

# School Safety is Everyone's Job

State renews focus on school safety

**SESSION:** *Keeping Wisconsin Schools Safe: A Safe Schools Initiative* | **Presenters:** Kit Dailey, public information specialist, Eppstein Uhen Architects, Inc.; Steve Fernan, student services/prevention and wellness, Department of Public Instruction; Peter Pochowski, executive director, Wisconsin School Safety Coordinators Association



**K**eeping Wisconsin schools safe is a group effort.

“In Wisconsin, we have an excellent record of keeping schools and students safe,” said Steve Fernan, assistant director of the Department of Public Instruction’s Student Services/Prevention and Wellness team. Fernan added that an ongoing collaborative initiative by the state’s major education groups is designed to keep that record intact.

Shortly after the violence at Sandy Hook Elementary School in December 2012, Wisconsin education leaders began to discuss what they could do to improve school safety. The discussions culminated in a three-day safety summit in Racine attended by representatives from WEAC, WASB, WASDA, DPI, parent groups and law enforcement in 2013. Students added their voices in the form of a video presented at the summit. In the video, they talked about being afraid, not of a gunman like at Sandy Hook or Columbine, but of everyday pressures like bullies and depression.

Using a set of core beliefs as a basis for discussions, the group came up with a series of recommendations. In the area of mental health, members suggested coordinating state and national mental health initiatives and identifying best practices at the local level for meeting the mental health

needs of students. This was key since the group found that in Wisconsin there are a great number of students with unmet mental health needs.

Since the summit, Governor Scott Walker has established and funded an office of Children’s Mental Health. There have been meetings between DPI and the new state office to coordinate efforts to serve students. Federal grants are being used to pilot programs in several cities in the state that would serve as models for delivering mental health services throughout the state.

There is also ongoing training of school staff to identify and refer students with mental health services and to respond and prepare for school crisis situations.

The group also made a number of recommendations for changing school climate and culture including developing new ways to respond to disciplinary issues and adding peer to peer support and character education efforts.

In the area of policy and procedures, the group recommended adopting a statewide standard for crisis preparation and response and creating uniform templates for policies, procedures and crisis communication. Creation of regional crisis teams and a statewide school safety center were also suggested. All the

recommendations are available on the DPI website, Fernan said.

Peter Pochowski, executive director of the Wisconsin School Safety Coordinators Association and another summit member, discussed his group’s on-site safety assessments for schools that use a 25-point school security checklist. The checklist includes questions about staff training, and the school’s emergency operation plan, among other items.

Kit Dailey, a public information specialist with Eppstein Uhen Architects and past president of the Wisconsin School Public Relations Association (WSPRA), discussed the crisis communication tool kit developed by WSPRA. The kit has recently been updated to include a significant section on social media, Dailey said.

The kit is particularly important because the vast majority of Wisconsin school districts do not have a trained public information specialist on staff to help in times of a crisis, Dailey said. The toolkit is available free on the WSPRA website. The group’s members have also formed a network of specialists who are available to help districts with crisis communication when needed. ■