

A photograph of a school hallway. The floor is made of large, square tiles in shades of brown and tan, arranged in a checkered pattern. On the right side, there are rows of lockers with green frames and silver handles. The walls are a light beige color with a dark green wainscoting. In the center, there is a doorway with two red doors and a window above them. The ceiling is a drop ceiling with a grid pattern and several rectangular light fixtures. A large, white, bold title is superimposed over the lower half of the image.

STRATEGIC SCHOOL SAFETY LEADERS

Simplify complex school safety issues by
identifying what is most important

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A 51-year-old man with a violent history followed two female students into their high school during morning student arrival. The students alerted their principal, and when confronted, the man said he was there to “hurt kids.”

During the school day, a stranger was found in a middle school restroom offering needles to students.

A 35-year-old man was arrested after telling police that “a frequency” asked him to kill 50 middle school students to get another student out of a “trapped parallel dimension.”

These are real-life examples of the growing incidences of “unknown unknowns” — school security threats that are difficult, if not impossible, to predict or include in a school emergency plan. Boards and superintendents must be forward-focused, strategic school safety leaders and communicators about school safety issues.

Below are ways to cut through the noise to identify what is important and to simplify complex school safety issues.

AVOID ‘SECURITY THEATER’

The worst time to make sweeping changes in school safety, security, and emergency preparedness policies and practices is immediately after a high-profile incident, when emotions are running high. Change can be good, but the best change often comes with friction, debate, inclusivity, and collaboration. Board members and superintendents need to take a tactical pause — a deliberate break to look, listen, and analyze — before making dramatic changes to school safety policies and practices.

Boards and superintendents face enormous pressures to create visible, tangible indicators of increased security after their schools experience gun confiscations, shooting incidents, or other high-profile violence. This often results in target hardening measures such as security technology and hardware. While these measures may provide boards and administrators with a short-term solution for political and school-community relations problems, research is scant on their effectiveness. In fact, some studies point to their unintended adverse impact on student perceptions of safety.

An analysis of school safety civil litigation suggests that while the facts and merits of each case varies, a common thread is that allegations focus on claims of failures of human factors — issues of people, policies, procedures, training, communications, etc. — not allegations of failures of security hardware, products, and technology. Taking

a tactical pause can lead to more meaningful, strategic school safety decisions.

Be educated consumers of school safety information

The number of voices, viewpoints, and vendors grows as school shootings continue. Victims of school shootings form advocacy groups to push for what they see as the solution based upon their unique experiences. Security hardware, product, and technology vendors increasingly call for school “target hardening.”

School safety conferences are regularly filled with sessions narrowly focused on single-incident high-profile school shootings. While we can glean lessons from each of these tragedies, the next incident will likely follow a different fact pattern. School leaders should exercise restraint in making abrupt changes to safety policies and practices based upon the fact pattern of one high-profile incident.

Boards and administrators need to be educated consumers of school safety information. Security vendors are making claims with checklists and guidelines of school security “standards” that they often create without widespread input of superintendents, principals, teachers, and others in education. Vendors also lobby for laws and funding that benefits the security vendors’ industries, often with questionable benefits to students.

As the end of federal pandemic relief dollars nears, boards and superintendents face tough decisions about sustainability of security hardware and services, as well as student social and emotional support services, purchased with these funds. Will they be sustained in district operating budgets? If cuts are made, at the expense of what other needs? How do you communicate these cuts to your community?

CREATE AN INCLUSIVE CULTURE OF SAFETY

School safety is not the sole responsibility of principals or school safety officials. Support staff, students, parents, and others in the school community must be engaged.

Teachers often are left out of safety discussions. Research shows teachers are more likely to cite common issues, like bullying, as a main safety concern compared to active shooters. Yet the rise in school violence remains a consistent worry. The current teacher shortage coupled with the dramatic reduction in the pipeline of pre-service teachers highlights the dramatic need for school boards to listen to the experiences of their teachers.

Teachers have been leaving their jobs, with some

leaving the profession, due in part to an increase in job demands, stress, and safety issues. Teachers also are facing a rise in threats from students, including an increase in weapons being brought into school. Some are concerned for their personal safety if they correct student behavior. They express fear of retribution from students and parents, and they feel nothing is being done to protect them.

Teachers often feel ignored in the development and implementation of safety plans. They should have input on whether these safety plans are effective, as teachers are often the ones seeing the direct impact of policy changes. Even the best policies, if not effectively implemented, will fail.

Boards should both encourage and expect superintendents to include teachers in the design of safety and security policies to ensure that those who are most affected by the risk of violence are heard and are informing the process.

SIMPLIFY SCHOOL SAFETY

Many schools lack vibrant school safety or crisis teams and, in some cases, have no teams at all. Research indicates the value of shared mental models for preventing and responding to safety incidents.

Many schools now have 80- to 130-page emergency plans. Yet typically, no one from the superintendent to the school custodian knows what is in the plans. The documents often best serve plaintiff attorneys who use them against administrators in school safety lawsuits.

School teams should meet state and other legal mandates for school emergency planning. But it is unrealistic to expect teachers and support staff to memorize volumes of information from emergency plan templates. School leaders should simplify school safety by first emphasizing and training three areas:

1. **Situational awareness:** Being fully mindful, focused, and situationally aware when supervising students and campuses.
2. **Recognizing abnormalities in patterns:** Detecting individuals and behaviors not normally a part of their daily school context, such as strangers in halls or unknown cars on campuses.
3. **Cognitive decision-making under stress:** Educators typically make decisions collaboratively and need empowerment, training, and practice on making split-second safety decisions individually.

Focus less on memorizing voluminous plans and tem-

plates, and instead simplify school safety by emphasizing skills that cross many potential threat scenarios.

TRAIN ADMINISTRATORS TO BE STRATEGIC SCHOOL SAFETY LEADERS

Superintendent, principal, teacher, and support staff turnover is occurring at record paces. As a result of time demands, school safety professional development time is shrinking. If school leaders want to commit to school safety, it requires an allocation of time and leading by example.

Professional learning is more than allocating a half hour for teachers to review a few pages of the school's emergency plans. Support staff such as bus drivers, secretaries, custodians, and food service support staff often receive little or no training. Shorter exercises provide great opportunities for school staff to create shared mental models for violence prevention, preparedness, and response.

Be sure to debrief drills and actual incidents with all stakeholders. Discuss with teachers to know what happened and how students experienced the drill. Identify additional supports needed from nonteaching staff to support students in their recovery if a drill is traumatic.

Research shows high-reliability organizations thrive on learning from failure. It's important to allocate time for meaningful school safety planning and professional learning.

COMMUNICATE ABOUT SCHOOL SAFETY

Research tells us that superintendents and principals struggle in communicating about school safety. School leaders do many great things to create safe schools, but they often do not do their best at communicating about them. One principal captured this safety communications challenge in telling us: "I don't know what to say, how to say it, or when to say it."

Boards, superintendents, and principals should create strategic school safety communications plans. Dedicate time at each board meeting to share information with the public on district safety initiatives. Schedule time at every district leadership team meeting for principals and central office administrators to discuss safety issues. Incorporate five minutes at the end of every school faculty meeting to discuss one aspect of school safety. Take 60 seconds once a week for the principal to share a safety message during public address announcements to students.

There are meaningful steps boards and superintendents can take for school safety leadership and accountability. To do so, boards and superintendents must shift from being reactive to being strategic school safety leaders.

Board and administrator school safety leadership and accountability

Boards and administrators should ask:

- Are school safety, security, and emergency preparedness policies aligned with actual practices? Are there outdated policies? If so, can these policies be eliminated or updated to reflect current contexts?
- Are we doing what we say we are doing? What is the fidelity of implementation of school safety policies, regulations, and procedures?
- Trust but verify: How do we know if there are disconnects between policy and practice? In what internal and external assessment and audit practices can we engage to evaluate our safety, security, and emergency preparedness?

Steps boards can take for school safety accountability:

- Incorporate school safety, security, and emergency preparedness goals into the superintendent's contract. For example, one district required its superintendent to have an external expert school security and emergency preparedness assessment during the contract period.
- Create a permanent board school safety committee.
- Create quality discipline and crime data collection mechanisms, and provide the data to the board for oversight and discussion in executive session.
- Resist doing school safety "on the cheap" by incorporating costs into operating and capital improvement budgets and planning for sustainability of ongoing security hardware and school safety programs.
- Create criteria and protocols for vetting school security vendors and proposals.
- Create a policy requiring a comprehensive school safety plan focused on prevention, intervention preparedness, response, and recovery.
- Create a policy requiring school safety, security, and emergency preparedness professional development training for administrators, teachers, and support staff.
- Engage legal counsel to:
 - Provide regular updates on state and federal mandates on school safety, security, and emergency preparedness.
 - Review potential liabilities of school emergency and other safety plan content.
 - Identify district safety responsibilities and potential liabilities with district-sponsored charter schools and other contracted programs.

Boards and central office administrators should have:

- Safety plans for board meeting security and emergency preparedness.
- Threat assessment protocols for threats made by and to adults.
- Safety/crisis teams, drills, and other best practices as required of their schools for central office and support service sites.

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