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Returning to School Safely: School Safety Considerations for the 2021-2022 School Year

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A collaboration between NSBA's Center for Safe Schools and the Educator's School Safety Network

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Introduction

Education in a Post–Pandemic America: The Crisis After the Crisis or a Shared Opportunity?

As we emerge from a global pandemic, teachers, administrators, parents, and students are reeling from a year of virtual school, public health emergencies, civil unrest, increasing violence, social isolation, and family trauma. The events of 2020 have taken a toll on academics, social–emotional learning, and most importantly, on safety – but not just in a public health sense.

The next looming crisis?

Since March of 2020, educational communities have largely been in survival mode with little attention, time, or resources allocated to the ongoing work of school safety and violence prevention. Now we are facing a return to "business as usual" in the 2021–22 school year, but what exactly is "normal" now? The brutal reality is that the events and circumstances of the past year have not erased but rather exacerbated the safety concerns that existed before the pandemic. The need to provide appropriate support and interventions for students at risk for violence against themselves or others has never been greater. Unfortunately, too often, the commitment, professional development, and funding necessary to effectively implement school safety procedures (such as threat assessment, crisis response, and violence prevention) simply are not present in most schools right now. Schools must be able to walk and chew gum at the same time – recover from the public health crisis and prevent a future school safety crisis.

This is the troubling but vital question that every educator and parent must address: What school safety practices have been overlooked while we were busy dealing with COVID? Schools must now transition from "survival" mode into "the next thing" – which must include an all–hazards approach to violence prevention and safety.

At what point is the cure worse than the disease?

While children are at low risk for serious COVID complications, there have been significant increases in other threats to children's well–being during the pandemic and beyond, including increased anxiety and isolation, dramatic spikes in youth suicide, and steep decreases in academic achievement.
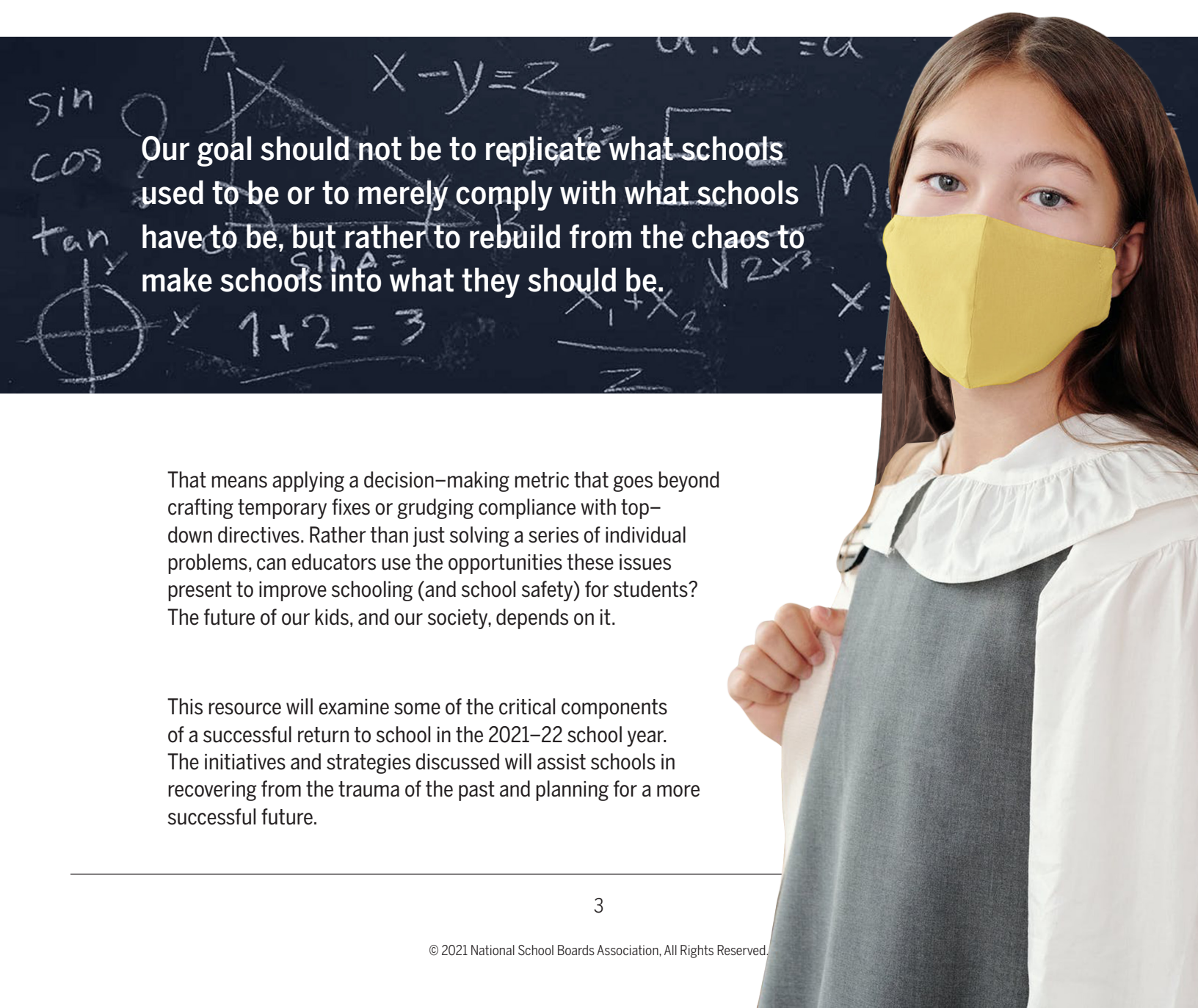
Politics and personal preferences aside, schools must, and will, reopen in the fall of 2021. What remains to be seen is how effectively we can reestablish positive relationships, rebuild public trust, and provide a safe and supportive learning environment for our students.

It is critical to plan for students and staff who come back to school in very different academic, economic, or emotional places than when they left. While everyone may have been in the same pandemic boat, the storm was very different for each person.

The return to "normal"

Planning and implementing initiatives for a return to school cannot just focus on a return to "normal." The public health, emotional, economic, and academic impacts of what has occurred will not magically disappear. What we "used to do" every year is no longer viable, effective, or appropriate not only because of public health or other concerns but also because we have a unique opportunity not just to survive but to thrive.

Our goal should not be to replicate what schools used to be or to merely comply with what schools have to be, but rather to rebuild from the chaos to make schools into what they should be.

That means applying a decision–making metric that goes beyond crafting temporary fixes or grudging compliance with top–down directives. Rather than just solving a series of individual problems, can educators use the opportunities these issues present to improve schooling (and school safety) for students? The future of our kids, and our society, depends on it.

This resource will examine some of the critical components of a successful return to school in the 2021–22 school year. The initiatives and strategies discussed will assist schools in recovering from the trauma of the past and planning for a more successful future.

The Role of School Boards in Returning to Schools Safely

The COVID–19 pandemic and calls for social justice reform have placed the role of the school board at the forefront of the educational landscape. School boards have been presented with countless unprecedented challenges and have been working tirelessly to navigate this new world. They have worked to support their schools and communities in innumerable ways while vigorously planning and preparing to safely reopen district offices and resume in–person services. With the litany of trials that boards have been facing and will continue to face into the next school year, we must not overlook the foundational elements that must be addressed to ensure that students and staff have access to safe, supportive, and empowering learning environments.

Districts are being stretched thinner than ever while also developing plans to address these new challenges, such as meeting COVID–19 protocols, making up for lost instructional time, and addressing the competing political interests of stakeholders. As these new challenges continue to grow in scale and complexity, districts cannot allow for traditional aspects related to the safety of our schools to fall through the cracks.

We must also be prepared to deal with the potential impacts on our students and staffs. They have been plagued with fear, uncertainty, isolation, and exposure to trauma. With this, we cannot be sure in what mental state they will be returning to schools in or the far–reaching impacts on school climate and safety these issues will have. Districts must begin preparing to understand and meet the needs of their students and staffs, with special attention paid to what they may have experienced since the pandemic began.

School boards are empowered to be the guiding force for a district and must continue to work diligently and consistently as they continue to enhance security and take action to protect students, teachers, administrators, and visitors. They must also consider the safety of student and staff mental health as seriously as they do the physical security of buildings. They must recognize their role in creating and sustaining positive, supportive, and inclusive environments to ensure that public schools are sanctuaries for learning and teaching. Now more than ever, school boards are needed to hold together their schools and communities. With these growing demands, it is important to take intentional steps to allow students and staff to return to safe schools.

School Culture and Climate

Many Happy Returns: Why School Culture Matters

As we approach the 2021–22 school with the fervent wish for a "normal" school year, let's hope that things don't go back to normal where school violence is concerned. In the 2018–19 school year, The Educator's School Safety Network's research found that violent incidents in schools increased 34% from the year before and a startling 113% from 2016. In addition, more than 3,058 threats were tracked, a 46% increase from just two years before.

While these statistics alone are alarming, we must also consider the devastating impact that actual incidents or threats of violence have on school climate and culture. In many cases, the perception or belief that violence could readily occur in a school is just as damaging as an actual event. There is even the "chicken or the egg" conundrum to consider – does a negative school culture cause safety concerns and incidents, or does a threat or incident of violence negatively impact a school's culture? The answer is simple – yes to both.

Perhaps even more troubling is the knee–jerk response implemented by many schools designed to "keep kids safe" – metal detectors, armed security guards, cameras, tracking apps, and pepper spray canisters. In our rush to respond, we must always remember that we are educators, not law enforcement officers. These are kids, not potential "perps," and we are running schools, not prisons.

We must also acknowledge the reality that violence can and does occur in schools, and it is often our students who are committing the criminal acts.

What is missing from these conversations, born out of fear and panic, is one solution that is staring us in the face: the proven effectiveness of a positive school culture in increasing safety, reducing social isolation, and improving academic achievement. Within every educator's grasp is the ability to improve the quality of life in the school for every stakeholder through a strategic, focused emphasis on building a positive culture.

Research indicates that a school's climate and culture have profound impacts on the mental and physical health, safety, and academic achievement of students. A positive school climate is associated with decreased absenteeism, lower rates of suspension, better psychological well–being and self–esteem, and lower rates of drug use. In a negative climate, students are more likely to experience violence, peer victimization, and punitive discipline. Perhaps most significantly, school climate is directly related to academic achievement in all levels of schooling. (Thapa et al., 2013).

How do we define school climate and culture?

The National School Climate Council defines school climate as: "The quality and character of school life as it relates to norms and values, interpersonal relations and social interactions, and organizational processes and structures. School climate sets the tone for all the learning and teaching done in the school environment and, as research proves, it is predictive of students' ability to learn and develop in healthy ways."

Edutopia's Maurice Elias defines school culture as "the sum total of the behaviors and interactions of all adults and children, their attitudes and norms, and the extent to which the school is safe, supportive, healthy, engaging, inspiring, and challenging for all."

Organizational culture is commonly defined as *"the way we do things around here."*

When we talk about school culture, it is a comprehensive look at how our systems, messaging, and practices are interrelated and set the tone for everything done in a building. When we talk about school climate, we are addressing how students, staff, and visitors feel when they are in a building and interacting with one another. Do they feel respected, included, heard, supported, and, ultimately, safe?

Why does school climate and culture matter?

In 2013, the National School Climate Center, in conjunction with Fordham University, conducted a review of school climate research. They found that a school's climate and culture impact a number of critical factors.

Students' mental and physical health

Extensive research shows that school climate has a profound impact on students' mental and physical health. A positive school climate has been shown to:

- Improve students' self–esteem (Hoge, Smit, & Hanson, 1990; Cairns, 1987; Heal, 1978; Reynolds, Jones, Leger, & Murgatroyd, 1980; Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, & Ouston, 1979).

- Mitigate the negative effects of self–criticism (Kuperminic, Leadbeater, & Blatt, 2001).

- Affect a wide range of emotional and mental health outcomes (Kuperminic, Leadbeater, Emmons, & Blatt, 1997; Payton et al., 2008; Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989; Shochet, Dadds, Ham, & Montague, 2006; Way, Reddy, & Rhodes, 2007).

More specifically, the research reviewed found that a positive school climate is linked to:

- Lower levels of drug use (LaRusso et al., 2008).

- Fewer self–reports of psychiatric problems among high school students (LaRusso et al., 2008).

- Better psychological well–being (Ruus et al., 2007; Shochet et al., 2006; Virtanen et al., 2009).

- Decreased student absenteeism in middle school and high school (deJung & Duckworth, 1986; Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1989; Purkey & Smith, 1983; Reid, 1982; Rumberger, 1987; Sommer, 1985)

- Lower rates of student suspension in high school (T. Lee, Cornell, Gregory, & Fan, 2011; Wu, Pink, Crain, & Moles, 1982).

- More effective risk prevention and health promotion efforts (Berkowitz & Bier, 2006; Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2002; Greenberg et al., 2003; Cohen, 2001; Najaka, Gottfredson, & Wilson, 2002; RAND Corporation, 2004; M. C. Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1993).

Safety of students and staff

In schools without supportive norms, structures, and relationships (in other words, a negative climate), students are more likely to experience violence, peer victimization, and punitive disciplinary actions (Astor, Guerra, & Van Acker, 2010). A negative climate that is perceived as unsafe results in high levels of absenteeism and reduced academic achievement (Astor, Guerra, & Van Acker, 2010).

Conversely, a positive school climate is associated with reductions in:

- Aggression and violence (Brookmeyer, Fanti, & Henrich, 2006; Goldstein, Young, & Boyd, 2008; Gregory et al., 2010; Karcher, 2002b).

- Bullying behavior (Birkett et al., 2009; Kosciw & Elizabeth, 2006; Meraviglia, Becker, Rosenbluth, Sanchez, & Robertson, 2003; Meyer–Adams & Conner, 2008; Yoneyama & Rigby, 2006).

- Sexual harassment, regardless of sexual orientation (AttarSchwartz, 2009).

In short, feeling safe in school promotes student learning and healthy development (Devine & Cohen, 2007).

Relationships

Safe, caring, participatory, and responsive school climates foster a greater attachment to school and provide the optimal foundation for social, emotional, and academic learning (Blum, McNeely, & Rinehart, 2002; Goodenow & Grady, 1993; V. E. Lee, Smith, Perry, & Smylie, 1999; Osterman, 2000; Wentzel, 1997).

Academic achievement

A large body of research overwhelmingly has shown that school climate is directly related to academic achievement in all levels of schooling (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1989; MacNeil, Prater, & Busch, 2009), including:

- Elementary schools (Brookover, Beady, Flood, Schweitzer, & Wisenbaker, 1977; Brookover et al., 1978; Brookover & Lezotte, 1979; Cook, Murphy, & Hunt, 2000; Freiberg, 1999; Griffith, 1995; Sherblom, Marshall, & Sherblom, 2006; Shipman, 1981; Sterbinksky, Ross, & Redfield, 2006).

- Middle schools (Brand, Felner, Shim, Seitsinger, & Dumas, 2003; X. Ma & Klinger, 2000).

- High schools (V. E. Lee & Bryk, 1989; Power et al., 1989; Stewart, 2008).

In addition to having a powerful influence on the motivation to learn (Eccles et al., 1993), the factors outlined above (mental and physical health, safety, and relationships) all have a direct impact on student achievement.

In their book *Shaping School Culture*, Kent Petersen and Terrence Deal define a school with a positive culture as a place where:

1. Educators have an unshakeable belief that all their students can succeed.

2. This belief is passed on and demonstrated to other school stakeholders in both tangible and intangible ways.

3. Educational leaders create policies, institute procedures, and implement practices that support their belief in the ability of their students to succeed.

These are critical and potentially uncomfortable questions. Do the educators in your schools truly believe that all their students are capable of academic achievement? If so, how are they demonstrating and acting upon this belief? And finally, what are you doing to ensure that this occurs? How are you contributing to and shaping the climate and culture of your district?

A positive school culture, and the benefits it creates, are tied most directly to establishing positive relationships among (and between) staff, students, and parents. The societal and public health events of the past few years have severely strained these relationships. Now more than ever, it is critical that all school stakeholders feel heard, respected, understood, and valued – students most of all.

Even though educational plates are full to overflowing, it is time well spent to "do the work" of improving a school's culture. This requires gathering (and listening to) feedback from critical constituencies, providing professional development to those who will be doing the work, and allocating resources for initiatives that support relationship–building and social–emotional learning.

Violence prevention practices, crisis planning, and appropriate emergency response protocols are critical considerations in improving school climate and culture. These endeavors complement and enhance other activities and initiatives designed to motivate and connect students and staff.

There is no need to invest in high–tech gadgets, hire expensive consultants, or purchase new curricula. There is only the need for like–minded educators to expand their knowledge and skills about developing a positive school culture – and then put those theories into practice. The past 18 months have highlighted the importance of school communities beyond simply academics.

Now, more than ever, our students and staff need a sense of belonging, acceptance, and consistency. With this, taking an intentional approach to developing and sustaining positive, safe, and supportive school cultures and climates may be the most powerful tool we have as we plan for the 2021–22 school year.

Petersen, K. D., & Deal, T. E. (2016). Shaping school culture (3rd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey–Bass.

Thapa, A., Cohen, J., Guffey, S., & Higgins–D'Alessandro, A. (2013). A review of school climate research. Review of Educational Research, 83, 357–385.

All–Hazards Approach
to Safety Planning

One small comfort as we emerge from a very atypical school year is the decrease (albeit an artificial one) in school shootings. With the return to face–to–face instruction, it is only a matter of time until a gun–based incident at a school drives our school safety discussions to active shooter situations. It's only natural that school leaders and law enforcement officers find themselves immersed in (and sometimes overcome by) the specter of an active shooter event. While preparedness is critical, we must remind ourselves that a madman with a gun is not the only, or even most likely, crisis event that a school will face.

As schools rush to "beef up" their safety planning by having active shooter drills or find themselves having lockdown after lockdown in the wake of threats, two important truths must be acknowledged.

First, active shooter preparation alone will not keep our students safe. Most districts have not considered, planned, or trained using the established best practice of a comprehensive, all–hazards approach to school safety. This means that while schools are spending time on the potentially catastrophic but statistically unlikely event of an active shooter, they are not preparing to deal with the myriad of crises they are much more likely to face.
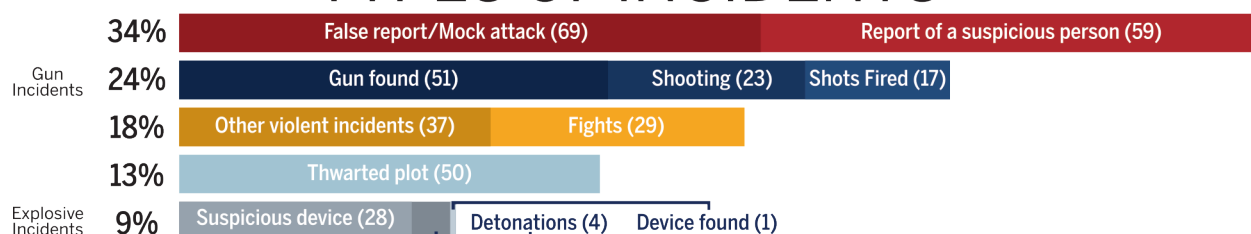
The Educator's School Safety Network's [most recent report on violent incidents and threats](#) in U.S. schools indicates that in the 2018–19 school year, the most frequent violent incident involved false reports of an active shooter (18.4%). Actual school shootings events comprised only 6% of all violent incidents.

Only 6% of all tracked incidents involved a shooting.
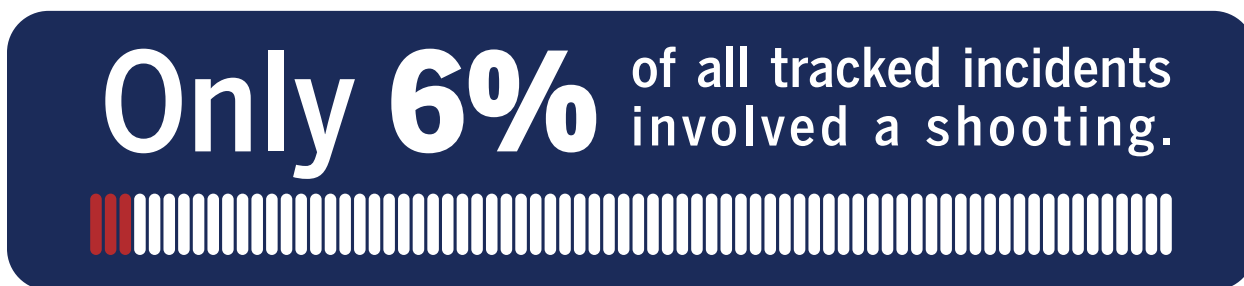
www.eSchoolSafety.org

Focus on gun violence is not without validity (as 24% of all violent incidents were gun–related in some fashion). However, violent incidents in schools encompassed a wide array of events, including 18% of incidents where violent, aggressive behaviors occurred in schools without the presence of a gun. These included outside aggressive actors such as disruptive parents or trespassers, large–scale student fights, and other less frequent but equally concerning events such as attempted abductions, dating violence, and assaults. This does not minimize the threat of gun–related violence in schools or our need to prepare effectively for it. Instead, it raises questions about the lack of training, preparedness, and resource allocation in schools for non–gun–related violent events more statistically likely to pose a threat to safety.

TYPES OF INCIDENTS

34%	False report/Mock attack (69)	Report of a suspicious person (59)
Gun Incidents **24%**	Gun found (51)	Shooting (23) · Shots Fired (17)
18%	Other violent incidents (37)	Fights (29)
13%	Thwarted plot (50)	
Explosive Incidents **9%**	Suspicious device (28)	Detonations (4) · Device found (1)

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Schools face a variety of potential threats and hazards, including severe weather, bus accidents, bomb threats and detonations, stabbings, medical emergencies, and accidents. These are potentially dangerous occurrences – and they require planning and training that encompasses more than active shooter response.

When a district plans and trains for an active shooter response at the exclusion of everything else, critical prevention activities such as threat assessment, strategic supervision, improving climate and culture, and increasing disclosures are ignored. We cannot protect children and make our schools safer by only reactively planning and practicing what to do after the bullets start flying. We must take a proactive, all–hazards approach that emphasizes both preventing and responding to natural disasters, medical emergencies, accidents, and all kinds of violent acts.

A heavy emphasis on active shooter response often results in the frequent and often inappropriate use of an old–school, "hide–out–and–hope–for–the–best" type of lockdown for every situation. Abraham Maslow's insight that if all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail is appropriate here. This fall, there will be hundreds of examples of students and teachers hunkered down in classrooms for hours, wondering if they are "the next Parkland" to allow administrators and police officers to investigate threats, provide "realistic" lockdown drills, or look for weapons or other contraband. We must acknowledge that there is a significant cost to inducing trauma in students or treating them like inmates "contained" in locked classrooms. We are, after all, running schools, not prisons.

It doesn't have to be this way. By viewing school safety as more than just a nail, educators can establish relationship–based cultures that reduce or prevent violence, allow students to feel safe and supported, AND increase academic achievement.

Active shooter preparation is critical, and lockdowns are an important response option. However, we must expand our view of crisis response to incorporate leveled lockdowns, rapid evacuation, barricading, and other protocols for bomb incidents, severe weather, medical emergencies, and acts of violence that don't involve a gun.

Amid the chaos, competing interests, political agendas, and general anxiety of coming back to school in the wake of the pandemic, let's start with the thing we can all agree on – no one wants kids hurt, scared, or dying at school. Sadly, it is also clear that schools must be prepared for the possibility of an active shooter. While it may be easier or more politically expedient to hold high–profile active shooter training, it is misinformed and dangerous for the work of crisis planning and response to stop there.

Ensuring the safety of the children in our care is the primary mission of all educators – and it is at times a daunting task. Board members, educators, parents, students, and emergency responders must commit to the difficult work and sustained attention that planning for, preventing, and responding to ALL safety hazards requires.

Every tragic school shooting reignites a national debate about school safety that has been simmering (and occasionally boiling over) since the massacre at Columbine High School in April 1999. More than 20 years later, as we remember all the subsequent shootings that have occurred since, critical issues require our consideration.

First, we cannot simply "buy" safer schools.

In 2017, security equipment and services generated $2.7 billion in revenue to private for–profit companies, capitalizing on the fear and anxiety of parents and school administrators. The National Center for Education Statistics indicates that the rate of schools equipped with video surveillance has risen from 19% in 1999 to 81% in 2016. Access control measures, such as buzzer systems and sally ports, are present in more than 94% of schools. In 2016, 73% of schools had electronic notification systems. These numbers are most certainly much higher now in the wake of the Parkland shooting in 2018. Yet data from the Center for Homeland Defense and Security indicates that there were 94 incidents of school gun violence in 2018, the highest on record since their data collection started in 1970.

While security–based solutions have dominated the post–Parkland discussion (and the funding that followed), there is a big problem that security equipment providers don't want to acknowledge. There is little to no evidence that the metal detectors, apps, cameras, and other surveillance equipment and security interventions that they are selling (and schools are desperately buying) work. A 2019 study of gun violence in schools, along with the 2016 Rand study on technology solutions, both report that security hardware and other law enforcement–based solutions alone do not prevent violence and actually promote a false sense of security that leaves schools at risk. This willingness to embrace the illusion of security has become so prevalent that Wikipedia has a term for it: security theater. It's defined as "the practice of investing in countermeasures intended to provide the feeling of improved security while doing little or nothing to achieve it."

Second, we are running schools, not prisons.

Perhaps the most significant consequence of embracing law enforcement– and security–based solutions is an actual increase in violence. Schools have shifted focus from developing relationship–based cultures that prevent violence and increase academic achievement to treating students like inmates. They lock students in, surveil their social media, walk them through metal detectors, and have armed security guards and cameras monitor their every move. Students feel this keenly. In 2019, New York City students protested the purchase of surveillance technologies over mental health services, chanting "support not surveillance" and "counselors not cops." While research clearly establishes the link between negative school culture and violence, we are just beginning to measure the impact of our "safety at all costs" choices.

Third, school safety is not just about active shooters.

In the wake of every school shooting, critical discussions and analysis of safety concerns are not the focus. Instead, media attention is focused on the arguments between extreme gun rights and gun control activists. As they slug it out, there is no room for other (less contentious) discussions, and nothing much happens. If every gun in the U.S. suddenly vanished, we would still have safety problems in our schools.

While active shooter threats are real, we must also be cognizant that the death of a student because we didn't have appropriate supervision at dismissal or because staff didn't get adequate medical training is ALSO a tragedy. Every school year, students die from classroom fights, school bus accidents, suicides on campus, and other equally horrific accidents or acts of violence that were not active shooter events. Educators and students need to know how to prevent and respond to the diverse threats schools face.

The 2019 controversy over an ill–advised active shooter training for teachers in Indiana raised a number of important issues. Those issues include the need for educator training that incorporates more than just active shooter response and the use of teachers as "props" in exercises and drills. Why are we training teachers like cops? While these are relevant concerns, let's consider whether subjecting teachers to a simulation of their worst nightmare is an effective training strategy. Not surprisingly, it isn't.

Since the 1960s, research has established that using fear to change behavior simply doesn't work and, in many cases, increases the problem. Using scare tactics to make a point, modify a behavior, or instill a sense of importance is ineffective at best, and traumatizing at worst. Teachers being shot "execution–style" with pellet guns by law enforcement officials checks all the boxes.

The solution? Invest in people, not in stuff. Staff members and students need appropriate, effective, ongoing training – not scary drills, traumatic exercises, or instructions on how to fight a gunman.

Staff and students must be provided with training that comes from an education, not law enforcement, perspective and focuses on an all–hazards approach, not just an active shooter protocol. This training should encompass violence prevention and risk mitigation as well as crisis response.

Keep in mind that all training is not created equal. When investing in training for staff and students, there are critical attributes that must be present. Training should be ongoing (not one and done) and appropriate for the intended audience. The training should be grounded in research–based best practices, not in anecdotes or personal agendas. In other words, education–based professionals with a high level of expertise in violence prevention and crisis response should be used to provide a comprehensive, all–hazards, hands–on training program that recognizes the unique needs of a school environment.

Fortunately, the avenues to acquire this type of training are expanding. Direct training is always the most effective, but time, money, and geography are constraints. Technology should be used to enhance training, not just create security solutions. Online, on–demand training is on the rise and can be an effective model for professional development, providing the content and methodology are appropriate and valuable. Let's develop a rule of thumb that says: for every dollar we spend on "stuff," let's spend a dollar on training for educators. Or here's another one – for every dollar we spend on active shooter response training, let's spend a dollar on preventing violence in the first place.

Perhaps most tragically, the view of educators and parents is often that "there's nothing we can do about violence; this is just the way schools are now." Nothing could be further from the truth. The good news is that there are many things that we can do to protect our schools and our students. We just need to defy the definition of insanity and stop doing the same thing repeatedly, expecting a different outcome.

Threat Assessment Management

The Most Important Safety Initiative Your District Probably Isn't Doing

Each instance of violence in American schools raises an obvious question: How can potential perpetrators of violence be identified? Why is it difficult for law enforcement, mental health agencies, and school officials to determine which individuals are viable threats to the community?

After violent events occur in schools, district leaders, school administrators, parents, and community members want to know if there is a more effective way to deal with troubled students and other individuals of concern. It's called Threat Assessment Management, and your school should be doing it.
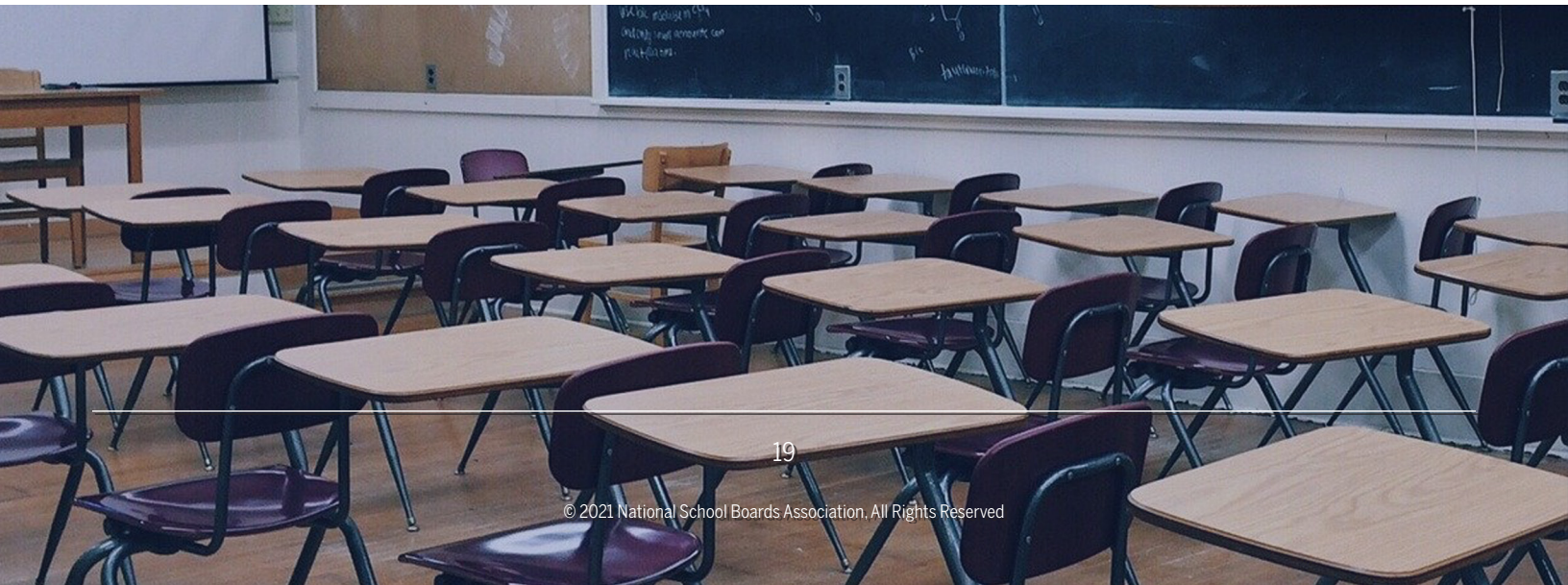
FEMA and the U.S. Department of Education call threat assessment "one of the most useful tools a school can develop…" (pg. 62). Threat assessment management is a means by which a school can identify, assess, and manage individuals who are at risk for violence against themselves or others. It's critical to note that threat assessment examines the risk for all types of violence – suicide, assaults, risk–taking behaviors, substance abuse, and more. [Do we have permission to use this infographic?]

Why engage in Threat Assessment?

> "One of the most useful tools a school can develop… is a multidisciplinary school threat assessment team"

p. 62 Guide for Developing High Quality School Emergency Operations Plans

The threat assessment process uses a team to gather information about a student or others to investigate and evaluate the level of threat posed by those who exhibit behaviors of concern to prevent targeted school violence.

Threat assessment teams are a critical component of a comprehensive, all–hazards approach to school safety that gives equal weight to prevention AND response. Violence in schools cannot be stopped purely through response measures.

As we look ahead at bringing students back to school for 2021–22, the need for threat assessment has never been greater. Think back to the fall of 2019. Nearly all schools had students about whom they were concerned. In March of 2020, these students who weren't "OK" were suddenly isolated, traumatized, and almost entirely without adequate supports and interventions. Fast forward 18 months, and these students are returning to school with even greater issues and concerns than when they left. Other concerns are those students who weren't on the radar before the pandemic but are returning with critical needs and trauma as schools scramble to deal with known issues.

Appropriately identifying, assessing, and managing these two categories of overwhelming need is almost impossible without effective threat assessment.

What is threat assessment management – and what is it not?

The first step in creating and implementing threat assessment management in your school is to have a clear idea of the purpose, capabilities, and limitations of threat assessment. In other words, what it IS, and what it IS NOT.

Threat Assessment Management **is:**

A fact–based, investigative approach to determining how likely a person is to carry out a threat of violence (Safe School Initiative Study, 2002.)

A means to identify, assess, and manage individuals who are at risk for violence against themselves or others.

A way to identify someone who has the potential for violence in many forms – self–harm, assault, risk–taking behaviors, suicide, substance abuse, and other aggressive or dangerous behaviors.

Threat Assessment Management **is not:**

A simple checklist of warning signs or red flags used to remove a student from school.

A means to label a student as a troublemaker and enact consequences.

A means to find "the next school shooter."

Threat assessment management is a fact–based, investigative approach to evaluate threats and determine how likely a person is to carry out a threat of violence. By investigating, gathering facts, and assessing threats, the threat assessment team can do three important tasks:

1. **Identify individuals at risk for violence against themselves or others. Who should we be concerned about? Keep in mind that these individuals may be any type of school stakeholder, a student, staff member, parent, or community member.**

2. **Assess the level of concern. How concerned should we be about this individual? Where are they on the path to violence? Ideation? Engaging in specific planning or preparation activities? Ready for implementation or attack?**

3. **Manage the individual. What are we going to do about it? How will the school and other agencies provide appropriate provisions and interventions to prevent the individual from engaging in violence and to get them the support they need?**

Threat assessment is not a simple checklist of warning signs or red flags that an administrator or guidance counselor completes based on a single threat or incident. Threat assessment examines the whole picture, not just an isolated event. The use of threat assessment management principles is not a means to "kick kids out of school" or label them as troublemakers, but instead to craft a plan for effectively intervening, managing, and supporting the individual.

It is important to emphasize that threat assessment is objective and fact–based. Bias, stereotypes, past family history, and societal prejudices have no place (and no value) in accurately identifying individuals of concern.

Central questions in threat assessment

Two central questions must be answered by the threat assessment team when faced with an individual who has the potential for violence:

How do we balance an individual's right to an appropriate education with the right of the rest of the individuals within the school to be safe?

A student has the right to an appropriate education.

Individuals in the school have the right to be safe.

Has the individual in question simply "made" a threat, or does this individual "pose a threat"? In other words, has the individual engaged in behaviors that pose a threat for violence, or has he solely expressed a threat without those concerning behaviors?

Has the individual MADE a threat?

Does the individual POSE a threat?

For an overview of model policies, procedures, and guidelines, consult Virginia's Department of Criminal Justice Services publication Threat Assessment in Virginia Public Schools: Model Policies, Procedures, and Guidelines.

Once you have a better idea of the threat assessment process and how it can assist in preventing violence and mitigating threats in your school, the next steps are to commit to the process, form your team, and secure the necessary training.

Regardless of what other safety initiatives your school does, implementing an effective, functioning threat assessment team is a critical component of keeping your school safe and preventing violence. Keeping our schools safe involves not only responding to violent events but also working to prevent them. Threat assessment management is a means to do just that.

Legal Perspectives

How Safe are Our Schools? A Potentially Uncomfortable Self–Assessment

It has been more than 20 years since the massacre at Columbine High School. Since that time, tragedies we know as Sandy Hook, Virginia Tech, and Parkland have repeatedly raised the question of "how safe are our schools?" One would assume that the years that followed each of these events have afforded us the opportunity to solve the school safety crises facing our most precious and vulnerable citizens. The disappointing truth is that most American schools have not made substantive changes toward a comprehensive, all–hazards approach to school safety based on evidence, best practices, and a commitment to make our schools safe and supportive for all learners.

Such an expansive notion of school safety is a big "ask" of board members, administrators, and educators. They are inundated with significant concerns about improving student performance, upgrading curriculum, evaluating teacher effectiveness, operating with minimal financial support. Add to that the enormous burdens of responding and recovering from a global pandemic. The failure point for school safety is not always a lack of time, priority, money, or commitment (although that is true in many situations). The main reason our schools generally have not made safety progress since Sandy Hook is that the leadership in schools is undertaking school safety in a way that is reactionary.

A lack of planning: Proactiveness is reactiveness in disguise

School leaders pride themselves on being "proactive" when it comes to academic, financial, or public health concerns. Yet when it comes to life and death issues of school safety, some leaders find themselves immersed in what organizational leadership expert Peter Senge calls "the illusion of taking charge" (Senge, 1994, p. 20). The emphasis on preparing a response to a violent event while ignoring a variety of highly effective prevention and intervention strategies, such as threat assessment management, truly embodies what Senge defines as proactiveness being reactiveness in disguise.

While preparing for what should be done after the destruction starts and ignoring what could be done to prevent or minimize the impact in the first place, we continue to react but not act. Senge maintains that "true proactiveness comes from seeing how we contribute to our own problems..." (1994, p. 21) – in this case, looking critically at a school's daily practices, procedures, and training rather than buying things like surveillance cameras or door barricades that we hope will help once the violence occurs.

This reactiveness disguised as proactiveness presents another flaw: Schools spend their time and resources preparing for an event that is extremely unlikely (statistically speaking), such as an active shooter, while less "dangerous" but much more likely events like severe weather, bomb threats, or assaults are ignored.

The legal requirements for crisis planning vary from state to state. What is required of public schools is sometimes different from what is required of independent or private schools. Broadly speaking, however, courts require that the conduct and policies of the school must be "reasonable" under the circumstances. It is unreasonable that a school or school district neglected to plan for the crisis events that historically and statistically we know will occur.

Well–reasoned policies that make a good faith attempt to keep students safe at school will not only have a positive impact on school safety but also will diminish a school's legal liability. Therefore, improvement in emergency operations planning serves these twin aims. Neglecting or delaying addressing these obligations can leave a school open to legal liability. It is important that the perfect not become the enemy of the good –– a crisis plan can be incrementally improved and updated. It need not be perfect to protect life and diminish liability.

Hey big spender

While most schools have some security measures such as door locking mechanisms, buzzer systems, or surveillance cameras, the million–dollar question is whether money has been spent on training school stakeholders on how to effectively use the new hardware. Could at least some of the money spent on "stuff" be spent training staff and students? Wouldn't this serve as a preventive measure for upcoming threats and a fruitful investment to save their lives in the event of a potential crisis?

The biggest bang for the safety buck

Ensuring the safety of students is the primary mission of all educators. Yet sadly, this is also an area where educators feel largely unprepared or have received little training. Past violent events indicate that teachers and students will be the ones who will need to know how to respond to crisis incidents.

Research shows that "civilians often [had] to make life and death decisions…" (Blair, 2014, p.8). This report by the Federal Bureau of Investigation then went on to recommend that school stakeholders "should be engaged in training and discussions on decisions they may face" (Blair, 2014, p.8). To what extent is this occurring appropriately in schools? While having law enforcement or security in schools or adding enhancements to the facility itself are great supplementary measures, adequate resources of time and money should be allocated first for the training and empowerment of school stakeholders. For just a fraction of the cost of any of these reactive measures, every staff member, student, and parent in a school or district could be trained and empowered in proactive prevention and response measures.

Not all trainings are created equal

The type and quality of the training are also crucial. School safety training should empower, not intimidate. It should come from an educational perspective rather than law enforcement. If we are asking staff and students to make life or death decisions, it is critical that the training understands and acknowledges the unique characteristics, constraints, and developmental needs in an educational setting. A "one size fits all" training, focusing only on an active shooter or violent intruder response, from a law enforcement perspective, does not meet these needs.

Students, staff, and parents will have greater peace of mind if they have been appropriately empowered, trained, and practiced in evacuation, barricade, and other responses, rather than relying on a piece of hardware or a security officer. Let's spend money on training people and equipping them with skills and competencies.

What should we be doing?

Becoming proactive rather than reactive requires that schools engage in an uncomfortable self–assessment of several problematic areas. The first area focuses on schools that are still using a traditional lockdown procedure for active shooter response (lock the door, hide out, wait for law enforcement). In June 2013, the U.S. Department of Education and FEMA released updated guidelines for best practices in schools that incorporate rapid evacuation and barricading as response capabilities. In many schools, a lack of awareness and training has resulted in staff and students who do not know how to use these options, incurring additional liability for the district. http://eschoolsafety.org/resource–let/

Another problem area is the lack of threat assessment procedures in many schools. According to the U.S. Department of Education, one of the most useful tools a school can develop is a multidisciplinary threat assessment team. Threat assessment is a means by which educators can identify students who are at risk for violence against themselves or others, assess the level of risk, and develop appropriate supports and interventions. Most importantly, threat assessment is an effective violence prevention measure that examines threats of all kinds, not just an active shooter situation. http://eschoolsafety.org/tam/

Many school districts traditionally do not have an accurate picture of the current level of safety and security within each building. This becomes even more concerning when paired with the impacts of the pandemic. Many staff members have had less connection to their students, and those students have been exposed to new and increasing traumas through the events of the past year.
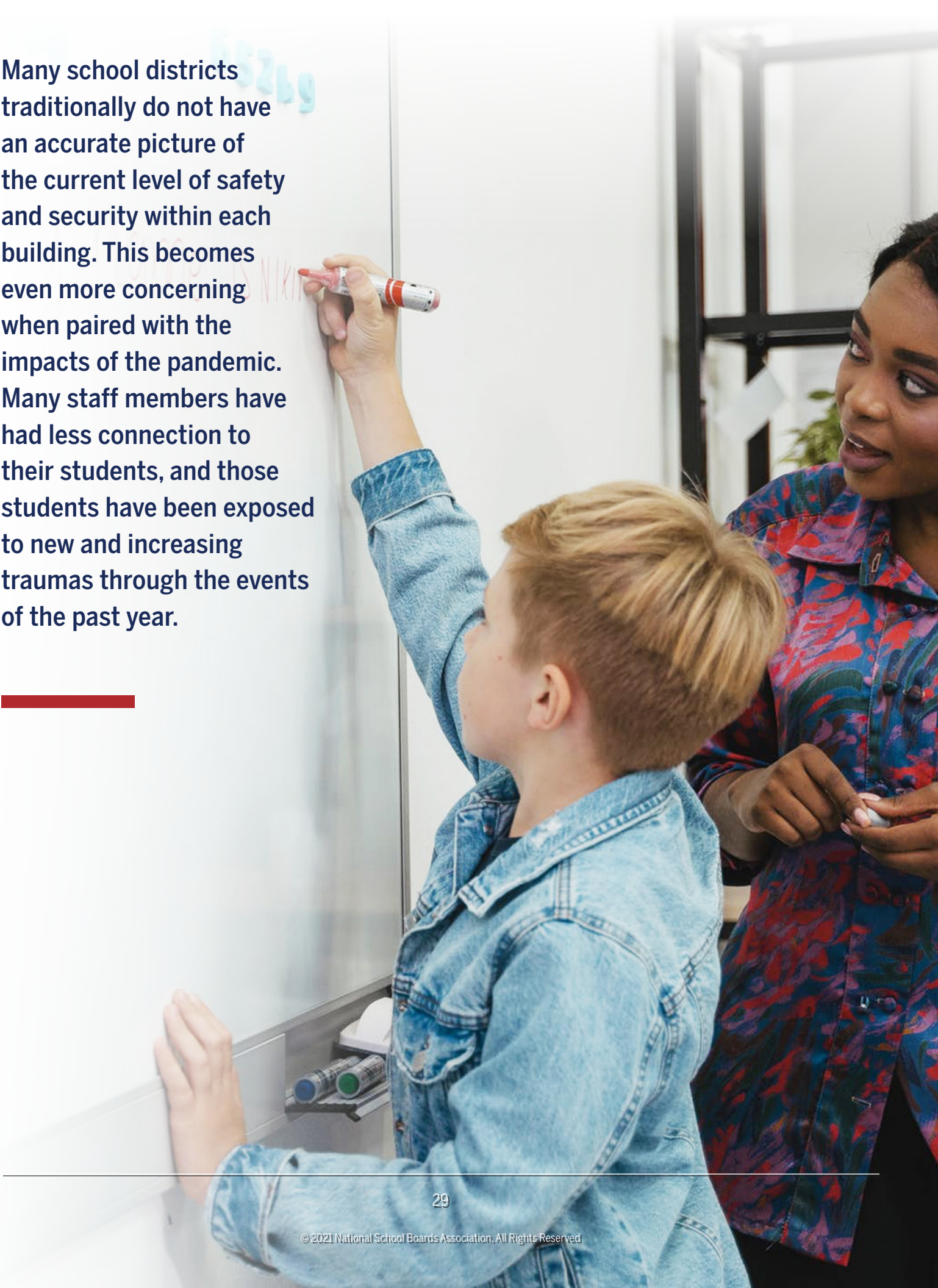
A vulnerability assessment identifies potential deficiencies and generates recommendations for improvement. An effective vulnerability assessment comes from multiple perspectives – educational, legal, emergency response – not just a security point of view. It should include an intruder assessment, a policy review, a mitigation plan, and a leadership team debriefing. http://eschoolsafety.org/consulting/

Finally, an often–forgotten element of school safety is a formalized, updated plan for parent reunification. In the aftermath of a crisis, the primary responsibility of the school is to ensure the safe and timely return of students to their parents. A plan for parent reunification cannot be developed "on the fly" in the emotional crisis chaos. http://eschoolsafety.org/reunification/

Proactive best practices serve important functions in addition to the preservation of life and property. School decision–makers have a legal obligation to ensure adequate disaster safety planning and precautions. Neglecting this obligation leaves school leaders open to personal and systemic liability for damages, injuries, and deaths that occur at the school. Engaging in proactive crisis planning and training increases legal protections from liability and can defend the district if litigation follows a crisis event. Perhaps most importantly, the school has a moral and legal responsibility to care for students in a crisis event when parents cannot.

Senge, P. M. (1994). The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook: Strategies and Tools for Building a Learning Organization. New York: Currency, Doubleday.

About The Educator's School Safety Network

The Educator's School Safety Network (ESSN) is an education–focused nonprofit organization that provides training, resources, and consulting services related to school safety, including crisis planning and response and violence prevention. ESSN is uniquely qualified to assist schools and law enforcement organizations in that it approaches the work of school safety from both an emergency response and educational perspective.

ESSN's training and consultation with educators and emergency responders are based on low–cost, research–based best practices in crisis response and violence prevention measures that are proven to be effective, such as threat assessment management, strategic supervision, and visitor engagement. As a nonprofit, their training and consultation services are research–based and affordable.

ESSN's founder, directors, and trainers come from an educational, not law–enforcement, perspective. Founder Amy Klinger is a career educator with 30 years of experience as an administrator and teacher who understands the critical need to empower, not intimidate, educators to prevent violence and appropriately respond to crisis events.

ESSN does not provide a "stock" program or menu of services but instead develops personalized training and consultation for staff, administrators, teachers, students, and parents. Training areas include lockdown enhancements, emerging issues in school safety, threat assessment management, parent reunification, technology and social media issues, and violence prevention. ESSN consultants conduct vulnerability assessments that include site surveys, intruder assessments, and policy reviews.

http://eschoolsafety.org/

Free School Safety Training Modules

The Educator's School Safety Network is providing support to restart the school safety conversation by providing a free, online on–demand course for educators, parents, and first responders.

School Safety 101 advocates an all–hazards, education–focused approach to violence prevention and crisis response. The course provides resources and guidance to schools struggling with a return to in–person schooling in the wake of the COVID–19 pandemic. To refocus the efforts of violence prevention and school safety, educators, parents, and emergency responders can participate in School Safety 101 at no cost, thanks in part to grant funding from the Motorola Solutions Foundation. The course can be taken by individuals or used for staff professional development. School Safety 101 can be accessed at www.eSchoolSafety.org/101main.

The National School Boards Association (NSBA) is a federation of state associations and the U.S. territory of the Virgin Islands that represent locally elected school board officials serving approximately 51 million public school students regardless of their disability, ethnicity, socio-economic status or citizenship. Working with and through our state association members, NSBA advocates for equity and excellence in public education through school board leadership. We believe that public education is a civil right necessary to the dignity and freedom of the American people and that each child deserves equitable access to an education that maximizes their individual potential. For more information, visit nsba.org.

Additional Resources

All–hazards approach to safety planning

"Looking Forward and Back: A Review of the 2018–2019 Year in School Safety" The Educator's School Safety Network, webinar.

"Looking Forward and Back Part 2: A Review of the Fall of 2019 in School Safety." The Educator's School Safety Network webinar.

Violent Threats and Incidents in Schools: An Analysis of the 2018–2019 School Year. The Educator's School Safety Network.

"Safe at What Cost? The Unintended Consequences of School Safety". EdWeb national webinar

"School Safety: It's Not Just About Active Shooters." EdWeb national webinar

Empowered or Intimidated? Self–assessment Inventory, The Educator's School Safety Network.

"Students or Inmates?" School Safety Free Period podcast. The Educator's School Safety Network.

Threat assessment management

Click here for a comprehensive list of resources to assist in the design, training, and implementation of a threat assessment program.

Planning, Creating, Training, and Implementing a Threat Assessment Team. The Educator's School Safety Network.

"Tip Sheet for Threat Assessment Interventions and Supports" worksheet. The Educator's School Safety Network

Enhancing School Safety Using a Threat Assessment Model: An Operational Guide for Preventing Targeted School Violence. U.S. Secret Service.

"Threat Assessment and Management for Schools: What Is It and How to Get Started." The Educator's School Safety Network, webinar.

Threat Assessment Toolkit. The Texas School Safety Center.

Threat Assessment: An Approach to Prevent Targeted Violence. The National Institute of Justice's Research in Action.

Student Threat Assessment as a Standard School Safety Practice: Results From a Statewide Implementation Study. The University of Virginia.

Additional Resources

Legal perspectives

What Makes a Good Vulnerability Assessment? checklist. The Educator's School Safety Network.

A Potentially Uncomfortable Self–Assessment. The Educator's School Safety Network webinar.

A Potentially Uncomfortable Self–Assessment worksheet to accompany the webinar. The Educator's School Safety Network.

School culture and climate

School Climate and Culture Professional Learning Community facilitator and participant guides from The Educator's School Safety Network.

10 Tips for Improving School Culture worksheet. The Educator's School Safety Network.

"School Culture, School Climate: They are Not the Same Thing" by Steve Gruenert, Principal Magazine.

"The Softer Side of School Safety" webinar. The Educator's School Safety Network.