



Protecting Elementary Students from Harm

High-profile missing student case highlights need for security plans.

THE CASE OF KYRON HORMAN, a second-grade Oregon student missing from school since June 4, 2010, has generated international attention. The seven-year-old never arrived in his classroom after attending a science fair with his step-mother at his Portland elementary school.

An unusual student disappearance, unexcused student walk-away, or report of a stranger at an elementary campus creates anxiety, fear, and often panic in a school community. Underreaction or delayed reaction can heighten parental stress. Overreaction and knee-jerk decisions can result in over-the-top security measures creating the perception of, but not necessarily the reality of, increased safety.

Prevention Measures

School administrators can take a number of steps to protect elementary students.

1. Enhance supervision. Good supervision practices prevent students from causing harm to themselves or others. They also reduce the risks of harm being perpetrated against students by third parties with ill intentions.

I recently conducted a security assessment at an affluent private school for 45 minutes prior to the start of the school day. No staff members supervised the drop-off areas. Although a number of school employees walked past us, no one asked us who I was or why I was there. This lack of supervision is often present in cases where preventable accidental or intentional harm occurs to students.

Supervision is also a frequent focus of litigation cases against school officials. Administrators and staff should maintain clearly delineated supervision plans for all times students are on campus. Heightened attention should be given to higher-risk times such as student drop-offs



Kyron Horman has been missing since June 4.

and pick-ups, cafeteria meal times, class changes, student restroom breaks, before and after-school activities and throughout special events.

2. Stay on top of custody issues. Noncustodial parent issues top many elementary school principals' concerns. Many schools require copies of court orders for student files when custody conflicts arise. Secretaries are often highly alert and flag the files of students with custody orders. Staff members with a need-to-know are made aware of these cases. Having current photos of students in high-risk custody situations is also prudent, as is having a photo, physical description and vehicle description for high-risk noncustodial parents.

3. Train students not to open exterior doors for strangers or persons they know during the school day. Students may recognize other students, parents and school staff trying to get inside, but they may not know if these individuals are barred from the school or have ill intentions. This training is increasingly done at elementary schools, but all schools should have this conversation with students.

4. Establish a buddy system. Many elementary schools send students in pairs for restroom breaks or for other out-of-classroom purposes.

5. Reduce building access, manage visitors and train staff. Reducing the number of open doors, creating a visitor sign-in and management system and training staff to greet, challenge and report strangers improves school access control.

Preparedness and Response

Administrators must prepare for potential responses in advance of an actual incident. Steps can include these:

1. Establish protocols for notifying parents when students do not arrive at school and parents have not notified the school of an absence or tardiness.

2. Anticipate police questions about custody circumstances when a child is missing.

3. Train staff on how to observe and report concise descriptions of people, automobiles, weapons observed, verbal statements and threatening behaviors.

4. Develop nonverbal de-escalation strategies for intervening with students at a high risk for walking away. Create plans for notifying parents and police to assist in retrieving students who cannot be stopped from leaving school grounds.

5. Practice lockdown drills during nontraditional times, including lunch periods, class changes and around student arrival and dismissal times.

6. Create mass parent-notification systems, media protocols and related crisis communications plans for short-notice use in an emergency.

7. Establish plans for engaging mental health support following traumatic events. **DA**

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