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2025

Enhancing School Safety And Emergency Response

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Ensuring the safety and well-being of students and staff is paramount. This Spotlight explores approaches to enhancing school safety and emergency response, emphasizing both proactive prevention and effective crisis management. From state-level initiatives focused on violence prevention and the implementation of surprise safety inspections, these articles offer valuable perspectives. Discover resources and best practices for strengthening overall school safety and security, and more.

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Charlie Neibergall/AP

Local residents pray during a candlelight vigil following a shooting at Perry High School, on Jan. 4, 2024, in Perry, Iowa. The deaths in school shootings last year have led to new legislation in a half-dozen states.

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States Emphasize School Violence Prevention, Not Just Security

By Evie Blad

Lawmakers whose communities have been rocked by school shootings hope to avert future tragedies through policies that emphasize prevention.

Bills in at least six states aim to address weak points in school safety practices that were evident in recent attacks. They include requirements to create school-based teams to respond to threats and information-sharing systems for schools and law enforcement.

"We want to be proactive and not reactive," Georgia House Speaker Jon Burns, a Republican, said during a Feb. 3 news conference where he announced a sweeping school safety bill.

The new legislative action suggests lawmakers are heeding the advice of school safety experts to give equal or greater attention to "human factors"—like training, prevention, and encouraging students to report concerns about potential violence—as they do to security measures.

And while many state lawmakers have filed broad school safety bills that include money for security measures, many of those proposals include such prevention efforts.

"We need to get much better in this country about breaking down the bystander effect," said Jaclyn Schildkraut, the executive director of the Regional Gun Violence Research Consortium at the Rockefeller Institute of Government. "We have to make it so that, when people suspect something, they say something. We don't do always do that with mass shootings."

State lawmakers focus on school violence prevention

Prevention became a legislative priority for Georgia lawmakers after a shooter, who police identified as a 14-year-old student, shot 11 people at Apalachee High School in Winder, Ga., killing two teachers and two students.

After that Sept. 4, 2024 attack, officials discovered missed opportunities to intervene. Threats the suspect had posted online had been investigated and dismissed as jokes, educators struggled to respond to a last-minute warning call from the alleged shooter's mother, and because the student had recently transfer between districts, there were gaps about what his school knew about his behavioral and disciplinary history.

To address those gaps, Burns' bill would require the Georgia Emergency Management and Homeland Security Agency to maintain a "school and student safety database" that would collect information about students' threats, concerning behaviors, disciplinary history, and interactions with police and make that information accessible to schools, law enforcement, and mental health professionals who need it to address concerns students may harm themselves or others.

Florida lawmakers mandated a similar, more expansive database following a 2018 shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland that would also incorporate data from social media monitoring sites. Civil rights groups raised alarms, suggested the data collection presented a privacy risk and may lead to unfair profiling.

In Georgia, Burns' bill would also mandate school-based "threat management teams" of administrators, mental health professionals, and law enforcement to investigate reported threats; require schools to use an anonymous reporting app to collect tips about concerning behavior; provide $50 million for one-time school safety grants; and require schools to immediately suspend students who make threats until police and administrators determine it's safe for them to return.

The Apalachee shooting was the deadliest school shooting in 2024, according to a tracker maintained by Education Week. That tracker counted 39 shootings in 2024 that resulted in injuries or deaths and occurred on school grounds during the school day or during a related activity.

The second deadliest incidents occurred at both Abundant Life Christian School in Madison, Wis., where a 15-year-old student killed two people on Dec. 16; and at Perry High School in Perry, Iowa, where a 17-year-old student killed two people on Jan. 4. Police said both of those suspects had a known interest in previous school shootings, such as the 1999 attack at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colo., and both posted concerning messages online.

Iowa lawmakers have responded by introducing a bill that would allow public schools and accredited private schools to create threat-assessment teams and allow schools to more easily share information with social workers, law enforcement, and mental health professionals.

In January, Wisconsin Gov. Tony Evers, a Democrat, created an office of violence

prevention through an executive order. He also called on lawmakers to pass a "red flag law" that would allow courts to restrict an individual's access to guns if they are deemed a threat to themselves or others.

"A lot of our work is not just to prevent people from hurting others, but to make sure people are safe from hurting themselves," he said.

In other states, lawmakers from both major parties have proposed safety bills that emphasize prevention. In Michigan, a new law signed by Democratic Gov. Gretchen Whitmer in January requires schools to create threat-assessment teams. A New York bill would also require threat-assessment teams.

In Minnesota, a bill would require schools to report all threats to a state "fusion center" that allows law enforcement agencies to share information. A Virginia bill would require schools to provide materials to parents about how to respond to concerning behavior if their child is flagged by a threat-assessment team.

School shooters show warning signs

School violence prevention efforts, like anonymous tip reporting systems, are grounded in research that shows most school shooters—and mass shooters in general— tend to signal their intentions to friends and family beforehand, a pattern known as "leakage." Schools have encouraged students to adopt a "see something, say something" approach, telling trusted adults if their peers show signs they may harm themselves or others.

To help respond to those warning signs, school-based threat-assessment teams, often made up of administrators, counselors, and school security staff, review reports and immediately refer imminent threats to police. In other cases, they make a plan to support the student through measures like counseling or frequent check-ins with adults until the risk is resolved.

About 71 percent of U.S. schools had a threat assessment team during the 2023-24 school year, according to the most recent national data, and 10 states require schools to have them. But researchers say there is wide variability between states and districts in how those teams function. Among the differences: whether police serve on the team, what supports students receive after they are reported, and whether schools follow research about effective threat-assessment processes.

A review of more than 23,000 student threat assessments educators conducted in Florida schools conducted during the 2021-22 academic year found evidence the process had averted potential acts of violence. But some schools hadn't fully trained staff in the state's required model by the time researchers from the University of Virginia collected their data. Schools also varied in the information they kept about if, and how, students were disciplined after a threat assessment was completed.

Teams must respect students' rights, advocates say

Civil rights groups have also warned that threat-assessment teams must be monitored carefully to ensure students in certain demographic groups, like Black students and students with disabilities, aren't consistently deemed more threatening than others or disciplined without due process.

In Iowa, civil rights advocates said the proposed bill offers broad and vague criteria for opening a threat investigation in the case of an "emotional disturbance," a vague term that could be unfairly and subjectively applied, the Cedar Rapids Gazette reported.

"The breadth of these terms that they're using, where the student is experiencing or at risk of emotional disturbance or mental illness, lots of things can be a mental illness that a student can be suffering from and it doesn't necessarily mean they're a threat," said Lisa Davis-Cook, the director of government affairs for the Iowa Association for Justice, told the Gazette.

Privacy advocates also caution that any information sharing must comply with federal privacy laws.

When handled carefully, information sharing could provide a clearer picture for schools about to support students in crisis, Schildkraut said.

"If you don't have all of the pieces of a puzzle, it's very difficult to put them all together," she said.

But researchers have also found variation in what educators and administrators deem a credible threat.

That's why Schildkraut's research team is combing through more than 108,000 pages of official records from 173 mass shootings that occurred from 1999-2024 to identify trends in shooters' communications and behaviors before they attacked. They hope to identify patterns that can help threat-assessment teams know what to look for.

"We want to say: Here's what this looks like, here's how threats are communicated, and here are the other things behaviorally at the same time," she said. ■

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These Surprise Inspections Test Schools' Safety Practices

By Evie Blad

The vast majority of school safety plans require administrators to lock exterior doors and limit building access, through protocols like ID checks for visitors.

In Texas, teams of inspectors visit every campus to make sure schools actually practice what they preach.

In unannounced visits, unarmed state employees conduct intruder audits to see if they can get into school buildings and, if they can, how long it takes to do so.

In sometimes divisive debates over school safety, limiting building access is one of the most commonly agreed upon strategies. But all it takes is a few bad habits—propping open a door during recess or waving a visitor past an ID check—for the most well-intentioned plans to fail, said Amy Klinger, co-founder of the Educator's School Safety Network, an organization that consults with schools on safety plans.

"There is great value in having a fresh set of eyes look at your school," said Klinger, who contracts with districts in other parts of the country to conduct vulnerability audits that included unannounced intruder tests. "We have to be careful that it doesn't devolve into a 'gotcha,' but instead it's being used as a mechanism for improvement."

At least 16 states and the District of Columbia require safety audits of school facilities, according to the Education Commission of the States, a policy clearinghouse. But many of those inspections are self-administered, conducted using a simple checklist, and not completed on an annual basis.

Texas' annual intruder drills, on the other hand, test how schools' security protocols work in practice.

And last year, schools in the Lone Star State largely passed the test.

Audits check whether schools lock doors and limit access

Inspectors visited 8,400 school buildings in the 2023-24 school year, finding no issues at 9 out of 10 campuses, according to results released Aug. 8 by the Texas Education Agency. Teams contacted district superintendents a week before reviewing one of their campuses, but they did not announce their presence on the day of their visits. What they found:

- In phase 1, teams tried to enter three exterior doors and, if they were unlocked, they walked to the main office to document if anyone stopped them along the way. Ninety-seven percent of campuses had no findings in this phase. In those where teams could gain entry, a majority went through secondary entrances.
- When teams could enter buildings, it took an average of four minutes to get in, and no one approached them in 63 percent of cases.
- In phase 2, inspectors check in at the main office, get a campus escort, and check to make sure every exterior door is closed, latched, and locked. Ten percent of schools had a phase 2 finding, including unlocked or broken doors or door props nearby.
- In phase 3, inspectors checked if random interior doors were closed and locked in districts with local policies requiring such procedures, about half of school sites. Of those sites, 97 percent passed the test.
- Inspectors also checked local logs to ensure on-site staff had conducted regular door sweeps—regular walkthroughs to check if doors are locked—as required by law. Ninety-seven percent of schools were in compliance.

Schools with findings were required to take corrective action within 60 days by discussing the issue with the district's school board, conducting a live training session with staff, and developing a plan to address any issues with procedures or facilities.

After a 2018 shooting in which eight students and two teachers were killed at Santa Fe High School in Santa Fe, Texas, lawmakers passed legislation that required the state to review schools' comprehensive safety plans.

Survivors of that shooting complained that the state hadn't done enough to address student safety after the 2022 shooting at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas occurred. Nineteen students and two teachers were killed in Uvalde. Texas lawmakers responded with a bill that required armed adults on every campus and annual intruder detection audits conducted by the state's regional service centers.

Human factors are key to school safety

While lawmakers often call for "school hardening" measures like metal detectors and on-site police following school shootings, safety experts say human factors should be a greater priority. Districts should ensure that staff are trained to respond in a crisis and that

they consistently follow safety procedures, like keeping exterior doors locked.

A sophisticated security camera is worthless if no one monitors the footage, and a costly metal detector does little when staff regularly allow students to walk around it. Similarly, experts say that the best safety plans on paper may not be effective if the people who implement them cut corners.

Tests of these procedures are best when they include a range of factors, like whether staff greets students, how quickly they request identification from visitors, and whether entrances are secured, Klinger said.

It's also important for school leaders to learn to monitor their own compliance and to urge their staff to be consistent, she said.

"People have to be accountable, but it is equally critical that it becomes part of your operations internally so schools are checking themselves instead of just hoping that they don't get caught," Klinger said. "It's sort of like giving people a fish and teaching them to fish at the same time." ■

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How Columbine Shaped 25 Years of School Safety

By Evie Blad

School shootings had happened before the fateful 1999 massacre at Columbine High School. But it quickly became clear that the tragic event, in which 12 students and one teacher died, thrust the country into a new era, forever changing millions of American students' sense of safety.

Twenty-five years later, experts say many of the fundamentals of school safety date back to that transformative moment in Littleton, Colo., even as they've proven difficult for schools to embody: Recognizing threats, intervening when students are at risk of violence, preparing students for emergencies, and relying on a speedy police response.

Today, Columbine tops the list of K-12 school shootings that have become high-profile touchpoints in school violence debates, even as the scale of shooting has been eclipsed by attacks with more fatalities in Newtown, Conn., Parkland, Fla., and Uvalde, Texas.

Countless mass shooters have modeled their attacks on Columbine shootings, including some who weren't even born when they took place. Lockdown drills, a rare practice before 1999, are now a routine part of school for American students.

Schools have invested billions of dollars in technology like metal detectors and surveillance cameras—even as school safety experts say policymakers often bypass the core lesson that emerged in the earliest investigations following Columbine, which focused on human behavior, not merely "hardening schools."

Grieving families and survivors of more recent shootings live with the surreal feeling of seeing their schools' names on a list alongside Columbine.

"It was such a unique tragedy, so unexpected and just completely unimaginable that something like that could happen," said Nicole Hockley, who helped found the Sandy Hook Promise violence prevention organization after her son Dylan died in the 2012 school shooting in Newtown, Conn.

"No one ever thought anything like that would happen again," Hockley said. "But now, school shootings have become more frequent, and they are more woven into our everyday tapestry."

Michael S. Green/AP

Candles burn at a makeshift memorial near Columbine High School on April 27, 1999, for each of the of the 13 people killed during a shooting spree at the Littleton, Colo., school.

There is no predictive profile of a school shooter

Incidents like the 1997 shooting at Heath High School in West Paducah, Ky., and the 1998 shooting at Westside Middle School outside of Jonesboro, Ark., had already fueled Americans' fear for student safety, but coverage of the Columbine tragedy crystalized it.

On April 20, 1999, two seniors acting on a carefully constructed plan fatally shot 12 students and a teacher before killing themselves. The attack fell far short of the gunmen's vision when homemade bombs they brought to the Littleton campus failed to explode. But to a terrified public, it was akin to an act of terrorism.

"People remember where they were when it happened, like 9/11," said Jillian Peterson, an associate professor of criminology and criminal justice at Hamline University who studies the warning signs of violence. "It put school shootings into our public consciousness."

With that attention came a proliferation of myths, said Dave Cullen, a journalist and author of the 2009 book *Columbine*, including that the killers were bullied teens, part of the goth subculture, and members of an outcast group called "the Trench Coat Mafia."

In reality, that moniker belonged to an innocent group of teens that the gunmen were not part of, investigations found. The attackers were socially accepted, and their journals did not mention bullying.

The myths had legs: Policymakers seeking solutions after Columbine sought to identify a profile of would-be violent perpetrators, homing in on factors like their taste in music and video games or their mental health histories.

But in a seminal report, a 2001 U.S. Secret Service analysis of targeted school attacks found no predictive profile of offenders. The analysis, echoed in successive research, found that school attackers are frequently males with a sense of personal grievance or a perception of bullying and suicidal ideation. But none of those traits are rare enough to form a predictive checklist, the report concluded. Many students who struggle with bullying, social isolation, and depression will never have a violent instinct, but they still need support, it said.

"I think [Columbine] created this kind of mythology of these school shooting monsters we can lock out," Peterson said. "The reality is, these are students that we see every day."

Federal investigators did identify commonalities among attackers that remain core to school violence prevention. Contrary to popular misconceptions, perpetrators of mass

violence don't "just snap" or act impulsively, they found.

"Instead," said an FBI report published in 2000, "the path toward violence is an evolutionary one, with signposts along the way."

Learning to recognize those warning signs or "leaks" in which students communicate violent intentions beforehand, and intervening early, would make schools and communities safer, they concluded.

The Columbine shooters' exhibited many of those signs through online posts detailing violent intentions, journals, an English essay about a shooting, and queries about weapons to peers. But there was no system for piecing all of the warning signs together.

A growing focus on violence prevention

Such systems have now been built—at least in theory.

The earliest state and federal reviews of the shooting recommended schools create threat assessment teams to review reports of concern that a student might harm themselves or others, report imminent threats to law enforcement, and offer interventions like counseling for others. By the 2021-22 school year, 65 percent of public schools said they had such a team in place, though experts say those teams vary widely in training and procedures.

In 2004, Colorado created Safe2Tell, the first statewide school violence tipline in the country, which allowed students to report concerns about violence or suicide. By 2020, 66 percent of public schools reported the use of a structured, anonymous reporting system, federal data show.

"We learned so much from Columbine, about warning signs and about ways to intervene and take action to prevent these tragedies from happening," Hockley said.

In 2018, Sandy Hook Promise launched the Say Something anonymous reporting system, a national tipline that allows students to submit reports about troubling behavior through a website, telephone hotline, or mobile app. Operators have since fielded nearly 250,000 anonymous reports, the organization said, categorizing tips and sharing them with school administrators and law enforcement if they deemed an imminent response was necessary.

As just a small slice of what pours into the tipline, researchers who analyzed four years of Say Something tips from North Carolina students found that nearly 10 percent of reports related to firearms. Of those, 38 percent were plans for possible school attacks, they wrote in a January study.

Threat assessment has become an established part of school safety policy, but schools still struggle to get it right. Civil rights advocates have raised concerns that the strategy has led to profiling of students, including students with disabilities and overly punitive digital surveillance that leads students to be disciplined for innocuous behaviors like posting song lyrics on social media. School leaders say they lack the resources to effectively support students who are identified through the threat assessment process.

And even trained experts can differ on what they view as a credible threat.

Peterson and her fellow researchers at The Violence Project, a nonpartisan research center, found such variations via survey research. In one case, more than 6 in 10 law enforcement officials deemed a teacher finding a stick figure drawing of a shooting in the trash as a low threat; a little over 10 percent gave it a score suggesting a major threat.

Students may also be less likely to report concerns if they believe their classmate will be disciplined rather than helped, or if they don't believe adults will handle their concerns properly, Peterson said.

"Kids need to know that they can trust the adults [they report to] and that it'll be responded to effectively," she said.

And when adults aren't aligned, the consequences can be fatal. In November 2021, a 15-year-old student shot and killed four peers at an Oxford, Mich., high school after educators flagged repeated warning signs. On the morning of the attack, they called his parents to school for an emergency meeting after he drew a gun and a bullet on a math worksheet and wrote, "The thoughts won't stop. Help me. Blood everywhere. My life is useless."

His parents, who refused to take their son home that day, were later convicted of involuntary manslaughter for their indifference and for failing to secure a firearm used in the attack.

Columbine shootings led to the expansion of lockdown drills

One of the biggest and most debated shifts in school safety policy since 1999 was foreshadowed in an inauspicious place: A footnote in a 2001 report by a Colorado governor's commission.

Teacher Dave Sanders, who was later killed by the gunmen, and two custodians had rushed through the building to alert students to what was taking place and urge them to take cover. Their actions "no doubt saved many lives, because the two killers never entered any locked room," the report said.

Drills to ensure staff and students are prepared to take cover flowed from that panel's recommendations, and by the 2003-04 school year, when the federal government began collecting data on the subject, 47 percent of schools said they drilled students in a written school safety plan. Nearly all schools reported conducting lockdown drills by 2021-22, according to the most recent federal data.

As in Columbine, a locked classroom door remains one of the strongest safety measures in the event of a shooting, said Jaclyn Schildkraut, the executive director of the Regional Gun Violence Research Consortium at the Rockefeller Institute of Government.

But the expansion of drills has birthed unproven and sometimes harmful practices, like lifelike simulations meant to scare students into taking the exercises more seriously, or "run, hide, fight" exercises that teach students to throw objects like staplers at shooters to distract them, she said.

"We have a lot of people doing these things without knowing how they are working and what impact they're having," Schildkraut said. "But all of it has really been lumped under this umbrella of 'active shooter drills.'"

Schildkraut advocates for simple lockdown procedures that teach students to quietly and calmly remain in a locked classroom with the lights turned off.

A focus on human factors of safety

Dramatic and unproven drill procedures are hardly the only unsupported practice that has sprung up. Vendors use fear to market saferooms, gun-scanning technology, and bulletproof backpacks, among other things, to school officials terrified of potential harm to their students—and their own potential liability.

But the investigations of school shootings often point to human factors, like a lack of safety procedures, open doors and gates, and law-enforcement failures.

Tony Montalto, whose daughter Gina died in the 2018 shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla., cites many of those factors when he explains what went wrong that day.

Montalto, the president of Stand With Parkland, an organization led by victims' families to advocate for school safety solutions, has given tours of the building where the

shooting took place to members of Congress, Vice President Kamala Harris, and U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona.

"There's no other way to describe when you're involved in something like this other than shock," Montalto said of the moment he learned of the tragedy. He wasn't a parent when the Columbine shooting happened, and he never expected the same thing to affect his family. "I could barely take a breath."

Schools need layers of prevention measures and safety protocols in addition to physical security features, he said. While the Parkland gunman did not enter classrooms, he was able to shoot through doorway windows. Though schools were supposed to leave open areas in corners for students to get out of view, many of those spaces were blocked with desks and filing cabinets, Montalto said.

The AR-15 rifle the shooter used was so powerful that dust and fragments of ceiling tiles filled the air, setting off smoke detectors and prompting students on the third floor of the building to try to evacuate before they knew what was happening. While school procedures called for a single point of entry that could easily be monitored, the gunman, a former student, was able to enter the campus through the parking lot gates, which had been opened early to prepare for the end of the school day.

Gina had been studying in a hallway when she was shot with two other classmates.

Stand With Parkland has since successfully pushed for changes to state and federal law, including the creation of a "red-flag law" in Florida that allows courts to suspend an individual's access to weapons if they are deemed a threat, and a federal clearinghouse for school safety recommendations and reports.

Fourteen students and three teachers died in Parkland, which eclipsed Columbine as the deadliest high school shooting in the country's history. Less fatal attacks don't receive the same level of media attention. Because of the notoriety of the tragedy, Montalto feels compelled to speak out.

"It gives me a chance to talk about my daughter," he said.

Columbine changed how law enforcement responds to shootings

Parkland shares another commonality with Columbine: questions about the law-enforcement response. In Parkland, a school-based sheriff's deputy faced widespread criticism after security footage showed him waiting outside of the building during the attack, violating protocols that changed after the Columbine attack that called for police to quickly confront active shooters.

In 1999, police in Littleton formed a perimeter around the school, following procedures that called for them to tend to the wounded and gradually evacuate the building rather than quickly locating the gunmen. That gave the attackers 47 minutes to carry out their assault before they killed themselves.

After that, law enforcement agencies around the country trained officers to organize a central command and prioritize finding the shooter to limit fatalities. However, an inadequate law enforcement response has been cited following post-Columbine shootings, despite widespread attention to the new procedures.

In January, a federal review of the May 2022 shooting at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas, cited a "cascade of failures" in the law enforcement response. Among other blunders, officers treated the Uvalde shooting like a barricade situation, giving the gunman 77 minutes to attack before they entered the conjoined classrooms where the shootings took place.

"Every second counts, and the priority of law enforcement must be to immediately enter the room and stop the shooter with whatever tools and weapons they have with them," Attorney General Merrick Garland said as he released the report.

Columbine survivors leave a legacy

Just as Columbine provided insights for preventing shootings, its survivors continue to offer lessons about piecing life together after an unthinkable act of violence.

Principal Frank DeAngelis, who retired in 2014, offers his support to principals around the country after shootings at their schools, providing a listening ear and guidance on recovery. He joined fellow principals who've led schools that experienced shootings to release a recovery guide in 2022.

The shooting affected the daily rhythms of his school, he said. In the years following, the cafeteria couldn't serve Chinese food because the smell reminded students of the meal they ate the day of the attack.

"I made a comment two days after [the Columbine shooting] that I had just joined a club in which no one wants to be a member," DeAngelis said in 2022.

The students themselves have helped walk a new generation of survivors through a lifetime of grief. After the Parkland shooting, Columbine survivors formed an informal penpal network to help Stoneman Douglas students process and anticipate the next steps of their recovery.

A simple "where are you from?" conversation with a stranger can quickly take survivors back to the day of an attack, Jami Amo, who was a freshman at Columbine during the shootings, told Education Week in 2018. Among her most difficult experiences: Volunteering at her son's school on the day of a routine lockdown drill.

"We know that the real challenge is a year from now, five years from now when people aren't talking about it," Amo said. "We want to help them. We will always be 19 years ahead of them."

Former student Heather Martin, who survived the Columbine shooting by hiding in a cramped office with dozens of others, helped found The Rebels Project, an organization that supports survivors of mass shootings.

"We didn't want someone to go through what many of us went through for years after Columbine: Isolation, embarrassment, not being able to talk through it with people who understand," Martin, now a teacher herself, said in 2019.

Survivors of subsequent attacks also hope to turn their grief into action, centering their efforts on safety fundamentals that date back 25 years.

"There's a lot of pressure to 'do something,' rather than finding the best solutions," Hockley said. ■

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5 Key School Safety Conversations for Districts

By Evie Blad

For the general public, conversations about school safety are typically sparked by frightening events, like shootings. But for district administrators, school safety is a year-round conversation that is complex, emotional, and oftentimes logistically complicated.

Districts' approaches to safety span everything from bullying prevention to active shooter drills. They must evolve to face the demands of new research, public opinion, community factors, state mandates, and financial constraints.

Many districts will face a new round of safety decisions in the new year as state lawmakers open legislative sessions to consider new bills, school boards respond to challenging budget projections, and political candidates debate issues like policing and student mental health as part of 2024 campaigns.

Here are five key school safety conversations that emerged in 2023, and will surface again for school districts next year.

T.J. Kirkpatrick for Education Week

Brian Hall, an armed community safety officer in the Prince William County school system, monitors hallways at Ashland Elementary School in Manassas, Va.

1. How to prepare for hoax "swatting" calls

False reports of school shootings, known as "swatting" calls, have emerged as one of the most perplexing issues for law enforcement and educators alike.

In a swatting incident, police respond to a call of a shooting in progress at a school. Callers often claim to be inside the building as the attack is taking place, sometimes citing specific room numbers to add to the credibility of their reports, according to local news reports. Such calls often target several districts in the same region on the same day.

Though the reports are false, the law enforcement response—and the resulting fear—are real. Swatting calls have sparked lockdowns, parental panic, and confusion in hundreds of schools. The Educators School Safety Network, a school safety consulting organization, tracked media coverage of 446 false reports of school violence during the 2022-23 school year. But the actual number of swatting attempts may be higher because the events aren't always covered individually, the organization said.

The FBI is investigating swatting calls, and law enforcement agencies at the state and local levels have identified similarities, including a call with a "foreign accent" and phone numbers that can be traced back to an online calling service based in Canada, the Washington Post reported. There is no federal law against swatting, but many states have laws against false 911 reports, some with heightened penalties if the police response results in injury.

Districts have prepared for swatting calls by warning parents about the trend in advance and setting clear policies about how to communicate in the event of a lockdown, administrators told Education Week. When swatting calls do occur, principals have worked to debrief with students, talk through their experiences, and acknowledge their fears.

"There are some kind of sick people out there," Andrew Lavier, the principal of Alamosa high school in Alamosa, Colo., said after his school was targeted by a swatting call in 2022. "I don't know who would do that to a school."

Key questions for districts: Does your school system have procedures to communicate as clearly as possible during crisis events? Do you have resources to respond to the emotional effects of lockdowns?

2. The role of AI in school safety

A growing number of districts have purchased AI weapons-detections systems to help keep weapons out of buildings. The systems, similar to those that screen fans at large sports venues, use a combination of AI software, cameras, and electromagnetic sensors to detect possible weapons as students enter buildings.

However some administrators who've purchased the technology have backtracked, returning to older techniques like metal detectors and random bag checks to search for weapons.

The Utica City School District in New York made such a switch after its AI system failed to detect knives and a gun, administrators told Education Week in April. The Urbana, Ill., school system, reported consistent false alarms with common items like water bottles, slowing down screenings.

Officials in one district created a video to show students how to hold frequently misidentified objects in their outstretched arms so staff monitoring the scanners can easily

see what triggered the sensor. Reducing the machine's sensitivity to lower the risk of false alarms comes with a trade-off: reduced effectiveness at detecting legitimate weapons, like guns, Utica City administrators told Education Week.

But officials in other districts like Atlanta say that, while the AI screeners may not be 100 percent effective at keeping weapons out, they have served as a deterrent, leading to fewer weapons confiscated after they were installed.

As AI technology evolves, safety decisions are likely to grow in complexity. New York state officials banned the use of facial recognition technology in schools in September, citing concerns from parents and civil rights groups about student privacy, data security, and software limitations that may lead to higher rates of false identification for people in certain racial groups.

Key questions for districts: Are your administrators fully aware of a technology's limitations and capabilities before purchasing it? What is the ongoing cost of maintaining and updating new safety technology? Are your educators properly trained in low-tech procedures like lockdowns and securing classrooms? Do students feel comfortable and safe reporting concerns about weapons and threats to adults?

3. The proper way to conduct safety drills

Most public schools, 97.7 percent, reported conducting a lockdown drill during the 2019-20 school year, according to the most recent federal data.

Student safety drills have grown more common—and often more complex—in response to concerns from parents and the public and mandates by state lawmakers.

But, after years of rapid expansion of their use, more districts and state legislatures are asking questions about how often to conduct safety drills and what those drills should entail.

In Rhode Island, a legislative panel will review how school safety drills affect children emotionally and make recommendations like requiring schools to notify parents in advance and allowing them to opt their students out, the Providence Journal reported.

Washington state and New Jersey also set limits on school safety drills in recent years, prohibiting simulations of actual shootings during drills. Those moves followed complaints from students in other states that officials fired blanks in hallways or even used prop firearms to act out tragic events.

"You can prepare your kids for a house fire by telling them where to meet and how to climb out of their windows," Washington state Rep. Amy Walen, a Democrat, said in a 2022 committee meeting. "But you don't have to burn the house down to show them how to escape a house fire safely."

Safety consultants and researchers have also questioned the effectiveness of "run, hide, fight" drills that teach students to "counter" an attacker as a last resort by throwing items like books at them. Critics of such tactics say they may lead to confusion during an actual crisis and increase the chances a student is harmed—physically or emotionally—during training.

Researchers and school psychologists have stressed the importance of simple lockdown procedures that could be used to respond to a variety of concerns beyond active shootings. Some have also piloted techniques to make trainings less stressful for educators.

Key questions for districts: Are your procedures for safety drills evidence-based and age-appropriate? Do schools across your district perform drills consistently? Are parents aware of drill procedures? Do safety policies account for the needs of students with disabilities?

4. The appropriate role of police in schools

At least 50 districts removed police officers from schools or cut their policing budgets following the 2020 Minneapolis police killing of George Floyd, which set off protests about racism and law enforcement.

Civil rights and student advocacy groups have long questioned the presence of law enforcement in schools, saying it correlates with higher rates of punitive discipline for students of color. A slow, error-filled law enforcement response to the 2022 shooting at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas, raised additional concerns about the effectiveness, training, and coordination of law enforcement.

However some administrators have reconsidered those decisions in the time since, citing concerns about student behavior and violence in surrounding communities.

By June 2022, at least eight districts that had removed police from their schools had brought them back, an Education Week analysis found. Several of those districts cited shootings near their buildings.

Some districts have increased training for officers or set clearer policies to limit their interactions with students and prohibit their involvement in routine school discipline. Others have devolved the decisionmaking down to schools: Chicago allows local committees to determine if their schools will retain police or use those funds for alternative safety and school climate strategies, like hiring additional counselors.

Key questions for districts: Have your administrators sought feedback from students, parents, educators, and community groups about the use of school police? Does district data show any disparities in how school policing affects students of color or students with disabilities? How are your officers trained to work with students? Do district policies and MOUs with law enforcement detail the role of officers? Have school-based officers coordinated with local law enforcement to ensure a speedy response during crises like shootings?

5. How can schools respond to community violence?

Schools' safety concerns expand well beyond their campuses.

Twenty percent of high school students responding to a nationally representative federal survey in 2021 reported that they had witnessed an act of community violence. The experience of witnessing violence correlated with higher risks of suicidality, substance abuse, and carrying a firearm, a 2023 analysis of that data found.

"Schools offer a unique opportunity to help reduce youth violence," that analysis said. "Schools have direct contact with approximately 50 million students for at least 6 hours a day over a 13-year period and have a role in promoting social, physical, and intellectual development."

The 2022 Bipartisan Safer Communities Act included grants for schools to address student mental health and trauma exposure and to participate in community violence prevention programs.

Some districts have also created Safe Routes to School programs to help students safely walk and bike to and from their buildings.

Key questions for districts: Are your safety procedures trauma-informed and sensitive to the experiences of students exposed to community violence? Do your school policies and practices in place to promote a sense of connectedness and safety for students? Do administrators connect with law enforcement and community groups to identify ways to support students and promote safety? ■

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A MULTILAYERED APPROACH TO EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

School safety is not a one-and-done effort. Each day, district leaders and school safety professionals face the critical task of ensuring a secure learning environment while preparing for potential emergencies that can occur without warning. They must adopt innovative approaches that prioritize speed, clarity, and integration to protect students, staff, and visitors.

The reality is stark: emergencies unfold in seconds, and response times can mean the difference between life and loss. Emergency management today demands rapid response capabilities supported by advanced technologies and cohesive protocols. Yet, many districts still rely on fragmented safety measures that operate in silos, leaving critical gaps in communication, alerting, and emergency coordination.

A multilayered approach ensures that no single point of failure leaves schools vulnerable. By integrating multiple safety technologies, districts can build a responsive, coordinated system that prioritizes rapid emergency notification, clear communication, and seamless collaboration between school staff and first responders. These measures help protect lives and provide educators, parents, students, and communities peace of mind.

Technology as a Bridge to Better Response

In a crisis, seconds matter—and the faster an emergency response can be initiated, the better the outcome. A layered approach is best to ensure redundancy and accommodate usability and accessibility needs. When school staff can initiate alerts via Wi-Fi, cellular, and dedicated networks such as Long-Range (LoRa) wireless networks, it helps ensure that critical alerts are disseminated regardless of location or circumstances. Immediate, clear notifications help staff, students, and first responders take appropriate actions, reducing confusion and response delays.

> **"Having a multilayered emergency notification system, everybody is connected, and it's the speed of light."**
>
> —**NICK CAPUTO** | Division Coordinator for School Safety & Security, Lynchburg City Schools (VA)

Districts should look for solutions that allow staff to instantly and discreetly request help from anywhere on campus through multiple methods, including a mobile app and wearable device,

giving them multiple ways to summon help in high-stress and rapidly unfolding situations. Seamless integration with existing safety tools, such as PA systems, digital signage, and access control, also helps ensure a multilayered emergency response across campus. This layered approach not only maximizes existing investments but ensures each element works together to provide cohesive communication and response.

Advanced dynamic mapping shows floor-level and location-specific details when an alert is initiated through the Raptor Badge Alert. Maps shown from Critical Response Group.

Dynamic mapping further enhances this response framework, providing floor-level accuracy to first responders in real-time so they know where an alert is initiated—reducing confusion and accelerating response. By visually displaying the location of the initiator, schools and first responders can gain instantaneous situational awareness. Updates in real-time not only guide emergency personnel but also keep administrators informed, allowing them to adapt their strategies as the situation evolves.

The Right Communication at the Right Time

Effective emergency management hinges on communication. Districts must have systems in place that allow for multi-channel, real-time communication across all stakeholders during a crisis. The ability to send secure, direct messages to staff, provide updates to families, and relay critical information to first responders in real time is essential to maintaining clarity and control in high-stress situations.

Direct communication with emergency services is a vital component. Modern emergency systems can now relay precise details about the nature of an incident, the initiator's identity, and their location directly to 911 dispatch. This eliminates delays caused by miscommunication or incomplete information, enabling first responders to arrive on-site prepared with the tools and understanding needed to act immediately.

> "Total communication and collaboration is what we are really looking for because we have so many moving pieces."
>
> —**CRAIG STRAW** | Director, Safety and Emergency Management, Houston ISD Police Department (TX)

Two-way communication between staff and administrators also plays a pivotal role during emergencies. Secure platforms that allow for continuous updates can instill confidence and reduce panic. Staff are better equipped to follow instructions, share observations, and provide reassurance, helping ensure the safety of everyone in the building.

End-to-end Emergency Management

A robust emergency management system does more than just send alerts—it ensures a coordinated, scalable approach that adapts to different situations. Schools don't face just one type of emergency. A medical incident requires a different response than a weather event or a violent intruder. Without a structured system in place, response efforts can be delayed, chaotic, or inconsistent across a district.

A customizable, end-to-end emergency management platform enables districts to:

- **Get real-time data:** Leverage live dashboards that provide a clear overview of the situation, helping administrators and emergency personnel make informed decisions.
- **Comply with state and district mandates:** Meet or exceed state and district requirements, including Alyssa's Law, which mandates the adoption of silent panic alert technologies.
- **Schedule and execute drills:** Practice drills using the same technology and alert mechanisms as real emergencies, helping staff build familiarity and muscle memory for real-life situations.
- **Ensure real-time student and staff accountability:** Accurate accountability data allows for a more organized and efficient response, helping emergency personnel focus their efforts where they are needed most.
- **Improve the reunification process:** Streamline student-parent reunification by ensuring accurate records of students' locations and statuses.

Raptor Badge Alert, coupled with the Raptor Emergency Management System, offers unmatched emergency management functionality for districts across the country.

- **Grow and adopt:** Built for scalability, a unified system supports district-wide implementation, adapts to evolving safety needs, and integrates new technologies without disruption.

By adopting a unified solution, districts can eliminate inefficiencies, reduce response times, and enhance overall safety, helping ensure staff, students, and first responders work together effectively during any crisis.

A Safer Path to Learning

Safety measures should be seamlessly woven into daily school operations without creating a disruptive environment. Overly intrusive security measures can make schools feel like high-security zones rather than places of learning, impacting student wellbeing and staff morale. A multilayered approach to safety ensures that schools remain welcoming, yet well-prepared.

Raptor builds on more than 20 years of exclusive PK–12 expertise, supporting over 40% of our nation's schools, including 55 of the top 100 largest districts, in fostering a safer path to learning and driving district performance. What we have learned is that the best performing districts are built on a foundation of safety and wellbeing and don't look at safety as just one department or a check-box compliance issue. A safe culture of wellbeing impacts multiple dimensions of the school environment, including academic scores, attendance rates, enrollment rates, graduation rates, teacher satisfaction, compliance integrity, and community engagement. By amplifying the impact of their people, processes and technology, our customers are building a strong foundation of safety and wellbeing, ensuring their districts are a safe haven for student learning and success. Raptor helps schools across the country gain an impact multiplier and strengthen their foundation of safety and wellbeing across our integrated platform.

By embedding safety into the fabric of daily operations, districts provide an environment where staff feel confident, students feel secure, and learning outcomes exceed goals.

To learn more about how your district can implement a proactive safety strategy, scan the QR code or visit raptortech.com.

RAPTOR® TECHNOLOGIES

Published March 18, 2025

Leading a District After a School Shooting Is Hard. These Superintendents Want to Help

By Evie Blad

Mansfield, Texas Superintendent Kimberley Cantu knew about school safety drills and building security, but she didn't understand all of the logistical and interpersonal needs that arise after a school shooting until an unthinkable tragedy happened in her district.

The morning of Oct. 6, 2021, a student opened fire in the hallway at Mansfield's Timberview High School, wounding two teachers and a student. For Cantu, the unexpected decisions started right away.

"You have that initial, probably 15 to 30 minutes as a team going, 'OK, wait, we have protocol,'" she said. "You're in shock when you hear [news of a school shooting]. It's sort of like the clouds clear and you just go to work asking, 'What's our very best next step?'"

The district's plan called for relocating students to a nearby performing arts center. What it didn't account for: The teachers who'd just survived a traumatic event weren't prepared to supervise a roomful of anxious students. Within hours, hundreds of volunteers showed up at the family reunification site, and administrators quickly appointed an ad hoc organizer to determine if and how they could help.

As more unknowns emerged, Cantu knew she needed to talk to someone who could relate. She texted David Schuler, the executive director of AASA, the School Superintendents Association, who quickly connected her with Janet Robinson, who led the Newtown, Conn., district during the 2012 shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School. The insights she shared over the phone became a lifeline for Cantu in the days, months, and years of recovery that followed.

"If I didn't have Dave's number, I don't know what I would have done," Cantu said. "There are people who have gone through this that didn't have that support."

Three and a half years later, Cantu is part of a new effort to offer that same support to other superintendents facing the same challenges.

Supporting superintendents during school crises

The Superintendent Response and Recovery Network, newly organized by AASA, offers district leaders a number they can call as they respond to unthinkable crises, quickly connecting them with Robinson and Cheri Lovre, a school crisis expert who worked with schools following the 1999 Columbine High School shooting and the 2001 terrorist attacks in New York City.

F. Sheehan for Education Week / Getty

> **"To superintendents navigating a school crisis: You now belong to a club that none of us ever wanted to join."**
>
> **RANDY RUSSELL**
> Superintendent,
> Freeman, WA

Freeman, Wash., Superintendent Randy Russell will co-lead the network with Cantu, drawing upon his experiences following a 2017 school shooting, when a 15-year-old student shot and killed a peer in a school hallway.

"To superintendents navigating a school crisis: You now belong to a club that none of us ever wanted to join," Russell said in a statement on the network's website after it was announced. "How you lead through the next 10 days will determine the next 10 years for your district."

The effort complements the Principal Recovery Network, a separate group of school leaders organized by the National Association of Secondary School Principals in 2019.

"What we discovered in talking to people who have been through this is that it takes years [to recover]," Schuler said. "Anytime something happens [in another school], there is a trigger in that entire community. We needed to put a network and system together to help support our amazing colleagues and their communities."

The group's website hosts resources from AASA and other organizations, like the U.S. Secret Service, on threat assessment, forming district crisis-response teams, and other ways to prepare for and respond to campus emergencies. Network leaders hope to develop additional resources of their own, Cantu said.

In the early days following the Timberview High School shooting, Cantu decided to document every step of the district's response. She hopes to share those hard-learned lessons with others.

Among them: Educators must prepare for all of the everyday reminders that can stoke anxiety and grief in students and teachers. Students who were freshmen during the shooting are now seniors, Cantu said, and they often experience unexpected emotions when photos of their school are used in news updates about school safety.

School staff also had to shepherd students through a complex surge of emotions in January when the student who survived the Timberview incident died in an unrelated act of community violence.

"That stirred up a lot," Cantu said.

Though her district brought in grief counselors for students and staff after the 2021 crisis, it wasn't until six weeks later that Cantu realized she hadn't debriefed with her senior leadership staff.

"I called them all in a room and said, 'how are you doing?' How are you feeling?,'" she said, adding that she'd encourage other district leaders to tend to their own emotional needs much earlier than she did.

"We want to offer superintendents someone who will stay on the phone during these moments," Cantu said. "Even just to listen." ■

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OPINION

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'Homemade' Solutions to School Safety Can Be Fire Hazards. Here's What to Know

Security professionals know that life-safety codes exist for a reason

By Lauris Freidenfelds

iStock

Tragically, the threat of violence in our schools has become all too real. With the alarming frequency of school shootings, it's natural to prioritize the safety of students and staff. However, the urgency to take action can sometimes lead to equally unsafe measures.

Security and safety experts are increasingly encountering "homemade solutions" to keep doors shut from dangerous intruders. Unfortunately, these also block emergency-exit paths violating life-safety codes. These can include code-violating barricades and locking configurations.

I have witnessed instances where people, in their attempt to secure a door, have inadvertently created a blocked exit path. When I was a security director, my staff confiscated and reported homemade wedges, padlocks on exit push bars, and belts tying the door shut during their rounds. I would then have to discuss the code-compliance concerns with the employees and staff.

There are even manufacturers of devices that create a barrier to entry and exit. Regrettably, these are often not compliant with local life-safety codes (also called National Fire Protection Association, or NFPA, fire codes), posing a significant risk in emergency situations. In fact, in 2018, Campus Safety magazine stopped allowing these manufacturers to advertise in their publication, a decision applauded by both ASIS International, the largest organization for security professionals in the world, and the National Fire Protection Association. This action was a result of readers identifying that the use of the devices represented a life-safety-code violation.

There may be a misconception by facility managers in schools and some facility designers that one must choose between security or fire safety. A skilled security designer, however, can develop systems to protect against unauthorized access while maintaining emergency egress according to code.

It's important to recognize that these life-safety codes exist for a reason. They are the result of extensive research by life-safety experts and are often informed by past tragedies, where people were unable to escape from a fire or other hazards. The NFPA, a leading worldwide authority in safety guidelines and codes, underscores the importance of adhering to these standards, further emphasizing the need for professional assistance in security planning.

Security designers have long acknowledged that these safety codes can challenge security measures. However, effective security designers have been able to work with door-hardware manufacturers to address security measures for schools that are still code compliant. We—experienced security designers—believe the best current solution is a fail-secure electronic door hardware for security, coupled with a mechanical means of free egress.

Electronic door hardware is becoming more typical in classrooms and is increasingly included in school facility designs. In the past, many designers felt that electronic door hardware had to be fail-safe, meaning that in the event of a power loss, the door would become unsecured. (Fail-secure locks, on the other hand, remain locked when power is lost.)

Security professionals did not favor this approach. Experienced security designers have worked with numerous fire marshals and door-hardware manufacturers to design and install life-safety code-compliant and security-effective doors at the perimeter of the building and in classrooms. The value of electronic door hardware in classrooms is the control the school can have, especially in a lockdown scenario.

For example, teachers can control who can access a classroom before and during class sessions. Perhaps before a class session, door entry may be free access, but when class starts, the door may shift to give the teacher control over who is allowed access. This can help prevent intruders from entering the classroom after class has started. If the design concept is to allow free access into a classroom at any time, the electronic door hardware should be designed with a local button that will affect a

single classroom lockdown before the school-wide lockdown.

In a full school lockdown situation, each electronically controlled door is locked to prevent access from the hallway without any action needed from anyone inside the classroom. This hardware can be either a wireless lock or a typical hardwired card reader and lock configuration. The card reader on the hallway side of the door will work only for emergency responders or pre-authorized staff.

In the event of an emergency, teachers and students should follow their emergency procedures, hide from the intruder, and follow instructions from emergency-response officials on how and when to evacuate. There should not be barricades on the doors, which would impede evacuation.

Similarly, but perhaps a bit less effective, is mechanical key hardware. In an emergency lockdown scenario, the teacher needs to take action to lock the door to prevent access from the hallway side, but the door hardware should allow exit as needed.

Subject-matter-expert resources are available to help develop appropriate plans for a safe environment. Please consult with a trusted adviser on how to create a safe environment for the building's occupants in all hazards.

It's also essential not to fall for sales pitches that may seem to solve one condition but could possibly create another risk. Allow subject-matter experts to assist you in avoiding costly and potentially dangerous mistakes, as some vendors and manufacturers do not emphasize a holistic approach to safety. School administrators are then held accountable for code violations caused by these devices—and they could put the school community at risk.

Technology is becoming more sophisticated, and the proper designs are created by the experts in the field of security. Good security design consultants understand technology, operations, and door hardware. ■

Lauris Freidenfelds is a vice president of Telgian Engineering & Consulting, which provides security, safety, and fire-protection services. He has more than 40 years of experience in the field and has served as a security director for university campuses and as a consultant for numerous K-12 school districts.

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OPINION

Published January 22, 2024

How to Strengthen the Safety And Security of Your School

By Lindsay Burton & Michelle Kefford

The school shooting in Perry, Iowa, this month and the mass shooting in Lewiston, Maine, in October that left 18 dead drives home the grim reality that gun violence can infiltrate any corner of our society. For those of us entrusted with the safety of our students, these tragedies underscore the urgent need to reinforce and rethink our schools' protective measures. To assist students and educators confronting this reality, we want to offer resources to ensure that students nationwide can pursue their studies and school activities in safe, welcoming, and supportive environments.

According to a survey by the National Association of Secondary School Principals, only 53 percent of students in grades 8-12 say their school is "extremely" or "very" safe, with both school leaders and students citing ongoing concerns around such potential threats as online and in-person bullying, drug use, gun violence, and more.

As leaders who engage with and serve as a resource for school administrators and personnel on important school safety matters and their impact on school environments, we recognize and understand this concern firsthand. To help connect our nation's dedicated school leaders with helpful resources, guidance, and evidence-based best practices that can meaningfully strengthen the safety and security of their school this year and beyond, we offer the following guidance:

1. Plan for emergencies early and often and listen to all voices in your school community.

Although incidents like school shootings are rare, it is important to plan and prepare for a crisis. School leaders, including principals and assistant principals, play a critical role in emergency planning. In addition to managing school operations, school leaders provide essential services and supports, which can improve overall preparedness, while also serving as trusted sources for members of the school community to speak with and confidentially report potential concerns.

During the development and subsequent updates of safety processes, it is important for school leaders to create intentional spaces for both students and staff to have their voices heard. One initiative developed at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School to foster opportunities for student engagement is "Kefford's Kitchen" (as in co-author and Principal Michelle Kefford), where students can join her for lunch. During this conversation, students can make suggestions and ask questions (even anonymously at another time) across a range of topics that are top of mind for them. Similarly, "Mid-Week Muffins with Michelle" is open to staff so they can offer their opinions and feedback to school administrators to help refine safety planning.

Throughout the year, school leaders can take a proactive approach to emergency planning and help ensure the entire school community is as prepared as possible for potential incidents. Consider carving out time to review your emergency-operations plans (EOP) and practicing key elements. Practice may include holding tabletop exercises to test specific procedures or conducting developmentally appropriate drills so all members of the school community can run through the actions they would take before, during, and after an emergency. It is critical that schools collaborate with their community partners—local emergency-management staff, law enforcement and other first responders, and public and mental health officials—during the school safety planning process and throughout the year. These partners can provide school leaders with essential expertise and guidance to ensure that the school EOP is integrated with community efforts.

An equally important but sometimes overlooked element of emergency planning is to map out how your school will recover if an incident does occur, along with the actions the school will take to support the academic, physical, fiscal, and emotional recovery of the education community. Created by current and former school leaders who have experienced gun-violence tragedies at their schools, the Guide to Recovery from the NASSP Principal Recovery Network identifies some of the issues schools commonly face when recuperating from a traumatic event. These include identifying financial resources available to assist with recovery, connecting the community with mental health personnel, responding to offers of assistance from the community, supporting the reopening of a school, and attending to the ongoing needs of students and staff.

2. Keep track of relevant school safety resources and evidence-based best practices.

Although there are extensive resources available that address school safety, it can

sometimes be overwhelming to find and easily leverage this information in a well-organized and meaningful way. Schools have individual needs and unique characteristics that require thoughtful consideration and reflection. To help provide schools with direct access to relevant, timely, and useful school safety information that can help before, during, and after a potential emergency, the federal government created SchoolSafety.gov. Through this site, school leaders can utilize tools to prioritize school safety actions, find applicable resources on a range of important school safety topics, find expertise and connect with school safety officials specific to their state, and develop school safety plans that meet unique school needs. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security created the Prevention Resource Finder to help the full range of education stakeholders identify resources, training, research, grant funding, and other opportunities.

3. Provide leaders with access to grants and funding opportunities to financially support school safety efforts.

Because schools and districts often require additional funding to support and implement various school safety measures and initiatives, it's important to remember that the process to locate and secure necessary funding oftentimes requires year-round attention and effort. To help schools more easily identify, plan for, and apply for applicable funding opportunities that can help keep their school community safe, SchoolSafety.gov provides a comprehensive Grants Finder Tool featuring federally available school safety grants. While it can't solve the entire grants-management process, the tool can help school leaders navigate at least part of the financial pathway.

If a tragedy occurs at a school, no matter where it is located, we all feel the impact and want to do everything we can to prevent it from happening again. Creating a safe and supportive school environment is a common goal shared by everyone in the community—our children, educators, and dedicated school staff deserve it. In preparation for the worst-case scenario, take some time to think through your school's current approach to school safety. By sharing these resources and recommended practices, we hope to help school leaders feel ready and empowered to address school safety throughout the year.

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