relationship between schools and students' emotional welfare and health can create a safer and more secure environment for learning. To accomplish this goal, the CDC recommends that schools "provide students with the academic, emotional, and social skills necessary to be actively engaged in school." Students who exhibit skills such as problem-solving, conflict resolution, responsible decision-making, and relationship-building not only perform better academically, but are far less likely to engage in problem behaviors such as alcohol and drug



use, violence, truancy, and bullying.

Here is further proof of the power of social and emotional learning (SEL) programming: A landmark meta-analysis of 213 SEL programs clearly established the effectiveness of SEL programs across a number of areas

critical to student success. Students scored 11 percentile points higher on standardized achievement tests—a significant improvement relative to peers not receiving SEL programming.

As stewards of our nation's children, principals like Flanders and Okino understand the critical importance of keeping students socially, emotionally, and behaviorally healthy and safe—a condition that starts in the early grades. And to that end, NAESP is working on behalf of principals to ensure the implementation of meaningful, systemic, research-based mental health solutions, and is continuing to engage in conversations with lawmakers to support nonpartisan policies on children's mental health.

## Solutions

As part of this effort, NAESP works continuously to provide policymakers with information on why mental health is such a critical factor to student learning. We know that schools must be supported to provide students and their families with access to mental health services.

Among the legislative proposals NAESP is working energetically to support is the Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning Act of 2015. The bill proposes that schools adopt social and emotional learning programs, including classroom instruction and schoolwide activities that teach stress management, impulse control, problem-solving, and similar skills. The bill details evidence of success of such programs, including increased motivation to learn and mastery of subject matter; improved grades and graduation rates; and a decrease in violence, bullying, and substance use. Please join NAESP in working to ensure all kids in need receive the high-quality social and emotional support they deserve.

As for the behavior issues at Plains Elementary School, principal Flanders reports that Jayce continues to have good days and bad days, and that it's all about finding the small successes, one hour at a time. Patience, a team of adults, resources, thoughtful interventions, and love are the keys to supporting Jayce and other children in distress, she says. Fortunately, this is a recipe for success that all principals know intimately and practice endlessly. **□**