

The School Safety Checklist

School safety expert provides tips for keeping schools safe



SESSION: *The School Safety Checklist Your Wisconsin School Must Have* | **Presenter:** Peter Pochowski, executive director, Wisconsin School Safety Coordinators Association

A safer school starts at the front door. So says school security expert Peter Pochowski who shared a checklist of 25 common sense tips for keeping schools safe.

“You have some schools that leave their front door open. Not only is that a bad idea, but you’re leaving yourself open to a lawsuit,” said Pochowski, executive director of the Wisconsin School Safety Coordinators Association (WSSCA). “You don’t have to make school look like a prison, but you have to lock those doors.”

In addition, every school should have an access plan that outlines how staff, students, and visitors enter and leave the building.

Pochowski, a former Milwaukee Police Department captain, also worked for eight years as director of security for the Milwaukee Public Schools. He backed up his recommendations with anecdotes from his years of experience. In one case, he said a door left propped open so a teacher could go outside to smoke let in a thief who made off with expensive computer equipment.

Pochowski put together the checklist after the 2012 shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School prompted a flood of phone calls and emails from school officials asking him to do safety assessments of their schools. The WSSCA offers training but does not do assessments, which are expensive. The checklist was designed to give advice on how to make sure schools are “reasonably safe.”

Under state law, school districts are required to have an emergency action plan for all schools and update it every three years. Each school is also required to designate a staff member as a safety coordinator, who maintains

contacts with local law enforcement agencies and undergoes regular training to keep current.

Framed as a series of questions, the checklist recommends that schools have a safety committee and written memorandums of understanding with local law enforcement and other external agencies, such as local businesses that could offer help with evacuations, and local media outlets that would help communicate information during an emergency.

All school staff should be trained in emergency procedures. However, Pochowski reminded his audience that there are other more common emergencies than school shootings such as fires and chemical spills.

Security cameras should be checked regularly to make sure they are working properly and money should be budgeted for their maintenance.

Students and staff should wear identification badges and doors should be clearly marked so emergency vehicles can quickly identify them.

Other recommendations include developing written procedures for what to do in case of an emergency before or after school as well as during a field trip. Pochowski recommends schools have a key control policy and a written procedure for how to work with students with mental and physical disabilities during an emergency. He is an advocate of police school liaison officers and recommends that school offices be located near the main entrance to help control visitor access.

He ended by encouraging his audience to do everything they can to make their schools as safe as possible.

“If we can’t make our kids safe, we have failed as adults,” he said. ■

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