

# Communicate for Safer Schools

Open channels of communication between staff, school leaders, community, and law enforcement is essential



## SESSION: 10 STEPS TO A SAFER SCHOOL

**Presenter:** Peter Pochowski, executive director, Wisconsin School Safety Coordinators Association (pictured)

**P**eter Pochowski, executive director of the Wisconsin School Safety Coordinators Association, said one of the most important elements in keeping schools safe is communication.

“We need to have 360 degrees of communication in our schools,” he said.

School principals need to communicate to staff, and staff needs to feel comfortable talking with school leaders. This communication loop also needs to include the school board, parents, and community. In addition, Pochowski said, the school, if it hasn’t already done so, needs to have an open channel of communication with local law enforcement.

“Communicating is the most important thing we as adults do,” Pochowski said. “Look what happens when we don’t.”

That communication is not limited to adults. Pochowski said students also need to be involved in school safety, “Students will help keep your schools safe if you listen to them.” Pochowski said students usually see problems before adults do. Those

problems can range from a burnt out light in a bathroom to information about a possible fight. Most importantly, if students come to school leaders with sensitive information, they need to be protected.

A school staff dedicated to safety is also important. Pochowski said staff is one of the major factors in creating a safe or unsafe environment. For instance, staff who have a habit of not locking doors or violating fire codes by burning candles or hanging excessive amounts of paper on the walls can unknowingly create an unsafe environment. An active and engaged staff will also help enforce rules consistently and recognize students in distress. Emphasizing the importance of staff involvement, Pochowski said that the most important aspect in maintaining school safety, in his opinion, is the principal.

“If they know their job and they’re committed, they can make your school better,” Pochowski said. “The principal creates the culture and affects the motivation of the staff.”

Another step schools should take

to make their schools safer is to adopt interagency memorandums of understanding. These dictate what different agencies such as law enforcement, emergency rescue workers, and the fire department do in the case of an emergency at the school.

Pochowski also recommends appointing a safety coordinator. This is someone who is responsible to the superintendent and school board for all safety and security policies and programs. Pochowski said this person doesn’t necessarily have to be a trained individual in security — it simply needs to be someone who is willing to stay on top of security programs and policies in the district.

While Pochowski has plenty of advice for schools, he said that the most important thing is that districts take an active role in school safety and come up with their plan.

“I believe that local decision-making is the best process,” Pochowski said. “I may not agree with your decisions, but you’ve got to get the discussions started as far as what you’re going to do to make your schools safer.” ■

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