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The Fundamentals of School Security

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School security is a front-burner issue for educators, students, and citizens reeling from the shock of a series of mass school shootings. Yet recently released studies show significant decreases in key types of school violence. In this emotionally charged atmosphere, school administrators must strive to meet their schools' real security needs without wasting scarce resources on measures that may be unwarranted.

How Serious Is the Problem?

Despite occasional high-profile tragedies, children in the United States are safer in schools than outside them. Of all violent deaths that occur among school-age children, less than 1 percent occur at or en route to school or school-sponsored events (Kachur and others, cited in Berner and others 1999).

Ninety percent of all public schools reported no serious violent crimes during the 1996-97 school year. Although 57 percent reported at least one incident of crime or violence to law-enforcement officials, less-serious and nonviolent crimes such as theft, vandalism, and fights not involving weapons were by far the most common (National Center for Education Statistics 1998).

Some types of school violence are declining, along with overall youth violence in the nation. Berner and others (1999) found significant decreases in several types of violence-related behaviors among high school students between 1993 and 1997, including a 28 percent decrease in self-reported weapon carrying and a 9 percent decrease in fighting on school property. They also note that the percentages of such behaviors occurring on school property were much lower than the total percentages.

The number of students expelled for bringing guns to school declined 31 percent between the 1996-97 and 1997-98 school years (U.S. Department of Education 1999).

Reductions in violence did not occur in all subgroups, however. For example, levels of fighting remained the same among Hispanic students, Berner and others report. Their study also found no significant decreases in the percentages of students who reported being victims of theft or deliberate damage of property at school, feeling too unsafe to attend school, and being threatened or injured with a weapon on school grounds.

How Can Schools Assess Their Security Needs?

Periodic, routine security assessment can provide an objective review "without the denial often present before a serious incident or the overreaction that typically follows a crisis," says Kenneth S. Trump (1999).

Checklist surveys are helpful assessment tools. Ronald D. Stephens (1995) provides model checklists covering areas ranging from physical security and procedures to emergency preparedness. George E. Richards (1997) suggests involving parents, students, law-enforcement and community representatives, and school staff in creating or adapting checklist surveys to the specific needs of a district and each of its buildings. Stephens recommends annually reviewing all aspects of a school-safety plan.

A security assessment by an independent consultant has several advantages. An independent specialist brings objectivity and credibility as well as expertise, and can give professional validation to existing security measures as well as recommend improvements. Seeking an outside opinion demonstrates a district's openness and commitment to safety and may reduce liability (Trump). It is important to check the credentials and references of prospective consultants and make sure they are not associated with particular security product vendors (Richards, Trump).

To target security efforts where they are most needed, an analysis of school-crime data can identify patterns in crime types, locations, and perpetrators. Surveys of parents, staff, and students can yield information on unreported crimes and other problematic behaviors (Stephens).

How Can Facilities Be Made More Secure?

Recent tragedies involving guns and bombs have prompted many school districts to consider adding high-tech hardware to their traditional lock-and-alarm systems.

Metal detectors are an expensive and controversial option. Their potential usefulness for a given school depends on many factors, including the severity of weapons problems, the availability of funds for staff and training, the physical design of buildings, and possible negative effects on school atmosphere.

Hand-held detectors are less expensive and intrusive than walk-through models, and their portability permits random checks. They are particularly effective in keeping weapons out of events that take place in a confined space, notes National Alliance for Safe Schools Director Peter Blauvelt. Other high-tech security measures include photo ID systems, which may be tied into school computer databases, and closed-circuit television cameras (HADG 1999).

Security cameras and other technologies are not a substitute for human beings (HADG 1999). As Hill Walker (1999) of the University of Oregon's Institute on Violence and Destructive Behavior points out, Columbine High School's video cameras were not being

monitored when the mass shootings broke out at that school. "If they had been monitored," he says, "perhaps the bombs brought into the school prior to the shootings would have been detected and the plot uncovered. Further, if the emergency team personnel had known where the shooters were in the building, they may have been able to save lives."

Increasing supervision by adding security personnel is another option. Stephens cites the pros and cons of employing local police, contracting with a security-guard service, or hiring security professionals. "The ratio of adults to the number of students who must be supervised is of critical importance," says Walker, who notes that Columbine High School had only a single school-security officer. Walker recommends that school resource officers report jointly to the school's principal and to the police department and have close connections to the community and neighborhood.

Security can also be improved by cost-free measures such as changes in procedures, scheduling, and allocating space. For example, separating cafeteria entrances and exits reduces lunch-time congestion and the potential for student conflicts. It is important to control building access by limiting the number of entrances and exits and establishing visitor-screening policies. Parent volunteers can be recruited to supervise problem areas (Stephens). Closing the school campus eliminates a major risk factor (Walker).

How Can Attitudes and Behaviors Be Changed to Make Schools Safer?

Identifying potentially violent students and intervening before serious problems erupt has become a high priority.

The Department of Education and Department of Justice have developed *Early Warning, Timely Response: A Guide to Safe Schools* (Dwyer and others 1998) to help schools recognize danger signs and take proactive steps. The guide describes typical characteristics of children who later behave violently, signs that may immediately precede a deadly outburst, and effective intervention strategies. Helping staff, students, and parents to become more aware of these warning signs—and then to report them, either directly to school staff or via anonymous "hot lines"—may prevent future tragedies.

Beware of stigmatizing students who seem to fit a standardized profile, however. Educators must consider warning signs in context, avoid stereotyping and labeling, and keep concerns confidential (Dwyer). Well-communicated, consistently enforced discipline policies with specific rules and consequences are the foundation of a positive school climate.

All students should be treated respectfully to avoid creating resentment among individuals or subgroups. Walker notes that smaller schools, which provide a more intimate atmosphere and a greater sense of belonging, have fewer behavior problems than large schools.

School officials should encourage staff members to form positive relationships with students. "Research shows that a positive relationship with an adult who is available to provide support when needed is one of the most critical factors in preventing student violence," Dwyer and others report. Positive attitudes and behavior among students can be fostered by teaching prosocial skills and anger management, and by peer mediation and conflict-resolution programs (Hamby, HADG, Dwyer).

What If Preventive Measures Fail?

Every school should have a written crisis plan spelling out procedures for responding to a broad range of possible crises, including natural disasters, bomb threats, fire, homicide, and hostage situations (Stephens). The plan should designate individuals to handle specific tasks if a crisis occurs, and establish procedures for communicating among school staff and with parents, community agencies, and the media. Walker recommends that at least two people be assigned to coordinate each crisis-related task and that each school room have two means of communicating with the office, such as an intercom system and a cell phone or walkie-talkie.

When creating the plan, schools should coordinate with police, fire, medical, and other agencies and determine what local, state, and federal resources exist for crisis and postcrisis help (Dwyer). Information explaining the plan should be distributed to all members of the school community, and all school staff should receive crisis training. Students and staff should practice evacuation and other crisis procedures as routinely as fire drills (Hamby, Dwyer and others).

The plan should include procedures for handling the aftermath of a crisis: for example, a prepared press release describing how information will be transmitted, including locations for press conferences (HADG). Districts should coordinate with community mental-health professionals to provide immediate and long-term psychological support for affected staff, students, and parents (Dwyer and others).

Even the most valiant efforts cannot make schools completely secure. But administrators can reduce the likelihood of crime and violence and ameliorate their impact by taking preventive steps and preparing effective responses.

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