



*School Districts Develop a Broad Approach to Student Well-Being
by Patrice McCarthy*

In the aftermath of tragic school shootings in Columbine, Colorado and Newtown, Connecticut, many school districts responded immediately to try to prevent a similar tragedy in their schools. School board members, superintendents, staff, parents, students, first responders, and Legislators addressing this issue in consultation with experts in the field learned that enhancing school safety and security requires a broad approach. Many state legislatures established commissions and task forces to examine these issues in the past several years. The Oklahoma Commission on School Safety developed five recommendations adopted by the legislature in 2013:

- Formation of the Oklahoma School Security Institute (OSSI)
- Establish a mental health first aid training pilot program
- Amend and change state law to require school intruder drills
- Require the reporting of illegal firearms found on school property to law enforcement
- Establish a school security tip line

In Connecticut, multiple commissions including the Sandy Hook Advisory Commission, the School Safety Infrastructure Council, and the Task Force to Study the Provision of Behavioral Health Services for Young Adults have addressed these issues. The reports included recommendations on:

- Safe school design and operations, acknowledging that the strategies must be tailored to the needs of the communities and schools and cannot be static.
- Mental health, including insurance funding, stigma and discrimination
- Response, recovery and resilience

Many states have adopted legislation including grants for upgrades in security features and requirements for emergency management plans.

Rather than focus exclusively on preventing a specific tragedy from occurring, school boards now take a comprehensive approach which includes multiple aspects of the school environment. The “all hazards” approach addresses not just armed intruders, but natural and manmade disasters. Much has been learned about strategies to prevent and deal with all types

of emergencies. Schools continue to be one of the safest places for young people – but maintaining and increasing that safe environment is an ongoing process.

School Climate

A positive school climate enhances the opportunities to learn for all students. Students should feel they are valued and belong in their school. A positive school climate can reduce bullying, absenteeism, suspensions and cultural and socio – economic differences - and increase academic achievement.

In 2007, the National School Climate Council identified specific criteria for what defines a positive school climate, including:

- Norms, values, and expectations support social, emotional, and physical safety.
- People are engaged and respected.
- Students, families, and educators work together to develop and live a shared school vision.
- Educators model and nurture attitudes that emphasize the benefits gained from learning.
- Each person contributes to the operations of the school and the care of the physical environment.

School resource officers (SRO) working closely with school staff can enhance the school climate. An SRO can build a trusting relationship with the students, providing them guidance and support. Experts confirm that the most effective way to prevent acts of violence in schools is to build trusting relationships with students and others in the community, so threats are deterred. Successful partnerships with school resource officers include a memorandum of understanding between the school and the police department. The MOU should address supervision and training of the SRO, interactions with students, staff and police, and a graduated response model for student discipline. The MOU focus is on the students, not be “turf”.

Mental Health

It has become clear that there is a significant lack of availability of mental health services for children and young adults throughout the country. Many school leaders report that they have no where to refer a child who they identify as in need of mental health services, because of lack of providers who focus on the needs of young people, as well as the cost of services. Unfortunately, school counselors, social workers and psychologists are often eliminated in school budget cuts. Connecticut recently established a Children’s Mental, Emotional and Behavioral Health Advisory Board to address some of these challenges.

Communication and Coordination

Technological advances provide new opportunities to improve communication between schools and communities. Electronic emergency notification systems are now in wide-spread use to notify parents and guardians of school situations, and first responders can be alerted with the press of a button.

Technology is one element of increasing school safety and security, but equally important is developing ongoing relationship with first responders and community leaders. Districts now share school floor plans – confidentially – with emergency personnel, and mock emergency response drills are conducted in the school buildings. Communication needs to be ongoing. Superintendents change. Principals change. Police Chiefs change. The best plans must be reviewed, rehearsed, and revised on a regular basis.

Supporting Those In Need

Historically, school communities respond with compassion and support in the face of tragedy. One of the lessons learned from the tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School is that managing the offers of support creates an additional level of stress on the community. Without three loaned executives from General Electric, that community of 27,000 would have been overwhelmed by the outpouring of donations – including thirty thousand teddy bears. Some school districts are now discussing ways to support those facing tragedy and guiding students and staff in matching the response to the need of the specific situation.

The increased focus on safety, security and climate is yielding measurable results. For the 2013-14 school years, the survey by the National Center for Education Statistics showed 65 percent of public schools reporting one violent incident in school, such as a rape, fight, robbery or threat of physical attack, down from 74 percent in the 2009-10 school year, when the survey was last administered.

Discipline Challenges

School administrators face a real challenge in balancing school safety with the constitutional rights of the students when dealing with threats of violence. School board associations offers model policies addressing discipline and violence prevention. “With the advent of the Internet and in the wake of school shootings at Columbine, Santee, Newtown and many others, school administrators face the daunting task of evaluating potential threats of violence and keeping their students safe without impinging on their constitutional rights. It is a feat like tightrope balancing, where an error in judgement can lead to a tragic result.” *Wynar v. Douglas Co. Sch. Dist.*, 728 F.3d 1062, 1062 (9th Cir. 2013). See also *Burge v. Colton School District 53*, No.3:14-00605 ST (US District Court –Oregon). Courts will ultimately struggle to address these issues.

Looking Forward

No school, movie theater, place of workshop or government building can be made 100 percent safe from any situation. That is why the conversations about safety and security must continue with teachers, administrators, parents, public officials, legislators – all who are committed to the well-being of our students.

Patrice McCarthy is Deputy Director and General Counsel for the CT Association of Boards of Education, and Past Chairman of NSBA's Council of School Attorneys.