

## Safe Schools Need Safe Plans

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School violence is killing our nation's students as well as the dreams of those seemingly untouched. School administration and staff must deal with the harshest of realities. They must not only guard against a stranger coming on campus, but must guard against one of their own students, as well. Statistics, gathered from across the country, speak of the fear and death experienced by children at the hands of children. According to two studies, the first by Underwood, Lewis, Pickett and Worona (2000), and the second study by the Center for the Prevention of School Violence (2001), many communities have had to deal with a stranger or one of their own students bringing a weapon onto the campus. This alarming trend focuses a spot light on the absolute need for each school to create a safety plan or to examine an existing safety plan for its ability to adequately address the needs of the school, staff, and at-risk students. This trend should also be of concern to the state legislature, which has a responsibility to provide adequate funding to implement safety plans and provide California schools with adequate counseling services.

Dwyer, Osher and Warger (1998), authors for *A Guide for Safe Schools*, found that most researchers believe that children who commit violence in schools are really a small subset of a vulnerable, at-risk population. Underwood, Lewis, Pickett & Worona (2000), cited a study by P. Edmister (1999), stating that many researchers, psychologists, and other mental health practitioners believe that many factors impinge on the mental and emotional well being of today's youth. While it would be easier to believe that school violence is primarily an outcome of emotional and physical abuse, there are many contributing factors, beginning with early childhood attachment opportunities, parenting skills and mentoring by adults who play a significant role in a child's life, developmental traits, psychological and cultural factors, and contributions of the media. Deficits in one or more of these areas can potentially create stress in a child's life that could over time manifest itself in negative consequences such as violence and vandalism. Underwood, et al (2000) further found that "one theory of school shooters is that they are victims who have been repeatedly bullied. Their rage at this injustice erupts in a final fit of violence" (p. 2). Even so, many schools are lacking counseling and/or intervention resources. Recently, DeLaine Easten, State Superintendent of Public Education, cited shocking statistics that California's Counselor-to-student ratio is ranked last in the nation.

Many schools now have a disaster/crisis response or management plan. However, even where one exists, due to recent changes in school violence (increasing frequency, broader targets, and more sophisticated instruments of violence), a review is in order. One standard format being used in many schools in Northern California is the Elementary School Crisis Response Plan (1998-1999), which includes five key elements. The first is an overview of the bell system and what to do in the case of a fire, earthquake, intruder on campus or other crisis situations. The idea is to eliminate confusion if such a crisis were to occur. The second element is the development of crisis response team assignments and duties. If a disaster were to strike, there is a better chance of order being maintained when the staff is trained and ready to assume a role of responsibility. The third element consists of a student (family) phone-tree and a district and community phone-tree. Most schools designate responsible parents in each classroom to contact other parents in case of an emergency. The fourth element deals with plant management, site floor plans, where power sources are located, and how to access the roof and other vital areas.

The fifth, and perhaps the most important element, is the development of intervention strategies that can be implemented at the school site to slow or stop violent situations from developing. This is the area where the contributing factors to school violence, previously cited, could and should be addressed. A necessary aspect of any successful intervention plan must include adequate counseling services to address issues including anger-management, self-esteem development, and to listen for subtle nuances signaling a possible eruption of rage. However, if California schools are to implement specialized intervention strategies, the state legislature must adequately fund counseling programs on elementary, junior high and high school campuses.

In response to school violence, every school must create and practice an adequate disaster/crisis response or management plan. Where a response plan currently exists, a review is necessary due to recent changes in school violence. The state legislature must partner with schools to decrease school violence through adequate funding of intervention programs. It is imperative that schools as well as the state legislature acknowledge that significant risk for escalating violence exists in all

communities across the state. If the issue of safe schools is not addressed, dreams of school success will diminish as anxiety and violence escalates.

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