

## School Violence—Creating a Positive School Climate for Students

School-based violence is a growing concern for school districts across the United States. As we continue to balance our attention between delivering quality education and securing the school, providing students with a safe environment is becoming a challenge.

In the 2009–10 school year, there were 17 homicides in schools of school-age youths (ages 5–18). In the 2012–13 school year, a gunman opened fire in a Connecticut elementary school on December 14, 2012, killing 26 people, 20 of them children. Many continue to ask, “What can we do differently to prevent these tragedies?” No school can ever be considered totally secured. School Administrators and Risk Managers continue to explore ways to improve security in our schools and reduce school-violence incidents. School violence is a serious issue that requires continuous effort and vigilance.

As we review the United States Secret Service and United States Department of Education May 2008 report, “Prior Knowledge of Potential School-Based Violence,” and the United States Department of Education and Department of Justice Programs February 2012 report, “Indicators of School Crime and Safety 2011,” we may draw similar ideas for preventing school violence.

Outside the layers of physical asset protection, controlled access of school properties is paramount. Controlled accesses during school hours should be in place and visitor sign-in and identification required for visitors, staff and students. There should also be a structured threat reporting system, limits on social media used by students and staff, sweeps for contraband, two-way radio communication systems, use of security cameras, clearly communicated dress codes, use of school resource officers and hall monitors, and metal detectors. All of these investments are intended to make our schools safer.

In the limited study “Prior Knowledge of Potential School-Based Violence,” which discusses the Safe School Initiative studies, it is reported that 81% of the time someone has advance knowledge of the planning of the attack before the actual occurrence. What we understand from this study is one of the best preventive steps is to develop a positive climate among students, parents, teachers and staff that allows for clear communication between all four parties.

Schools should consider the following preventive steps:

- Create a positive school climate that promotes students, parents, teachers and administrators to be comfortable in sharing information regarding potential threatening situations. Teachers, school resource officers, counselors and assistant principals are key officials in providing the social and emotional connections to the school.



# School talk.



- School Administrators and law enforcement need to clearly delineate to students that reporting information about threats will not subject them to negative consequences. The creation of a confidential call-in number is one means to provide a mechanism to allow parents and students to report.
- Use a variety of communication means such as assemblies, bulletin board postings, school websites, special events and clubs to promote the reporting and that threats are taken seriously.
- Create effective school policies and train teachers/staff how to take all threats seriously, how to respond properly to a report, who is responsible for handling the threat and keeping the confidentiality of the report.
- Teachers and staff should be trained on how to identify and report warning signs well in advance of violence. Some examples include:
  - » Sudden lack of interest
  - » Obsessions with violent games
  - » Depression and mood swings
  - » Writing that shows despair and isolation
  - » Lack of anger management skills
  - » Talking about death or bringing weapons to school
  - » Violence towards animals
- Creating school-based violence programs for students to teach and develop skills to understand emotional self-awareness and control, social skills, problem solving, conflict resolution, leadership and teamwork. Creating bullying/cyber bullying prevention programs aid these efforts.
- It is important for schools to create a positive climate for students where they can engage in social involvement with the school, teachers and staff.

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