

How To Make Schools Safer

To create and implement a safe schools program, a tripartite school-community-family approach that engages students in school is recommended (Verdugo 2000). Students who are engaged in school and its culture are better students and tend to be better behaved (See Learning First Alliance 2001; NEA 2005). NEA suggests three basic steps.

Steps for Making Schools Safer

1. Establish a School Safety Committee
 2. Develop and implement action and crisis management plans
 3. Continue monitoring and assessing data
-

Step 1: Establish a School Safety Committee

NEA members can make their schools safer by forming a school safety committee involving a core group of school employees—teachers, administrators, and education support professionals—who can explore short-term strategies, then invite community representatives to work with them on long-term efforts. Holding two preliminary meetings of the educators core group before involving community representatives is recommended.



Community Groups to Involve in a School Safety Committee

Government and Community Agencies and Organizations

Health Department
 Social Service agencies
 Police Department
 Judicial system
 Fire Department
 Housing authority
 Tribal councils
 Neighborhood associations
 Tenant councils

First and Second Meeting of the School Safety Committee (Educators Core Group Only)

Membership. Representatives of all education employee and student groups should attend this first meeting. It is especially important to include education support professionals, who are often excluded from school discussions, because they deal with problems of school violence and usually possess information and insights on the matter. Students should also be involved because they can offer views on the student culture that school staff might fail to see or understand. For “Suggestions for Schools to Promote and Make Use of Community Support,” see Appendix 1.

Agenda. Two topics should be discussed at the first meeting: the school’s immediate problems based on observations, data, and the composition of the school safety committee. In discussing immediate problems, the educators core group should identify violence problems and possible short-term solutions. In discussing the composition of the larger school safety committee, the core group should select parents and

representatives of community groups who can help reduce or eliminate the identified problems. Care should be given to the nature of the problems the school is facing and exactly how those community representatives can help the school reduce or eliminate school safety problems. See “Possible Topics for Antiviolence Seminars,” Appendix 2.

Third Meeting of the School Safety Committee
(*Educators Core Group and Community Representatives*)

During its third meeting, the educators core group should involve representatives of selected

community groups. Together, they would assess data about the community and school and, if appropriate, discuss who else should be invited to join the school safety committee.

Addressing community and school violence and their perpetrators. The objective of this discussion is to gain a wider view of community and family violence and how those problems affect the school. Such a discussion can then be used to plan the next topic on the agenda—the assessment.

Organizations, Clubs, and Groups to Contact for Assistance

Volunteer Service Organizations	Private Organizations
Veterans organizations Salvation Army Goodwill Industries Fraternities and sororities 100 Black men and women Links National Network of Runaway and Youth Services	Foundations NAACP National Indian Justice Center National Asian Women’s Health Organization National Urban League National Council of La Raza League of United Latin American Citizens ASPIRA Churches and religious groups Hospitals Colleges and universities Local businesses Local media YMCA and YWCA Respected individuals in the community Local athletes Local entertainers Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund National Pacific Islander Educators Network
<p>Clubs</p> Big Brothers and Sisters Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts Other youth clubs	
<p>Professional Groups</p> School psychologists organizations Education associations Medical associations Nursing associations Legal associations Social worker associations Morticians	

Assessing data about the community and the school. The assessment has two parts. In the first, the group will gather data about the community, and in the second it will gather data about the school. The data about both sectors should include sociodemographic data and data on crime and violence in the community. In terms of socio-demographic data, the following items are related to crime and violence:

- Unemployment
- Poverty
- Income inequality
- Changes in ethnic and racial distribution
- Residential segregation

In terms of crime and violence, the following might be important data to collect:

- Homicide rates
- Number of robberies and thefts
- Prevalence of gang violence
- Incidents of domestic violence
- Child abuse
- Hate-motivated crime
- Sexual harassment and rape
- Assault
- Vandalism
- Incidents of violence

In each of the areas listed above, it is important to know—

- *Who* (what groups) are involved?
- *What* are they doing?
- *When* are they doing it?
- *Where* are they doing it?
- *Why* are they doing it?

In conducting the school assessment, please see Appendix 3, “School Safety Checklist.”

Inviting others to join the school safety planning committee. At this third meeting, members will have a better grasp of the problems with which they are confronted. Members of the committee should have a general sense of the nature of the problem, be aware of the groups involved, and know the views of other community members.

At this point, the committee might engage in a discussion of their needs and whether additional community representatives should be invited. For example, should gang leaders be invited to join? Should representatives of rape crisis centers and local hospitals be part of the group?

Step 2: Develop and Implement Action and Crisis Management Plans

Action Plan

The school action plan follows from the assessment and should be tied to the school’s overall mission, that is, programs that are to be implemented in the school to address the issues and problems that have been identified in the assessment. See Appendix 4, “Action Plan for Specific School Emergencies.” In making schools safer, three areas are critical: 1) school management, 2) curriculum, and 3) the physical environment.

School Management. School management involves roles, behavior, and standards. In making schools safer, the school district must advocate and constantly reinforce roles and standards for behavior. Specifically, it must generate a mission statement and a disciplinary code.

Writing the Mission Statement. This management component begins by developing an overarching mission or philosophical statement about the school’s goals and objectives regarding school safety and student and staff behavior. This statement, a sample of which appears below, sets the tone for the school and its safety programs. In addition, it will address three principles: 1) the right of all students to receive an education; 2) the right of all individuals on school grounds to be safe from harm; and, 3) the importance of education to groups, individuals, and society. The school district should make such a statement available to education employees, students, and parents—and should repeatedly state, review, and amend the document.

Disciplinary code. In addition to including a mission statement, the action plan should also contain a disciplinary code that deals with

Sample Mission Statement (Note: Please revise to suit your school's needs.)

It is the intent of the (district) to promote harmonious human relationships that enable students to gain a true understanding of the rights and duties of people in our heterogeneous society. Furthermore, it is our intent to promote the rights of equality and human dignity basic to the American heritage.

Each school is responsible for creating an environment that fosters positive attitudes and practices among students and staff. In addition, the school is responsible for promoting learning. Because it is well established that anxiety and lowered self-esteem impede learning, the school is responsible for creating and protecting an environment that mitigates against anxiety-producing or demeaning incidents taking place within the confines of the school. These incidents include, but are not limited to, those targeting members of a particular race, ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation.

Thus, rather than allowing the school system to inadvertently support unequal educational opportunities for some by virtue of their demographic characteristics, as well as inadvertently contributing to poor citizenship in others, it is our intent to provide an environment that further allows persons to realize their full individual potential through understanding and appreciation of the society's diversity of race, ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation. To accomplish this objective, the district will be accountable through a visible commitment to human rights.

Source: Cristina Bodinger-DeUriarte. 1992. *Hate Crime: Sourcebook for Schools*. Los Alamos, CA: Southwest Center for Educational Equity, Southwest Regional Laboratory.

language, behavior, dress, drugs and alcohol, and guns on school premises. Check to see if the school district has existing disciplinary codes; if they do, use them. The disciplinary code should make it perfectly clear to parents, students, and staff what behavior is expected on school grounds. Due to increased violence, especially gang-related violence, some schools require students to wear uniforms or clothes chosen from a limited line of clothing. They also have codes regarding the use of abusive language, the use and sale of drugs and alcohol on school grounds, and the possession and use of weapons on school grounds. Although the U.S. Constitution guarantees freedom of speech, it does not guarantee the right to use language that causes harm to others. And, in terms of weapons, codes should be clear and strictly enforced. Guns are not tolerated on school grounds. A "Zero Tolerance" policy is acceptable in these cases.

In summary, a good disciplinary code will contain certain characteristics. It will—

- Be short and easy to understand
- Have student input
- Contain enforceable rules
- Be enforced fairly and consistently
- Be reviewed and updated periodically
- Be sent to students, parents, and staff at the beginning of each school year

Issues. Finally, school management must address three issues.

1. Open versus closed campuses. In many areas, violence and crime occur

during lunch breaks or as students are allowed to leave campus. If this is a problem, schools might consider closing their campuses during school hours and limiting entry to outsiders without proper identification. Student input is crucial here because unless students have a voice in such a policy, closed campuses could lead to other kinds of problems. The intent is to be inclusive.

2. Student participation. It is important for students to participate in activities that make their school safer. Students can offer insights about problems that fail to catch the eyes and ears of education employees.
3. Alternative educational environments.⁴ In the event that a school cannot convince some students that their behavior is disruptive and in need of control, it may wish to consider alternative educational placements. The school should think hard about this alternative. A related issue is the special education student. Although federal law requires states to have laws on the books for students to be expelled for possession of weapons on campus, it allows local administrators to make exceptions on a case-by-case basis. Placing a student in an alternative school is a sensitive subject, but one that needs to be addressed by education employees, students, parents, and community leaders.

Curriculum. The school curriculum is a second area that school safety committees must address. Making schools safer is not merely a matter of creating and enforcing rules and regulations. It is also a matter of inculcating in students the values and norms that lead to appropriate behavior in school, as well as in their families and communities.

Some schools require students to attend peer mediation, conflict resolution, or multicultural classes at some time during the school year. Others attempt to merge these programs into the curriculum so that students are continually exposed to them throughout their school careers.

Other programs receiving considerable attention involve student and adult mentoring. In both cases, a mentor assists troubled students with problems they might be having inside and/or outside of school. Information on topics, programs, and strategies that can be integrated into the curriculum is provided below.

Programs that can be Integrated into the Curriculum

- Conflict Resolution
- Diversity
- Drug Education
- Anger Management
- Multicultural Education
- Peer Mediation
- Sexual Harassment

Physical Environment. For many schools, working to improve the physical environment is crucial. The use of metal detectors is an option in schools with high rates of crime and violence. Other options include eliminating student lockers, providing better and more lighting, and improving the appearance of the school by cleaning and painting. By asking for parent and student volunteers, and by soliciting the assistance of community leaders, the school can offset the cost of some of these programs.

If building new schools is the answer, districts might well consider a truly community design. A well-lit circular building will enhance the

⁴ Make sure that school officials talk to a special education professional so that laws, such as IDEA, are followed.

ability of education employees to see students in play areas or areas where students congregate, such as hallways. In addition, there appears to be a correlation between school size and crime and violence problems. School decision makers should consider building smaller schools designed for safety and which house a smaller student population.

Crisis Management Plan⁵

It is absolutely crucial that schools develop and implement a crisis management plan. The plan makes it perfectly clear who does what, when, and with whom in the event of a crisis, such as a shooting on school grounds. The crisis management plan covers the following three broad areas (More can be added if a school so chooses): communication, facilitation, and counseling.

As part of the process, school leaders should meet with local law enforcement authorities to become familiar with what is expected of school personnel in the event of a crisis. For example, in the event of a crisis, law enforcement agencies have an Incident Command System (ICS), which lays out a hierarchy of authority and roles for all law enforcement personnel. In the event of a crisis, school leaders are not in charge, but must take on an advisory role if they are asked to do so. School personnel should become familiar with how their law enforcement agencies operate in the event of a crisis.

Communication. The communications component of the crisis management plan should address three groups.

- *Parents.* Parents of victims and offenders should be notified and informed about the condition of their children and the status of the situation as soon as possible. Someone from the staff needs to be given this responsibility. More than likely, parents will hear, call, or even make the trip to the school in the event of a crisis. At least two individuals should be identified to handle

phone calls and to deal with parents who come to the campus.

- *Staff.* Staff members need to be identified and given the responsibility of dealing with students. First, they must enable students not involved in the crisis to be taken out of harm's way. Second, they must help develop a policy for keeping students in school or letting them out after a crisis has been contained.
- *Media.* In addressing the media, the plan should speak to establishing a media room, determining who should talk to the media. Developing prior relationships with reporters who cover education issues for local papers is helpful.

Additionally, schools must help develop a strategy and policy for the next day. For example, some schools have a cooling-down period of one or two days and offer on-site counseling for students in need of such services. Other schools open for regular classes the day after a crisis. Whatever the policy, someone should be designated as the school's spokesperson, responsible for talking to community officials who arrive on campus during or after a crisis.

Teachers who are out of harm's way must be informed about the crisis so they can help other students. Most often, involving teachers in the crisis plan is the best way to make teachers aware of what they are to do. Frequent reminders are also helpful.

Facilitation. A crisis management plan should outline who will help whom. If possible, someone should stay with the victims until the authorities arrive or, if necessary, ride with the victims in an ambulance to the hospital. When authorities arrive, a designated school employee should assist in answering questions or completing forms.

⁵ See Crisis Management Plan at www.nea.org/crisis

Offenders must also be assisted. If possible, someone should stay with the offender(s) until the authorities arrive, and then speak to the authorities on behalf of the offender(s) if they cannot do so. Offender(s) have certain rights, and school facilitators should ensure that those rights are upheld.

Counseling. Counseling services might be necessary for students and employees following a crisis. In extreme cases, such as a fatal shooting, post-traumatic reactions can set in at any time. Counseling might be needed for both students and employees.

Educational Strategies for Violence Prevention

The following suggested strategies can be used individually or in combination to prevent violence in schools.

- Teach students about the nature and extent of violence in society and in their community. This is especially important for young people who have a natural tendency to believe they are immortal and often have an “it can’t happen to me” attitude. Complement discussions of violence with instruction on how to avoid becoming a victim of crime.
- Prevent hate crimes by discussing and rejecting stereotypes of minority groups (including students who are GLBT), encouraging interaction with members of different cultures, and encouraging an appreciation of diversity. Also, ensure that educational materials reflect the many cultures of this society.
- Use existing courses to teach safety topics. For example, social studies or current events classes can discuss social unrest and resulting violence in society. English classes can write essays on self-esteem or interpersonal conflict, and art classes can design antiviolence posters.
- Teach students about the damaging effects of sexual harassment and sexual assault. From an early age, children can learn the difference

between “good touching” and “bad touching,” and that “no means no.” Older students can have group discussions about dating and relationship expectations.

- Instruct students in laws that affect juveniles and the consequences for breaking these laws. In some instances take students to visit a jail to observe incarceration firsthand and to talk to prisoners about what led to their being imprisoned. Encourage respect for the law by leading discussions on social contract theory and other theories about creating laws.
- Tell students about the lethal impact of guns and the legal implications of carrying or using guns. Try to counteract the attractiveness of guns for young people. Emphasize that students should not carry guns, and include a discussion about gun safety.
- Videotape television news stories that describe actual incidents involving guns and ask students to watch and discuss the tapes.
- Teach elementary and secondary students to avoid gang activities and provide them with alternative programs to meet their social and recreational needs. Invite guest speakers, such as law enforcement or probation officers, who work with gang members, to speak to classes or assemblies. Former gang members who have “turned their lives around” can also tell stories that inspire students to keep away from gangs.
- Teach problem-solving skills in both academic and extracurricular school settings.
- Tell students that anger is an acceptable feeling, but that acting on anger in violent ways is unacceptable. Teach children how to express their anger non-violently or to confront the source of their anger with plans to “work it out” through peaceful, problem-solving discussions.
- Offer assistance in finding jobs to students who are at risk of dealing drugs or joining a gang.

- Teach students social skills, such as how to use self-control, communicate well with others, and form and maintain friendships.
- Intervene when name calling and harassment occur, including when students use terms such as, "That's so gay."
- Talk with students about being "good sports" to discourage the disruptive and violent behavior that can break out at school athletic events. Encourage coaches, teachers, parents, and other adults to set good examples.

Source: These strategies have appeared in many other publications. See Cristina Bodinger-DeUriarte and Anthony A. Sancho. 1992. *Hate Crime*. Los Alamos, CA: Southwest Center for Educational Equity, Southwest Regional Laboratory.

Step 3: Continue Monitoring and Assessing Data

To reduce or eliminate school violence and crime, the school safety committee must continually monitor certain kinds of activities. Of great importance is the collection of data or indicators that alert the committee to potential problems. Such indicators can include an increase in the number of gang-related activities and changes in the distribution of ethnic and racial groups in the community.

NEA suggests two broad data gathering activities for school safety committees: 1) community data gathering and analysis, and 2) school data gathering and analysis.

Community Data Gathering and Analysis

Socio-demographic Data. At the community level, data might be collected on selected socio-demographic traits, such as—

- Poverty
- Population, especially race and ethnicity
- Unemployment

Crime. Selected crime statistics need to be collected. Again, the focus is on indicators that the committee feels may alert it to potential problems in the school. A suggested list of crime indicators are—

- Drug arrests
- Robbery
- Vandalism
- Prostitution

Violence. Finally, data on the incidence, frequency, and kind of community violence need to be collected and analyzed because of their possible implications for school violence. A suggested list of indicators would include—

- Domestic Violence
- Child Abuse
- Assault
- Homicide
- Gang and drug-related violence and activities

School Data Gathering and Analysis

It is important that data gathering and analysis continue at the school building level and involve students and employees. Data collected from these groups can be recorded on specially designed forms. These data can paint a portrait of criminal or violent behavior surrounding a school and can be used in developing school safety policies.

