



# SCARED OR PREPARED?

Don't fall into the trap of only thinking about school safety when it's a hot topic in the news. A proactive approach to school security and emergency preparedness planning is critical.

BY KENNETH S. TRUMP, M.P.A.

Parents will forgive school officials if test scores drop, but they are much less forgiving if something happens to their children that could have been prevented or better managed, especially when it comes to school crises. Parents want their school's administrative team and staff to take all possible steps to reduce the risks of an act of crime or violence from occurring at their school. They also expect school staff to be well-prepared for responding to events ranging from student suicides and natural disasters to school shootings and acts of terrorism.

School counselors play a vital role in school safety and emergency preparedness planning. School counselors are increasingly looked upon as proactive players in the school safety planning process and should be an integral part of the school's safety and crisis teams.

Schools need to view school safety planning as an ongoing process, not a one-time event, although there will always be new issues to consider and established plans to revisit. Whether your school is just beginning to create your plan or if you are conducting a review of your existing plan, following are 10 critical questions to consider:

**HOW DO YOUR STUDENTS FEEL ABOUT SAFETY IN THEIR SCHOOL?**

Students often know where security gaps exist and what can be done to improve school safety. Where do they feel most safe? Least safe? Why? Ask students what they would do to make their school safer if they were in charge. Be sure to include students in your safety-planning process through focus groups, anonymous surveys and other methods.

**DO STUDENTS FEEL COMFORTABLE REPORTING SAFETY CONCERNS TO SCHOOL STAFF?** Do students have at least one adult they would feel comfortable talking to about safety concerns at school? Are there other methods, such as hotlines or e-mail tip lines for students to report concerns? Schools must work on creating a climate where students feel comfortable reporting safety concerns and have multiple mechanisms for doing so.

**DO YOU REVIEW YOUR SCHOOL POLICIES, PROCEDURES AND EMERGENCY/CRISIS GUIDELINES ON SECURITY AND EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS?** Have the school board and administration written policies and procedures related to security, crisis preparedness planning and overall school safety planning? If so, when were they last updated? Are you doing what your plans and policies say you should do? Oftentimes day-to-day practice does

not reflect what schools have put in writing, thereby creating confusion and potentially setting up school leaders for increased liability.

**IS SCHOOL SAFETY AND EMERGENCY PLANNING A "LIVING" PART OF YOUR SCHOOL'S CULTURE, OR DO YOU JUST HAVE A DUSTY DOCUMENT SITTING UPON A SHELF?** Does your school have a school safety committee to develop an overall plan for prevention, intervention and security issues? Are these plans balanced and not just prevention-only or security-only? Do you have written school emergency and crisis guidelines? Is there a school crisis team to deal with emergency planning? Who are members of the safety committee and crisis team? Do these teams involve counselors, school nurses, custodians, secretaries, bus drivers, security and police staff and other support personnel in addition to teachers and administrators? How often do they meet? What type of training has been provided to these teams? Are these plans and guidelines reviewed regularly – at least once a year?

**ARE SCHOOL EMERGENCY/CRISIS GUIDELINES TESTED AND EXERCISED?** Do your school officials test and exercise written crisis guidelines? What type of tests do they do? If you don't



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have the opportunity to participate in a full-scale exercise of emergency plans with public safety partners, have you held tabletop exercises to test written plans?

Tabletop exercises can bring together building and district crisis teams and their public safety partners in a half-day or full-day professional development classroom setting to test written plans against hypothetical scenarios to determine if what is in writing will work in a real emergency.

**HAS A PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL SECURITY ASSESSMENT BEEN CONDUCTED FOR YOUR SCHOOL?** Are there a reduced number of doors that can be accessed from the outside while still allowing children to exit from the inside in an emergency? Do faculty and staff greet visitors, challenge strangers and know who is in their school? Are there sign-in procedures, visitor identification badges, etc.? Do you have basic physical security measures in place, and are they adequate for reducing risks at your school? School safety assessments should include reviews of written policies and crime-prevention practices, security and police staffing, relationships and partnerships between school and community safety officials, training and awareness strategies and physical security measures such as access control, communications, lighting and related issues.

**DO YOUR SCHOOL LEADERS USE INTERNAL SECURITY SPECIALISTS AND OUTSIDE PUBLIC SAFETY RESOURCES TO DEVELOP SAFETY PLANS AND CRISIS GUIDELINES?** Do school officials actively involve internal school security specialists in developing safety plans and crisis guidelines? Do school officials have meaningful, working relationships with public safety agencies serving their schools? Are outside local safety officials involved on school safety committees and teams? Plans should not be created by one person or in isolation. In many ways the planning process is as important as the final written product due to the communications and relationships developed in the process.

**DO SCHOOL EMPLOYEES RECEIVE TRAINING ON CRISIS PREPAREDNESS ISSUES?** Have school employees received training on security and emergency strategies? Are all employees included in such training? How often is training provided? Is the training provided by qualified and experienced instructors with knowledge of K-12 safety issues?

**DO YOU AND YOUR ADMINISTRATORS USE OUTSIDE RESOURCES FOR MONITORING TRENDS AND BEST PRACTICES?** Do school officials subscribe to current publications and free school safety listservs addressing school security and emergency planning issues? Do they attend conferences and workshops on school safety? Have they reviewed their security measures, crisis guidelines and safety plans with school safety experts? School security threats are ever-evolving, and keeping updated is critical.

Do you and your fellow school staff members do your part in making schools safe? Do you follow parking, access control and other safety rules at your school? Do you talk with students about violence prevention and security issues, drug and alcohol issues, gangs and related topics? Do you inform and engage parents and the school-community in your school's violence prevention and emergency preparedness efforts?

School safety is everyone's job. We must make sure that common-sense measures and best practices for school safety are in the forefront of our minds even when there isn't a crisis in the national headlines or in a community nearby. School counselors can and do play a critical role in making sure members of their school community are aware and prepared, not scared. ☐

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