



Effective School Safety Programs Include:

- ~ increased awareness, responsibility and involvement of the entire school community.
~ clear guidelines, rules and procedures for crisis prevention and response.
~ increased monitoring and supervision.
~ measures that easily fit within the normal operation and mission of the school.

School Safety Matters in West Virginia

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In the past decade, no educational issue has received more attention than school safety. With increased concerns about terrorism and events such as the school shootings at Columbine, school safety plans have emerged as a preventive strategy in school districts across the country. According to recent reports from the US Department of Justice, more than 90% of American schools report having crisis plans in place for both natural disasters and safety threats (NCES 2004). Nearly all students ages 12 to 18 report having encountered at least one security measure at school (NCES, 2006).

The increased focus on school safety may be having an effect. The overall rate of violent crime in schools has declined, dropping by 54% from 1992 to 2004, and the number of violent crimes decreased from 48 victims per 1,000 students 12 to 18 years old to 22 per 1,000 (NCES 2006). However, other indicators have not improved. During 2005, the percentage of students responding to the Department of Justice Indicators of School Crime and Safety survey reported an increase in gang activity from 21% to 24% in their schools; while, the percentage of students reporting that fighting, carrying a weapon and drinking remained at the 2003 level (NCES 2006). In 1999-2000, 71% of public schools reported at least one violent incident, totaling 1.5 million such incidents across 59,000 schools (NCES, 2004). More than 83% of the nation's schools also report suspending students for more than five days (NCES, 2004). It is important to note, these statistics may be deceptive as No Child Left Behind requirements may result in

many incidents going unreported. More than 85% of school resource officers surveyed nationally speculated that underreporting occurs in their schools (Hurst, 2005).

A hidden cost of school violence and criminal activity is the loss of learning time for American students. In addition to documenting safety concerns, school safety statistics reflect a likely loss of significant learning time for students; both as a result of consequences for offenders and victims and general disruption of the school community.

In addition to high-profile acts of violence, bullying continues to be the number one concern at the school-building level, followed by student disrespect, insubordination, and gang activity. Research reveals that more than 1/3 of students report being bullied at school (Ferrell-Smith, 2003) and that there is reason to believe incidents of bullying will continue to increase (Astor, et. al., 2005). This possibility is particularly disturbing in light of a US Secret Service report concluding that bullying has been the trigger for many recent school shootings (Ferrell-Smith, 2003). Bullying has also been positively correlated with gang activity in schools (NCES 2005).

While limited, research conducted in rural school communities challenges the assumption that rural America is a safe haven from school violence, bullying and gang activity (Schroth & Fishbaugh, 2000). In fact, the most recent incidents of high-profile school shootings

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have occurred in rural schools in Vermont, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania, and 2003 statistics reveal that rural students (10%) were more likely to report being bullied than their urban (7%) and suburban (7%) counterparts (NCES, 2004). In particular, evidence suggests that *youth gangs* are emerging in rural areas and bringing with them an increase in bullying. Responses to the 1996 National Youth Gang Survey confirm that gangs are not just a "big-city problem." Twenty-five percent of sheriffs' departments in a sample of rural counties responding to the survey reported active youth gangs in their jurisdictions (OJJDP, 2005). Other agencies have also confirmed emerging gang activity in rural schools. In a study of rural junior high and high school guidance counselors, more than 1/3 of the respondents indicated an increasing gang presence, with few reporting any prior history of gangs (Caldarella et al., 1996). This same study proposed that the emerging nature of this problem in rural areas points to the need for timely and coordinated interventions.

Efforts to Address the Issue

The implementation of preventive school safety measures is on the rise nationally. More than 95% of American schools report requiring visitors to sign in when entering a school; however, only 75% actually *control and monitor* school entry locations. Of these, only 34% report controlled entry to the school campus (NCES, 2004). In addition to controlling entry, measures have included installing metal detectors, employing security guards, limiting student access to lockers, requiring faculty and student IDs, conducting random police trained dog searches, utilizing security cameras, and requiring clear book bags. The percentage of students observing the use of security cameras increased from 39% in 2001 to 58% in 2005, while 90% of students reported seeing school staff monitoring school hallways, and 68% reported the presence of security guards or police officers in their schools (NCES, 2006). These measures are typically part of a school or district level *school safety plan*.

Plans implemented to address issues of school safety range from revisions of individual school policy manuals to complex community-based partnerships driven by local district and state department of education goals implemented with local and federal grant funding. Although progress has been made, national data reveals that significant work still remains to be done. Often school efforts are dictated by the availability of resources needed to take advantage of modern technologies or impeded by lack of communication among key school and community stakeholders. Research supports a comprehensive approach to school safety that includes crisis planning, violence prevention, and social support in the context of a sustained and broad-based school-community partnership. "*Partnerships are key*" according to the National Academies' Research

Council (Kellam, 1999, p.15).

Increased attention to school safety has led to other consequences. Some believe efforts to facilitate safer learning environments have created "oppressive" conditions within schools that have actually contributed to a decrease in safety. Critics point to dissemination of reports such as the FBI's "40 Warning Signs" of problematic behavior as contributing to increased stress levels among students. They emphasize that school safety plans must address issues of *emotional and mental safety*, as well as physical safety (Morrow, 2004). Other researchers stress the *need for discretion* by all stakeholders, including parents, students, teachers, and administrators, when developing and implementing site-based safety plans (Astor, Benbenishty & Meyer, 2004). A review of research on best practices suggests that successful schoolwide programs:

- ◆ Increase awareness and responsibility of students, teachers, and parents regarding the types of violence occurring in the school.
- ◆ Target the social systems in the school and clearly communicate procedures to be followed before, during and after violent events.
- ◆ Focus on getting students, school staff, and parents involved in the program.
- ◆ Fit the intervention or measure easily into the normal flow and mission of the school.
- ◆ Rely on faculty, staff, and parents to plan, implement, and sustain the program.
- ◆ Increase monitoring and supervision in non-classroom areas. (Astor, et. al., 2005, p. 28)

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Project SAFE Harrison County Schools, West Virginia

One successful school safety initiative supported by a sustained, broad-based partnership between a school district, local law enforcement and emergency agency representatives, and other local and state stakeholders is Project SAFE (School Action For Emergencies) in Harrison County, West Virginia. Project SAFE was supported with a U.S. Department of Commerce's Technology Opportunities Program

(TOPS) grant and local matching funds. The project integrates wireless technology with existing surveillance cameras in county high schools and middle schools; making video feed accessible to emergency responders and school administrators via laptop computers and hand-held PDAs. Broadband technology is used to send video images from inside and outside school buildings directly to emergency responders and school administrators in the event of a school crisis. Project SAFE technology connects individual networks into a district-wide network with direct connection to the Harrison County 911 center. This direct informational link to 911 facilitates effective communication during emergencies. The increased ability of building level administrators to access video also supports more effective and frequent use of this information. The initiative was accompanied by efforts to improve staff awareness of safety procedures, taking advantage of the enhanced communication and collaboration between school officials and local emergency responders. The National Telecommunications and Information Administration describes Project SAFE as an “innovative approach” to community-wide crisis preparedness (Jefferson, n.d.).

Key Features of Project SAFE

A critical feature of the project was partnership development involving key safety stakeholders and school administrators in Harrison County. Evidence of the critical nature of this partnership is evident in the design, implementation, and evaluation of Project SAFE. These partners include:

- ◆ Local representatives from law enforcement, fire departments, and emergency agencies of Harrison County and the Cities of Bridgeport and Clarksburg
- ◆ State representatives from the West Virginia High Tech Corridor Region and the West Virginia Safe Communities Program
- ◆ National representatives from the FBI Criminal Justice Information Services Division and the FBI Criminal Division
- ◆ Representatives from Harrison County Schools

The fundamental importance of the partnership is evident as reported by one district official:

“Project SAFE has done a lot to bring in money to update the surveillance system, no doubt. But from the beginning we’ve tried to look at the bigger picture. How can we coordinate efforts with the emergency responders and get the schools working together...and also getting teachers and principals to think about how this can all work together.”

By recognizing the need for school safety and enhanced technology, the Harrison County Board of Education took a proactive stance with county school safety efforts. By implementing Project SAFE, community relationships were strengthened, as well as the efforts of school-based educators to facilitate safer learning environments. The citizens of Harrison County in general have benefited from what has now become an extended partnership committed to community safety.

In conjunction with Project SAFE, Harrison County revisited the Harrison County Schools Emergency Operations Plan (EOP). The EOP is reviewed regularly by emergency responders and school officials during annual color-coded drills creating mock emergency response situations. Project SAFE and the proactive stance of the EOP have had a positive impact on perceptions of school safety in Harrison County. (Heinen, et.al., 2006)

As a result of Project SAFE, Harrison County educators recognize that school safety requires a *team* approach from all those stakeholders vested in safer Harrison County schools. They have also learned the following about the necessary elements of an effective school safety program:

School culture is an important factor for school safety and is affected by variables including transparency of policies, type and level of collaboration, clear procedures, strong leadership, and empowered followers.

Enhanced technology is a promising avenue for improving perceptions of schools safety, particularly when it involves collaborative efforts across agencies.

Technology can not replace human intervention. Programs should consider possible technological and maintain administrator presence.

Collaboration is important to success and must legitimately involve and empower all constituents. School safety should be viewed as a community effort.

High levels of discretion are essential to creating innovative and content-appropriate safety efforts. Discretion empowers leaders to be creative and visionary. (Heinen, et.al., 2007)

In conclusion, Harrison County officials emphasized their commitment to keep school safety as an on-going top priority. Images of Columbine and the terrorist attacks of September 11 are still fresh in the minds of education stakeholders across the nation. They serve as motivation for constant vigilance of what *could* happen. Harrison County officials believe that with strong leadership, collaboration, and innovation, their schools will not only *feel safer*, but actually *be safer*.



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Additional Resources

Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence's Safe Communities – Safe Schools Initiative:

<http://www.colorado.edu/cspv/safeschools/index.html>

National Center for Education Statistics:

<http://nces.ed.gov/programs/crimeindicators/>

U.S. Department of Justice:

http://www.usdoj.gov/whatwedo/whatwedo_pyv.html

National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center:

<http://www.safeyouth.org/scripts/topics/school.asp>

Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention:

<http://ojjdp.ncjrs.org/>

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The Center for Education in Appalachia at Fairmont State University is committed to supporting public education that leads to economic opportunity in West Virginia and across Appalachia. Center goals focus on building networks and partnerships between people and organizations committed to education in West Virginia and the Appalachian region. The Center also serves as an informational resource to state education policy making efforts with a special focus on its unique rural, Appalachian context. We believe this can be accomplished by helping push up issues and working models from local communities and generate knowledge so that state and national initiatives will be effective when implemented within local communities. For more information visit: www.fairmontstate.edu/cea