Safe and Secure Schools

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by Karen M. Hawkins

The goal of any school is to be a place of learning, and for students to learn they must feel emotionally and physically secure. In an arena where lethal shootings can share headlines with teasing and bullying as school issues, safety for schoolchildren is a critical challenge for educators.

Before they can attempt to prevent or counter incidents of school violence, principals need to understand the root causes of aggression. Research supports the effectiveness of anti-bullying, conflict resolution, and threat assessment approaches in addressing school violence. Ensuring a safe place of learning may also require the installation of security equipment and establishing crisis response teams.

This Research Roundup reviews research and best practices that can help principals maintain safe and effective schools where students can maximize learning and achievement.

Brenda Guenther LeTendre and Richard P. Lipka argue that prevention is the best weapon against school violence.

The U.S. Secret Service and U.S. Department of Education examine the pre-attack behaviors of students involved in school violence.

Cori Brewster and Jennifer Railsback provide guidance for implementing anti-bullying programs.

Marie-Nathalie Beaudoin and Maureen Taylor urge respect and tolerance to combat bullying.

Mark D. Lerner, Joseph S. Volpe, and Brad Lindell discuss creating a crisis response team to address school emergencies.


"Prevention works best" is the thesis of Targeting Violence In Our Schools, and understanding the source of school violence is the first step towards a solution.

Brenda Guenther LeTendre and Richard P. Lipka have written a practical guide for establishing a physically and emotionally secure setting where all students can learn. They suggest ways for educators, parents, or community members to reduce the likelihood of violence. They also advise school administrators to look beyond "quick fix" solutions for aggressive behavior.

The authors describe several ways principals can examine violence and identify its causes.

Targeted problem solving. This process-illustrated by two case studies-helps school administrators "think through" issues of violence.

Systems thinking. This approach seeks multi-level causes of violence rather than pinpointing a single factor.
Root-cause analysis. This involves recognizing the causes of school violence by digging beneath surface factors and examining cause-and-effect relationships.

Action plan. The authors suggest developing an action plan to minimize everyday acts of violence and lessen the likelihood of criminal acts in schools.


Spurred by the 1999 shootings at Columbine High School, the Secret Service and U.S. Department of Education launched a joint effort that examined 37 incidents involving 41 targeted school attacks in the United States from 1974 to 2000. The Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative analyzes pre-attack information and reveals the following characteristics of incidents involving targeted school violence:

- In 73 percent of the attacks, the attacker killed one or more students, faculty, or others at the school.
- Fifty-nine percent of the attacks occurred during the school day.
- Almost all of the attackers currently attended the school where the attacks took place.
- All incidents were committed by boys or young men.
- In 81 percent of the incidents, the attacker carried out the attack alone.

Overall, the findings showed that some future attacks may be preventable. Most of the episodes of targeted violence were not impulsive acts, but were carefully planned in advance. The attackers' behavior suggested they were preparing for an attack and in most instances their peers were aware of the impending assault. However, this information rarely made its way to an adult. Most of the attackers were also known to have difficulty coping with failure or to have been bullied. The report concludes that schools should assess possible threats in light of these indicators.

Threat Assessment in Schools, a 95-page companion piece to the main report, gives guidance and offers training sessions for school and law enforcement personnel on managing threats and maintaining a secure environment.


Staff training and parental involvement are essential steps toward implementing school anti-bullying programs, according to this Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory report. Schoolwide Prevention of Bullying provides an overview of bullying behavior and effective efforts to address the problem.

According to cited research, 30 percent of American schoolchildren are involved in bullying, and 160,000 students miss school daily from fear of being bullied. The "primary indicators of bullying behavior include duration, power, and intent to harm," and research points to broad, schoolwide efforts as the most effective means of prevention. The authors offer seven steps schools must take in establishing effective anti-bullying programs:

- Determine the school's needs.
- Establish an anti-bullying policy.
- Offer training for administrators, teachers, and other school staff.
Integrate parents in program development and implementation.
Target resources for bullies, victims, and families.
Ensure adult supervision in bully-prone areas.
Incorporate anti-bullying ideas into the curriculum.

The human element is important in the fight against bullying. Listening is critical for parents, teachers, and counselors when confronting reports of bullying or abuse, and the report provides practical advice for how school staff can discuss this behavior with students.

The report profiles three schools, a district, and a state organization that have instituted anti-bullying programs by using research-based, whole-school strategies. By detailing how schools tailor programs to meet their individual students' needs, these profiles serve as models for school anti-bullying programs.


Promoting respect and responsibility is the best defense against bullying, say the authors of Breaking the Culture of Bullying and Disrespect, Grades K-8. In this practical guidebook, clinical psychologist Marie-Nathalie Beaudoin and elementary school teacher Maureen Taylor promote practices to counter the cycle of bullying. The text "combines therapeutic knowledge with day-to-day educational experience to provide a comprehensive approach to a vast array of behavior-related problems."

Part I (chapters 1-6) examines the causes of bullying and disrespect, while Part II (chapters 7-10) offers engaging examples and success stories of overcoming these problems.

Chapter 1 takes a look at the cultural beliefs that form people's viewpoints and how those beliefs can inadvertently foster disrespect and bullying.

Chapter 2 examines how cultural beliefs affect schools and, specifically, students who struggle with disrespect and bullying.

Chapter 3 addresses assumptions educators may harbor as they tackle bullying-related problems.

Chapter 4 presents ways principals, teachers, parents, and counselors can encourage respect.

Chapter 5 looks at actions that reduce bullying and disrespect.

Chapter 6 addresses the need for students to embrace positive change and how to ensure it will last.

Chapter 7 catalogs students' school experiences through interview transcripts and class dialogues.

Chapter 8 touts tangible ideas for encouraging respect, tolerance, and collaboration.

Chapter 9 presents a program of anti-bullying activities, focusing on bringing respect and tolerance into classrooms.

Chapter 10 describes how the authors worked with a student with a reputation of being a bully.

From bullying to bomb threats, *A Practical Guide for Crisis Response in Our Schools* presents a framework for successfully managing a spectrum of school-based crises. The authors, administrators with The American Academy of Experts in Traumatic Stress, emphasize the importance of every school having a crisis response team that includes the principal, assistant principal, school psychologist, social workers, school nurse, guidance counselor, teachers, and building security.

The guidebook also discusses Acute Traumatic Stress Management (ATSM)—a strategy focusing on people's emotional needs during a crisis. The authors describe 10 steps that caretakers must take when a traumatic event occurs, including assessment of danger, addressing medical needs, and providing support.

Other chapters spotlight grief counseling and managing the "everyday crises" that can include domestic violence, the violent/suicidal student, the substance-abusing student, the pregnant adolescent, the student experiencing a divorce in the family, and the student survivor of a car accident. The authors also provide practical suggestions for dealing with such disturbing school incidents as bomb threats, intimidating graffiti, and e-mail threats.

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