Plan for a safe return to school by taking a holistic approach to school safety.

Back-to-school season is a time of excitement, anticipation, and at times, concern for the kindergarten through grade 12 (K-12) community. In addition to the academic and administrative complexities a new school year can present, schools and districts may also contend with ongoing and evolving security challenges and threats. Having the proper school safety plans, procedures, and systems in place is a critical priority for schools as they open their doors to students this fall.

While there isn't a one-size-fits-all approach to school safety, there are common elements schools should consider in creating and sustaining a safe learning environment. These span from planning and prevention activities to protection and mitigation measures, to response and recovery actions during and after an actual incident. By integrating these various school safety elements – and applying them to their individualized and unique needs, challenges, and settings – schools can create a safer campus on the first day of school, and year-round.

Key school safety issues and strategies to support a safe back-to-school season include:

Bullying and Cyberbullying

Bullying is widespread in the United States and can take many forms. The behavior can threaten students' physical and emotional safety as well as impact their social and academic success at school. Educators, school staff, and parents can help prevent bullying by talking about it, building a safe school environment, and creating a community-wide bullying prevention strategy. Districts and schools should also adopt school climate initiatives and support for digital citizenship and positive character development, as well as procedures for observing student behavior in school and online to identify at-risk behaviors and provide interventions before they create safety issues.

Cybersecurity and Online Safety

K-12 schools have experienced a significant increase in cyberattacks in recent years. These incidents can have costly and consequential impacts to a school's privacy, data, and technology systems needed to perform operational and educational functions. Students are also spending more time online than ever before, increasing their potential for exposure to online safety risks and threats. School communities can work towards strengthening cyber safety and security by promoting online safety practices, improving digital literacy and critical thinking skills, and implementing cybersecurity practices such as multi-factor authentication, regular software updates, and the use of strong passwords.

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Emergency Planning

Emergencies at schools can happen at any time and can include man-made incidents such as targeted violence attacks as well as natural disasters and accidents. Planning for these events – and knowing how to respond – is a critical component of school safety. Every district or school should develop and implement a comprehensive school Emergency Operations Plan that describe the actions that students, teachers, and school staff should take before, during, and after emergency events. Training, exercises, and drills are also essential to help ensure there is a common understanding of emergency policies and responsibilities; to test emergency response protocols and plans; and to practice the actions everyone will take in the event of an incident.

Infectious Diseases and Public Health

The rapid onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and its significant impact to our daily lives underscores the importance of preparing for sudden infectious disease outbreaks and other public health emergencies. Sustaining safe in-person learning, ensuring proper hygiene, and managing daily operations are all important for keeping a safe school environment amid a health crisis. Schools are encouraged to implement layered prevention strategies – multiple strategies for prevention that are used together consistently – to protect students, teachers, and staff during an outbreak. They can also work with local public health officials, consistent with applicable laws and regulations, to determine additional prevention strategies needed in their area based on levels of community transmission and other factors.

Mental Health

Students often come to school with complex mental health concerns or social service needs. Schools are essential partners in supporting the mental health and well-being of students and can fill a critical role in both identifying children and adolescents who have or are at risk for mental disorders and connecting them with treatment. By providing access to mental health services and supporting students who are experiencing mental health challenges, schools can help foster a sense of safety, prevent the worsening of mental health conditions, and create better outcomes for students.

School Climate

School climate is a broad, multifaceted concept that involves many aspects of the student's educational experience. Research suggests that a positive school climate can lead to a significant decrease in the likelihood of crime, aggression, and violent behavior, as well as result in improved behavioral and academic outcomes for youth. Developing students with strong character who are connected to their peers, educators, and communities in meaningful ways can help improve school climate. Schools and districts should also implement social, emotional, and behavioral support systems, as well as engage in a routine school climate improvement process, to create an environment that supports and responds to student behavior.

Targeted Violence

Targeted violence refers to violence that is premeditated and directed at specific individuals, groups, or locations. It is distinct from violence that is impulsive, random, or spontaneous and is often distinguished by pre-attack behaviors that suggest violence as a possible outcome. Schools can work to prepare for potential acts of targeted violence by improving their campuses' physical security and involving school personnel who are trained to prevent, recognize, and respond to threats of violence, as well as implementing other violence prevention strategies. Conducting site assessments and developing building security plans can also identify existing vulnerabilities and enhance overall school security.

Threat Assessment and Reporting

Identifying and addressing threatening or concerning behaviors can help prevent and reduce targeted violence at K-12 schools. The use of a multidisciplinary threat assessment team comprised of the appropriate school staff can help identify, assess, and intervene with students who may pose a risk of harm to themselves or others. Schools should also establish a reporting system that is continually monitored and allows anonymous reporting to help provide school officials with the information they need to stop violence before it occurs.

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