

Safety in the Cafeteria and Playground



Proactive planning and staff development related to supervision of largely unstructured school environments such as cafeterias and playgrounds can promote school safety, reduce potential liability, and foster an orderly school setting. Since students spend a significant amount of time in these environments during the school day, it is important to develop, communicate, and implement a thoughtful supervision plan.

In many schools, it is assumed that school staff assigned to playground or cafeteria duty intuitively know how to supervise in a manner that will produce the desired safe and orderly environment. Regrettably, this is often not the case.

Given the supervision limitations present in many school cafeterias and playgrounds, principals and school staff need to proactively address issues associated with poor supervision practices. Successful implementation of a quality supervision plan can reduce behavior referrals, student harassment

issues, health and safety challenges, and potential liability issues.

The following ideas can be incorporated into a quality supervision plan and staff development activities. As an elementary and middle school principal for 16 years, I have found the procedures to be very helpful.

Use a map to make assignments. At many schools, cafeteria and playground supervisors gather in one location and talk informally with little active supervision of the students or the physical environment. Instead, use a map to assign specific supervisor locations so that all areas of the physical environment are covered.

Provide a training session for supervisors. This training session should include a review of assigned supervisory locations and should model good supervisory practices such as visually scanning the supervised area and establishing arrival/departure times for assigned duties, communication logistics, strategies for addressing student conflicts, and procedures

for supervising students as they enter and leave the playground or cafeteria. A training video developed at the school site could be used with all supervisory staff.

Make supervisors visible. Having supervisors wear a distinctive vest or similar clothing identification allows students with issues or concerns to easily find an adult supervisor. It also provides students with the comfort of knowing that school personnel are available to assist them if needed.

Provide communication devices. This includes giving each supervisor a whistle and having a two-ray radio or cell phone available in the physical area of supervision. Instructions on who to call when incidents occur should be clearly articulated.

Identify procedures to use when incidents occur. Common incidents such as fighting, playground equipment injuries, and verbal conflicts should have an articulated protocol for supervisors to use. Role-playing typical incidents with supervisors or the use of videos in training sessions can give supervisors strategies for responding appropriately. This training could include desirable supervisor actions in breaking up a fight, calling for assistance, escorting misbehaving students to appropriate locations, and crowd-control strategies. Similarly, supervisors should be trained in protocols to be used when students are physically injured on the playground or other environments.

Have a “code red” plan. Regrettably, some playground and cafeteria incidents involve several students and are beyond the capacity of assigned staff to handle. When this situation happens, provide immediate assistance by making an all-school announcement to the effect that available unassigned staff should report to a specific location. This protocol needs to be clearly communicated to all staff in the school building. Similarly, supervisors should be knowledgeable about inclement weather procedures.


Have procedures for calling 911. Principals need to communicate to supervisors when it is necessary to call

911. Additionally, when a 911 call is made, a protocol needs to be in place that outlines school communication procedures so that the principal and relevant staff are informed promptly.

Assign discretionary staff to supervisory duties. Many teacher contracts make playground or cafeteria duty voluntary, so principals often have difficulty staffing these assignments. Assigning discretionary staff such as social workers, guidance counselors, and curriculum specialists to these duties on a rotating basis can address a school's need and put these staff in contact with a wider variety of students.

Use community and parent volunteers. A key issue is the commitment of volunteers or paid community members to report to assignments each day. Additionally, criminal background checks should be done on all supervisory staff. Training these volunteers is also important. Having volunteers work with an assigned staff mentor is a productive option.

Coordinate with special education staff. Providing appropriate supervision and interventions with special education students, many of whom have specific behavior intervention plans, is important. Playground and cafeteria supervisors need to be knowledgeable about recommended interventions. Supervisors should be included in communication with other staff about students with behavior intervention plans. Special education staff might also wish to visit these environments with their students to review school procedures and foreshadow environmental challenges.

Students, staff, and parents will all be beneficiaries of these best practices. Additionally, principals, teachers, and other school staff potentially can reduce the considerable amount of time spent each day dealing with the fallout of incidents that occur in the cafeteria or playground. 

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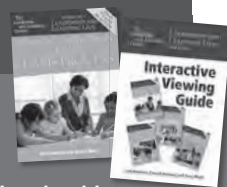
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