A Whole Child Approach to School Safety

Guest author ~ Dr. Matthew A. Mingle, Superintendent, Warren Township School District

This article describes a Whole Child approach to school safety emphasizing a broad focus on overall school climate and culture rather than a narrow focus designed entirely around turning schools into police institutions.

“Each student learns in an environment that is physically and emotionally safe for students and adults.” So goes the Safe tenet within ASCD’s Whole Child initiative. Schools that feature armed security guards, panic buttons, bullet-resistant glass treatments, and live-fire active shooter drills are now the norm rather than the exception in a national landscape that included 80 active shooter incidents in 2016 and 2017 according to the FBI.¹

Rather than accept this new normal as the only path forward, policymakers and school leaders must take a step back and review our role in providing a learning environment for each child that is safe in a much broader sense. The target hardening initiatives above may be a necessary component of the overall approach, however we must not lose sight of our focus as educators and the unintended consequences of teaching children in an environment of fear and uncertainty.

The indicators within the Safe tenet provide a template for considering an approach to school safety that contemplates the wide range of concerns in this area.

1. Our school building, grounds, playground equipment, and vehicles are secure and meet all established safety and environmental standards.

2. Our school physical plant is attractive; is structurally sound; has good internal (hallways) and external (pedestrian, bicycle, and motor vehicle) traffic flow, including for those with special needs; and is free of defects.

3. Our physical, emotional, academic, and social school climate is safe, friendly, and student-centered.

4. Our students feel valued, respected, and cared for and are motivated to learn.

5. Our school staff, students, and family members establish and maintain school and classroom behavioral expectations, rules, and routines that teach students how to manage their behavior and help students improve problem behavior.

6. Our school provides our students, staff, and family members with regular opportunities for learning and support in teaching students how to manage their own behavior, and reinforcing expectations, rules, and routines.

7. Our school teaches, models, and provides opportunities to practice social-emotional skills, including effective listening, conflict resolution, problem solving, personal reflection and responsibility, and ethical decision making.

8. Our school upholds social justice and equity concepts and practices mutual respect for individual differences at all levels of school interactions - student-to-student, adult-to-student, and adult-to-adult.

9. Our school climate, curriculum, and instruction reflect both high expectations and an understanding of child and adolescent growth and development.

10. Our teachers and staff develop and implement academic and behavioral interventions based on an understanding of child and adolescent development and learning theories.

In their book, *Keeping Students Safe Every Day: How to Prepare for and Respond to School Violence, Natural Disasters, and Other Hazards*, Klinger and Klinger argue that overstretched and unprepared school administrators find themselves without the necessary training and tools to adequately address crisis response planning at the same time that districts are investing in what they call "school safety stuff" without any measurable impact on safety.

So, what is a concerned educator to do? Return to the indicators that make up the Safe tenet of ASCD's Whole Child approach to education. Survey students, parents, and staff members about perceptions regarding these timeless focus areas and then work on improving in the areas that stakeholders feel need attention. Create a data loop to get feedback on a regular basis and pair it with information gained from other existing surveys, state-mandated school safety audits or reports, and word-of-mouth. This investment in the people who make up modern schools will demonstrate an ongoing commitment to true school safety that is likely to do more to prevent or adequately respond to a crisis than any fancy product or service in the market.

More information about ASCD’s Whole Child initiative can be found at [http://www.ascd.org/whole-child.aspx](http://www.ascd.org/whole-child.aspx).

More information about Klinger and Klinger’s Educator’s School Safety Network can be found at [http://eschoolsafety.org/](http://eschoolsafety.org/).

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… about the author ~ Dr. Mingle is the current superintendent of the Warren Township Schools. He is the immediate past-president of New Jersey ASCD and a member of the ASCD Board of Directors. Dr. Mingle presents statewide and nationally on a variety of educational topics.