# Enhancing the Climate of Safety in Your School

*Once safety concerns are identified, clearly defined behavioral expectations and a code of conduct become part of the school culture.*

Cindi Seddon

How would your students evaluate the safety of your school? The answers probably will depend on which students you ask. Bullies and students who are unaffected by bullies may report that the school is safe and free from harm for all. Students who witness bullying and/or other forms of violence, but are not targets, may report that they feel mostly safe. But others who are targeted, who witness violent acts between students, or who suffer with anxiety and apprehension likely will report that they feel unsafe most of the time.

The question for educators is this: How much is too much? How many students does it take to report that they feel unsafe before you take action? The answer, of course, should be "any amount." According to Marano (1995), "It is the basic democratic right for all children to feel safe at school and be spared the oppression and repeated intentional humiliation implied in bullying (or other forms of violence)."

So, how do we, as educators, accurately assess our students' feelings of safety, the areas of our buildings where they feel unsafe, and the actions we can take to address the challenges that some are facing? We suggest a three-part plan:

- Gather data from your students about their feelings of safety on the way to and from school, and during school;
- Determine the unsafe areas of your school; and
- Build lessons and activities designed to address areas of concern.

Once these steps have been completed, there is one more action to take to ensure that your school is a place where all students will feel safe. This involves shaping the measures that have been completed into foundational beliefs for the school community, and incorporating those beliefs into your school's code of conduct, discipline management system, and a reward system that recognizes good deeds and random acts of kindness.

**Gathering the Data**

Conducting a survey is the most direct method for gathering data from students. For smaller schools, it is relatively simple to administer a safety survey, count the responses, and determine students' feelings about levels of safety in various areas of the school. This method becomes more difficult in larger schools due to the sheer numbers of responses. Another way to gather data is to give students a map of the school and ask them to mark, with an "X," the areas where they feel unsafe.

The manner in which students are surveyed is important. Recently, when a group of middle and high school students were asked by a guest speaker, "How much of a problem is bullying in your school?" the few who responded shouted out, "There is no bullying here!" They were, in fact, known bullies who effectively silenced the rest of the student body. However, when students have the opportunity to complete a survey anonymously, they can express their true feelings.

**Changing the School Culture**

The survey findings sometimes come as quite a surprise. For example, in one school, 22 percent of students reported that they felt unsafe in their classrooms. But in this same school, 177 out of approximately 400 students—44 percent—said they felt unsafe in the stairwells. Locker rooms and bathrooms are frequently listed as other areas considered unsafe, along with any areas where adults are not present on a regular basis.

Once the top five or six most problematic areas have been identified, a safety program can be developed. It is important to note that this effort will require the commitment of the entire staff, and it will take time. It also will require clear and controlled expectations. A school safety program is not a teaching unit that is visited every year or two; rather, it becomes a part of the school's culture.

Some schools establish planning committees of teachers and support staff. Teachers review the data with their students, walk through the unsafe areas as a group, and discuss acceptable and unacceptable behavior in those areas. Follow-up lessons may include discussing the rights and responsibilities of students and staff in the various areas, role-playing scenarios, identifying the foundation on which expectations will be built, and developing a code of conduct.

## Erecting the Pillars

At this point, it is time to establish four or five "pillar" words or phrases that help to define the school's belief system. Sometimes, these can form a handy acronym. For example one middle school uses the acronym PRIDE:

P – Performance
R – Respect
I – Integrity
D – Determination
E – Empathy

The next step is to develop statements that support each pillar word or phrase. These should describe behaviors that are expected and acceptable, as well as those that are unacceptable. For example, under P (Performance) the statements might read:

A.  I come to school on time, ready and able to learn, and expect consistently excellent results from my efforts.

B.  I come to school with my homework completed and I listen in class.

C.  I am usually on time for school and I attend class, but I do not follow through on my homework commitment nor do I take advantage of the support systems at the school.

D.  I don't make an effort to come to school, I don't pay attention to lessons, and I often interfere with the learning of others.

Students are held accountable for demonstrating A and B levels of behavior, and they know that levels C and D are unacceptable. Once all of the statements have been developed, they can easily be adapted into a school code of conduct and the school climate will begin adapting to the new expectations.

The biggest payoff for this effort is that your school now will feel safer for all your students.

## Reference

Marano, H. E. (1995). Big bad bully. *Psychology Today*. September/October, 51-82.

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