**School Safety**

**Research and Recommended Interventions**

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**School Safety[[1]](#footnote-1)**

School safety refers to the actual safety of students, teachers, and others in school, but also to their *perceptions* of safety. Both are important. In safe schools, students and others experience few, if any, acts of violence and other actions, criminal or noncriminal, that are harmful to their physical or emotional well-being. Such emotional harm includes unusually high levels of fear, anxiety, sadness, anger, and avoidance of school. Those affects can be lasting. In unsafe schools, harm is experienced not only by those who are victims or who fear violence and other acts that threaten safety, but also by witnesses of violent and traumatic events.1

When students and staff are not safe, outcomes can be more serious and tragic, including death, as seen in school shootings. In safe schools, students and other members of the school community are safe but also *feel* safe. They do not worry about acts of violence and other harmful actions, regardless of their actual occurrence. Those actions include bullying. Although being safe, or unsafe, in school includes bullying (physical, verbal, and social relational), the topic of bullying is covered in another module in this issue, and thus is not covered as thoroughly here as in that module (see the “Bullying Victimization: Research and Recommended Interventions” module for more information). See the Delaware PBS Project website (http://wh1.oet.udel.edu/pbs/school-climate-modules/) for access to the Bullying Victimization module and other modules mentioned throughout this module.

As one of multiple subscales on the *Delaware School Climate Scale* of the *Delaware School Surveys* (DSS), the School Safety subscale appears on all three versions of the scale (student, teacher/staff, and home). The subscale consist of only three items: “Students are safe in the hallways,” “Students feel safe,” and “Students know they are safe in this school.”

**Estimates and Indicators of School Safety**

Estimates of safety in school depend greatly on how one defines being safe, and what one considers students and staff to be safe from. Presented below is information about several indicators of school safety reported in the recent 2018 national report, “Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2017,” published by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), U.S. Department of Education, and Bureau of Justice Statistics.2

* During the 2014-15 school year, 20 students, ages 5-18, were victims of homicides and 9 of suicides. (Although not in the NCES report, during the 2017-18 school year 29 students died from 17 school shootings in K-12 settings).33
* About 15 percent of public schools report one or more “serious violent crimes,” which include rape or attempted rape, sexual assault, robbery (with or without a weapon), physical attack or fight with a weapon, and threat of a physical attack with a weapon.
* When fights or physical attacks (without a weapon) and threats of physical attacks with or without a weapon are added to the above list of crimes as “violent incidents,” the percentage of schools reporting one or more of these incidents increases substantially (69% of public schools, and about 18 crimes per 1,000 students in the 2015-2016 school year).
* Fighting and physical attacks without a weapon tend to be the most commonly reported incidents (64.9% of public schools).

Despite the above statistics, schools are among the safest places for children and adolescents (and adults), especially when compared to other places and causes of injury and death.3-4 For example, the rate for each of the above serious violent incidents is less than 1 crime per 1,000 students. Moreover, approximately 97% of student homicides occur *outside* of school, with approximately one student homicide or suicide at school for every 1.9 million students. Children and adolescents are much more likely to be killed or seriously injured in their homes or community, riding a bicycle, swimming, and especially riding in vehicles.5

Thus, one may well argue that, overall, schools are quite safe, at least from events that involve death, serious physical harm, and serious violence. However, if all types of crimes (violent and non-violent) are viewed as indicators of school safety, as viewed in the NCES report, it is clear that schools vary greatly with respect to safety. These crimes include: theft, vandalism; distribution, possession, or use of illegal drugs; possession or use of alcohol; possession of a firearm or explosive device (ranging from a fire cracker to a bomb); possession of a knife or sharp object; and inappropriate distribution, possession, or use of prescription drugs. Approximately 79% of public schools reported such crimes in 2015-16.

The NCES report includes a variety of additional indicators of safety, based on student and school behaviors, that that tell us about additional safety problems in schools. These indicators include the percentage of students reporting gangs at school and reporting being the target of hate language or seeing hate-related graffiti at school; teachers reporting being threatened with injury and reporting that student tardiness and class cutting interfered with their teaching; and schools reporting “disciplinary problems” and “serious disciplinary actions” (e.g., expelling a student).

**How about in Delaware?**

Data on school safety, as reported by the Delaware Department of Education, indicate that schools in Delaware are safe. For example, in the 2016-17 school year, 806 school crimes (which include felonies, misdemeanors, or violations defined in the Delaware Code) were reported in public schools.6 With over 137,217 public school students enrolled in the state, this equates to approximately 6 school crimes per 1,000 students. Furthermore, about half of school crimes (378) were committed in the four school districts located in/around the city of Wilmington.

Most students, teachers, and parents throughout Delaware agree that its schools are safe. For example, on the Delaware School Climate Surveys in 2018, 84%, 93%, and 95%, respectively, of students, teachers/staff, and parents agreed with the statement “Students know they are safe in this school.” Clearly, it is important to recognize the small percentage of students who do feel unsafe, but these data provide support for the claim that a large majority of students, teachers, and staff **are** safe in Delaware schools.

**Primary Factors Contributing to School Safety**

In this section, major classroom and school-based factors related to school safety are listed, particularly the presence or absence of violent behavior, weapons, and drugs. Listed are those factors that are malleable—ones that can be targeted, although not always easily, to improve school safety. Factors that are much less malleable, and thus not listed, are school size, location, and grade levels. Schools tend to be safer if the enrollments are smaller, they serve and are located in communities with low rates of poverty and crime, and they are elementary schools rather than middle or high schools.2

Students and teachers/staff tend to feel safer in schools in which the following are present:

* Clear and fair rules and expectations for behavior.7-9,34 This includes clear and fair policies for addressing school violence that are consistently enforced.10,34
* Physical safety features, especially security cameras, secure entrances, and locked doors.8,11 However, research is not always consistent with respect to these features increasing perceptions of safety, with some studies showing the opposite effects.35,36 There also is little evidence that the presence of school resource officers (SROs) and police increases safety, including student perceptions of safety.4 However, as with relationships with other staff/teachers in school, interactions with SROs that are characterized by respect, fairness, and genuineness are more likely to be viewed as positive experiences by students.12-14
* Cleanly and well-maintained school facilities, displayed student work, and bulletin boards containing relevant information11,15
* Teachers and school staff who are highly visible, especially in areas where violence and other crimes are most likely to occur, such in hallways and stairwells8
* Positive teacher-student, student-student, home-school, and staff relationships (see modules on “Teacher-Student Relationships” and “Student-Student Relationships”).
* Students are cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally engaged in school (see module on “Improving Student Engagement” for more information).
* Efforts are made to develop students’ social and emotional competencies, both school-wide and in individual classrooms (see module on “Integrating Schoolwide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports [SWPBIS] and Social-Emotional Learning [SEL]” on the Delaware PBS website [http://wh1.oet.udel.edu/pbs/scss-modules/sel-swpbis-integration/] for more information).
* An overall positive school climate, such as seen in favorable teacher-student relationships, student-student relationships, and student engagement.8,16

**Recommended Strategies and Interventions for Improving School Safety**

Of all topics in this module series, school safety is perhaps the most controversial and complex, including for recommended strategies and interventions. For example, whereas many citizens and legislators see increased police presence in schools and other security measures as the leading solution, others see banning of guns as the solution. Neither of these two simple solutions (to a complex problem) are supported by research. Also problematic is that most schools are already quite safe, as seen in statistics reported previously. Thus, it is highly questionable if increased security measures in those schools, especially measures that characterize prisons (i.e., constant surveillance and police presence, harsh consequences for misbehavior) are necessary. Furthermore, one must question if increased security measures do more harm than good with respect to school climate and students’ learning and social and emotional development.

Finally, it should be emphasized that many of the strategies and interventions for improving school safety are not unique to school safety—they are the same ones found in other DE-PBS Project: School Climate and Student Success Grant training modules, especially those for improving teacher-student relationships, student-student relationships, and student engagement, and for preventing and responding to bullying. Therefore, in order to create a safe *and* caring environment conducive to student learning and social and emotional development, the following strategies and interventions should always be combined with the ones presented in the other modules of this series.

**Strategies and Interventions**

1. **Analyze data, especially school climate data, related to school safety**.

I.1 It is strongly recommended that changes in current policies and practices pertaining to school safety be guided by a needs assessment that includes data from multiple sources, especially a comprehensive school climate survey, such as the *Delaware School Climate Scale* of the DSS. The survey should be completed by students, teachers/staff, and parents, while recognizing that perceptions may differ among groups.

Results of the surveys would help answer the critical question:

*Is my school perceived as being safe across students, teachers/staff, and parents, and across subgroups within those respondents, including grades (e.g., 9th versus 12th grade), racial/ethnic groups, and gender?*

* Finding positive perceptions of school safety across all subgroups would indicate little or no need for the interventions that follow or for related staff development. This is especially true if the findings are supported by other data supporting the validity of those perceptions (see I.3 for other sources of school safety data).
* Finding negative perceptions of school safety across multiple subgroups would indicate the need for comprehensive and sustained efforts to improve school safety, including related district, administrator, and staff development.
* Finding negative perceptions for specific subgroups would indicate the need for more targeted efforts and deeper information gathering from those subgroups (e.g., African American students in the school, male students in 5th grade).
* The Delaware School Climate Survey Interpretation Worksheets are designed to help schools determine the above. See the Delaware PBS website: http://wh1.oet.udel.edu/pbs/school-climate/use-of-school-climate-data/

I.2. Be sure to examine not only subscale scores, but also responses to specific survey items, especially student responses to items on the School Safety subscale on the School Climate Scale. Although this subscale consists of only three items, comparing responses to individual items can help determine if students feel safe in certain areas of their school (i.e., hallways) as well as in school in general. This information should help determine which interventions and efforts might be most appropriate.

I.3. In addition to school climate data, and especially if data indicate that school safety is an area of concern, other scores on the surveys and additional data related to safety should be examined, such as office disciplinary referrals, suspensions and expulsions, absences, and police reports and arrests. Generally, data should be disaggregated by behavior of concern (e.g., drugs, fighting, noncompliance), location (e.g., hallway, cafeteria, bus), person making the referral, and student demographics (e.g., race/ethnicity, grade, gender).[[2]](#footnote-2) Such disaggregated data can reveal specific school needs and areas for intervention. For example, if data indicate that students are bringing drugs or weapons to school, then increased security measures (e.g., greater surveillance, locker searches) should be considered. If more minor problems are revealed, it is likely that there is little need to implement measures beyond those already being implemented, and especially those security measures described above.

I.4. Share results of the survey(s) and other data with focus groups comprised of representatives of subgroups that responded unfavorably to the items. For example, if 8th grade teachers or Hispanic/Latino students responded particularly negatively, consider meeting with those groups to gain insight into their perceptions of school safety, as well as which of the interventions, strategies, and efforts recommended below are likely to be effective.

1. **Avoid simple and quick fixes.**

Nearly all quick and simple solutions to complex problems are ineffective, and many do more harm than good—not improving safety, and harming school climate. Some common quick fixes that are typically ineffective follow.

* + *Student profiling.* Creating a list of characteristics of students who are most likely to engage in a given act, such as a school shooting, became popular shortly after the Columbine shootings. Such profiling has been shown to be unreliable, falsely identifying many students as being threats to safety.17-18 Studies show that school shooters do not fit any one profile. For example, whereas many victims of bullying seek revenge, including many shooters, there are many other victims of bullying who do not seek revenge and the vast majority never consider shooting the bully.
  + *School uniforms, strict dress codes, and ID badges.* One might argue that these practices are worthwhile regardless of their impact on school safety. However, research is lacking showing that what students wear has an appreciable effect on school safety. Often, imposing strict dress codes (including for uniforms) and requiring students to wear ID badges increase suspension rates and makes schools less pleasant places. That is, students are constantly monitored, and often suspended, for violations. Schools should be aware that some studies indicate that African-American students are more likely than Caucasian students to be suspended for dress code and more subjectively-defined violations (e.g., defiance, disrespect, disruption), and thus should be cognizant of possible implicit biases in responding to such violations.37
  + *Pervasive zero tolerance approach.* Reasonable schoolpolicies, including harsh ones, such as suspension or expulsion for possessing weapons and drugs, make schools safer. However, a pervasive zero tolerance approach, characterized by out-of-school suspension without consideration of circumstances and often for relatively minor misbehavior (e.g., noncompliance, defiance, non-serious threats) seldom improves safety and risks making schools less safe by creating a poor school climate. This also holds true for observable security measures that are implemented to help enforce zero tolerance policies, such as school resource officers and metal detectors.19 Currently, it is unknown if such measures increase or decrease school safety.20-21 Use of resource officers tends to result in increases in crimes reported, including for serious violent crimes and weapons and drugs, but also for many less serious crimes unrelated to school violence, such as theft and vandalism20—this might not be what many schools and parents desire.

1. **Assure that the school’s approach to school discipline is comprehensive.**

This follows from the above recommendation: quick fixes don’t work. However, a comprehensive approach, based on a needs assessment, does. A comprehensive approach to school discipline includes four components (a) strategies for developing social and emotional competencies, especially those related to self-discipline, (b) strategies for preventing behavior problems, (c) strategies for correcting common behavior problems, and (d) programs and strategies for responding to serious and chronic behavior problems.22-23 Although the components are interrelated, each one also should be viewed as distinct. A common mistake in many schools is assuming that strategies for preventing and correcting behavior problems are sufficient for developing self-discipline and maintaining a positive and safe school climate.

1. **Assure that the school’s overall approach to school discipline is authoritative—one that balances structure with social support.**

This also follows from recommendation II: A zero tolerance, or authoritarian, approach to school discipline is not the best approach for school safety, unless one desires a prison-like environment and is not concerned about developing students’ social and emotional competencies and addressing their mental health needs. Ample research on classroom management and school discipline shows that the best approach to preventing behavior problems is the authoritative approach.24 This approach also is found to characterize safe schools, as well as schools with fewer suspensions and smaller racial disproportionality in suspensions.25

The authoritative approach consists of a balance of structure and social support, with both seen as equally important. Structure refers to having high behavioral and academic expectations for all students, clear and fair rules and consequences, and close monitoring and supervision of students. It also includes strict punitive policies (e.g., suspension or expulsion for weapons, illegal drugs, violent assault) and reasonable safety measures (e.g., locked doors, SROs, and cameras in schools where serious offenses or crimes have occurred). Social support refers to building and maintaining positive teacher-student and student-student relationships—relationships that make all students feel accepted, respected, and a sense of belonging and support from others. Strategies for promoting social support, and structure, are emphasized in the training modules on Teacher-Student Relationships, Student-Student Relationships, and Student Engagement.

1. **Teach social and emotional competencies that develop self-discipline and foster prosocial behavior and a positive school climate.**

The teaching of social and emotional skills should be integrated throughout the curriculum and included in classroom management practices (see training module, “Integrating the SWPBIS and SEL Approaches”). For example, lessons on empathy, responsible decision making, and peer pressure should be covered in literacy courses, social studies, and elsewhere.

Likewise, these skills should be taught and reinforced in the context of classroom management practices for both preventing and correcting misbehavior. Such lessons might be supplemented with lessons from an evidenced-based program for social and emotional learning, such as Second Step (see CASEL.org for a review of programs).

1. **Increase students’ awareness of threats to safety, understanding of their moral responsibility to report it, and knowledge of how to report it.**

Many school shootings havebeen averted by students informing school authorities of the potential act of violence.27 Unfortunately, in the majority of student school shootings that have occurred, at least one classmate knew about the act of violence ahead of time but failed to prevent it or inform an adult about it.18 Among common reasons why bystanders fail to intervene and report potential acts of violence are they do not believe the perpetrator is serious, do not foresee the seriousness of the threat, do not accept responsibility for intervening, fear retaliation if they report it, believe that no one will do anything about it, and do not know how to report it.19

As done in programs that have decreased bullying,28 schools can help prevent the most serious acts of violence by increasing students’ awareness of threats to safety, helping them understand and recognize their moral responsibility to report it, and know exactly how best to report it. Perhaps more so than with bullying, however, it is important to communicate these messages while not inducing unnecessary fear, such as using scare tactics. Information and discussion about preventing serious acts of violence might be presented in context of the social and emotional learning curriculum or other classroom lessons and discussions. It might also be taught and reinforced via:

* school assemblies
* special projects (e.g., students developing and helping implement a plan of action)
* posters
* school announcements
* pledges taken by students
* school media

1. **Review procedures, policies, resources, and supports for helping students*.***

This pertains particularly for students commonly referred to as being at Tiers 2 and 3 with respect to academic and mental health needs. However, it also includes all students, regardless of tier and previous history, who engage in acts that make schools unsafe, such as students who possess or use drugs, who physically harm others, who engage in bullying, who are depressed or suicidal, and so forth. It also would include the victims of acts of aggression or bullying, who need services. Among questions that should be addressed are:

* Who in the school provides mental health, including threat assessment, interventions, and crisis responses services? Do they have sufficient time to provide needed services?
* To what extent does close coordination and collaboration of services exist between the school and various outside agencies, including social services, child protective services, mental health agencies, and law enforcement?
* When, and how, are outside resources obtained?
* What services exist within the school (e.g., mental health interventions), and which ones are lacking, based on student needs?
* Do teachers/staff have the knowledge, skills, and awareness to recognize students who need services?
* Do teachers/staff have adequate time to address students’ needs, and administrative support in doing so?
* What are the procedures for students to receive needed services? Are services available, such academic and mental health services for students with behavior problems? Are students, parents, teachers, and other staff aware of the procedures? Are services easily requested and delivered in a reasonable period of time?

1. **When students are referred for misbehavior, develop a plan with the student to help prevent the misbehavior from reoccurring.**

This does not apply to minor misbehavior that should be handled only by the classroom teacher (and perhaps the student’s parents), or to criminal behavior that is handled by a school resource officer. Instead, it applies to more serious acts that typically justify a referral to the office, but especially those resulting in suspension (in school or out of school). The plan, either formal or informal, should consist of two parts:23

1. The first part should focus on teacher-centered classroom management strategies, but also include needed supports and resources outside of the classroom that might be provided in or outside of the school, with a focus on both structure and support (see modules on Student Engagement and Teacher-Student Relationships). The key guiding question should be “What can the teacher(s), the school, and the home do differently that would help prevent the behavior from reoccurring?”
2. The second part, which should be interrelated to the first part, focuses more on what the student needs to do differently—what skills need to be developed and exhibited? This might require student-centered interventions such as social skills training, anger management/emotion regulation training, and counseling.
3. **Have professionally trained individuals available and procedures in place for assessing the seriousness of threats of violence**.

More than one trained individual available at all times is highly recommended. Typically, these individuals are school mental health professionals (e.g., school psychologists), school administrators, and law enforcement or school resource officers. The primary goal of a threat assessment interview is to determine the seriousness of the threat and the need for follow-up actions (e.g., contact parents and law enforcement, warn potential victims, discipline the student) and services for the student. When conducted successfully, threat assessments avoid schools over-reacting to many threats that are not serious or pose an actual threat and avoid under-reacting to serious threats and students in need of mental health services.19  Threat assessment interviews also are often effective in deterring others from acts of violence by making them aware that their threats are noticed and taken seriously.29

For guidelines and resources on conducting threat assessments, see Reeves and Brock (2019).31

1. **Review school crisis prevention and response procedures.**

Each school should have a school crisis team and crisis plan in place that addresses crisis prevention, preparedness, emergency response, and recovery capacities. This team should meet and review the plan on a regular basis. The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) has developed the PREPaRE crisis curriculum to assist schools and school-based mental health professionals (i.e., school psychologists, counselors) in strengthening their school crisis plans.26 The model incorporates foundational security and safety information from the U.S. Department of Education and Homeland Security. See the NASP website (<http://www.nasponline.org/professional-development/prepare-training-curriculum>) for information about training opportunities. Presented below are some key considerations for a school crisis team and plan.

* *Crisis team.* The team should be multidisciplinary and consist of a wide range of school personnel, such as administrators, teachers, school psychologists, counselors, nurses, school resource officers, transportation managers, and family service representatives. In addition to school representation, the team should also have community representation from parents, law enforcement officers, emergency medical service (EMS) personnel, fire officials, and mental health practitioners. The roles and expertise of these individuals will inform the development, implementation, and refinement of the school crisis plan.
* *Crisis plan.* Although teams may use other programs or curricula instead of the PREPaRE model, it is important that some common elements and activities are included in the school’s crisis plan. Based on their area of expertise, team members can be assigned roles and responsibilities as they relate to the four stages of crisis management: (1) preparedness, (2) prevention, (3) response, and (4) recovery. The PREPaRE model emphasizes the following activities in alignment with the four stages:
  + **Prevent** and prepare for psychological trauma. Prevention includes ensuring physical and psychological safety (e.g., through the environment and school-wide behavior supports) and preventing traumatization (e.g., by fostering resilience, removing students from unsafe situations and crisis scenes). Preparing for psychological trauma and crisis intervention includes developing immediate crisis intervention resources and identifying longer-term mental health resources.
  + **Reaffirm** physical health and perceptions of security and safety. This includes responding to student physical needs as well as psychological needs (e.g., providing facts and adaptive interpretations, returning students to a safe school environment).
  + **Evaluate** psychological trauma risk. Factors to examine include: physical and emotional proximity to the crisis event, internal risk factors (e.g., poor emotion regulation), external risk factors (e.g., lack of social support), and signs of trauma.
  + **Provide** interventions **and Respond** to psychological needs. This should include re-establishing social support systems, psychoeducation, and psychological interventions based on student needs (e.g., classroom-based and individual crisis intervention, psychotherapy).
  + **Examine** the effectiveness of crisis prevention and intervention. This can be done through needs assessment, analysis of the crisis process (i.e., what worked, what could have gone better), and evaluating the outcome of the plan.

1. **Provide professional development training to all teachers and staff on school safety.**

Training for all teachers and staff should include each of the topics in the recommendations above, especially preventing school violence with an authoritative approach to discipline, crisis response strategies, and awareness of threats of violence. Training also should include:

* Suicide prevention and intervention
* Bullying prevention and intervention (including cyberbullying)
* Conflict resolution techniques
* Restorative practices that focus on empathy, social perspective taking, and restoring or developing positive relationships
* Trauma informed practices
* Home-school collaboration and communication
* How to respond to threats of violence, including: procedures for de-escalation techniques for anger and aggression; use of physical restraint, such as for student fights; and procedures for reporting and receiving help and support
* Resources and supports for students, teachers/staff, and parents, especially availability of mental health services for students who threaten or act violently and for victims of violence
* School climate and school violence (e.g., relations of teacher-student relationships and other aspects of school climate to school violence)
* School policies and procedures related to school safety, including legal responsibilities
* Role of law enforcement, and working collaboratively with school resource officers and other law enforcement personnel
* Security measures in the building
* Where appropriate (e.g., urban high schools), the role of gang affiliation in matters of school safety, especially for preventing weapon use. Training should include helping students resist peer pressure to join a gang and how to get out of a gang (see Sharkey & Janes, 2019).32

More in-depth and specialized training is required of those staff members who provide more direct and intensive interventions, such as school psychologists and school counselors.

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1. This module was adapted from Bear G. G. (in prep). Improving school climate: Practical strategies to reduce behavior problems. New York, NY: Taylor & Francis. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Note. As required in Senate Bill 85, schools in Delaware must examine racial disproportionality in disciplinary referrals. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)