



# A Framework for Safe and Successful Schools

## *Executive Summary*

This joint statement provides a framework supported by educators for improving school safety and increasing access to mental health supports for children and youth. Efforts to improve school climate, safety, and learning are not separate endeavors. They must be designed, funded, and implemented as a comprehensive school-wide approach that facilitates interdisciplinary collaboration and builds on a multitiered system of supports. We caution against seemingly quick and potentially harmful solutions, such as arming school personnel, and urge policy leaders to support the following guidance to enact policies that will equip America’s schools to educate and safeguard our children over the long term.

### **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS TO SUPPORT EFFECTIVE SCHOOL SAFETY**

1. Allow for blended, flexible use of funding streams in education and mental health services;
2. Improve staffing ratios to allow for the delivery of a full range of services and effective school–community partnerships;
3. Develop evidence-based standards for district-level policies to promote effective school discipline and positive behavior;
4. Fund continuous and sustainable crisis and emergency preparedness, response, and recovery planning and training that uses evidence-based models;
5. Provide incentives for intra- and interagency collaboration; and
6. Support multitiered systems of support (MTSS).

### **BEST PRACTICES FOR CREATING SAFE AND SUCCESSFUL SCHOOLS**

1. Fully integrate learning supports (e.g., behavioral, mental health, and social services), instruction, and school management within a comprehensive, cohesive approach that facilitates multidisciplinary collaboration.
2. Implement multitiered systems of support (MTSS) that encompass prevention, wellness promotion, and interventions that increase with intensity based on student need, and that promote close school–community collaboration.
3. Improve access to school-based mental health supports by ensuring adequate staffing levels in terms of school-employed mental health professionals who are trained to infuse prevention and intervention services into the learning process and to help integrate services provided through school–community partnerships into existing school initiatives.
4. Integrate ongoing positive climate and safety efforts with crisis prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery to ensure that crisis training and plans: (a) are relevant to the school context, (b) reinforce learning, (c) make maximum use of existing staff resources, (d) facilitate effective threat assessment, and (e) are consistently reviewed and practiced.

5. Balance physical and psychological safety to avoid overly restrictive measures (e.g., armed guards and metal detectors) that can undermine the learning environment and instead combine reasonable physical security measures (e.g., locked doors and monitored public spaces) with efforts to enhance school climate, build trusting relationships, and encourage students and adults to report potential threats. If a school determines the need for armed security, properly trained school resource officers (SROs) are the *only* school personnel of any type who should be armed.
6. Employ effective, positive school discipline that: (a) functions in concert with efforts to address school safety and climate; (b) is not simply punitive (e.g., zero tolerance); (c) is clear, consistent, and equitable; and (d) reinforces positive behaviors. Using security personnel or SROs primarily as a substitute for effective discipline policies does not contribute to school safety and can perpetuate the school-to-prison pipeline.
7. Consider the context of each school and district and provide services that are most needed, appropriate, and culturally sensitive to a school's unique student populations and learning communities.
8. Acknowledge that sustainable and effective change takes time, and that individual schools will vary in their readiness to implement improvements and should be afforded the time and resources to sustain change over time.

Creating safe, orderly, and welcoming learning environments is critical to educating and preparing all of our children and youth to achieve their highest potential and contribute to society. We all share this responsibility and look forward to working with the Administration, Congress, and state and local policy makers to shape policies based on these best practices in school safety and climate, student mental health, instructional leadership, teaching, and learning.

# A Framework for Safe and Successful Schools

The author organizations and cosigners of this joint statement applaud the President and Congress for acknowledging that additional actions must be taken to prevent violence in America's schools and communities. We represent the educators who work day in and day out to keep our children safe, ensure their well-being, and promote learning. This joint statement provides a framework supported by educators for improving school safety and increasing access to mental health supports for children and youth.

We created these policy and practice recommendations to help provide further guidance to the Administration, Congress, and state and local agencies as they reflect upon evidence for best practices in school safety and climate, student mental health and well-being, instructional leadership, teaching, and learning. Further, the partnership between our organizations seeks to reinforce the interdisciplinary, collaborative, and cohesive approach that is required to create and sustain genuinely safe, supportive schools that meet the needs of the whole child. Efforts to improve school climate, safety, and learning are not separate endeavors and must be designed, funded, and implemented as a comprehensive school-wide approach. Ensuring that mental health and safety programming and services are appropriately integrated into the overall multitiered system of supports is essential for successful and sustainable improvements in school safety and academic achievement.

Specifically, effective school safety efforts:

- Begin with proactive principal leadership.
- Allow school leaders to deploy human and financial resources in a manner that best meets the needs of their school and community.
- Provide a team-based framework to facilitate effective coordination of services and interventions.
- Balance the needs for physical and psychological safety.
- Employ the necessary and appropriately trained school-employed mental health and safety personnel.
- Provide relevant and ongoing professional development for all staff.
- Integrate a continuum of mental health supports within a multitiered system of supports.
- Engage families and community providers as meaningful partners.
- Remain grounded in the mission and purpose of schools: teaching and learning.

Although the focus of this document is on policies and practices that schools can use to ensure safety, we must acknowledge the importance of policies and practices that make our communities safer as well. This includes increased access to mental health services, improved interagency collaboration, and reduced exposure of children to community violence. Additionally, our organizations support efforts designed to reduce youth access to firearms. Finally, many local school districts and state boards of education are considering policies that would allow school staff to carry a weapon. Our organizations believe that arming educators would cause more harm than good, and we advise decision makers to approach these policies with extreme caution.

We urge policy leaders to support the following guidance to promote safe and supportive schools. We look forward to working with the Administration, Congress, and state and local agencies to shape and enact meaningful policies that will genuinely equip America's schools to educate and safeguard our children over the long term.

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS TO SUPPORT EFFECTIVE SCHOOL SAFETY**

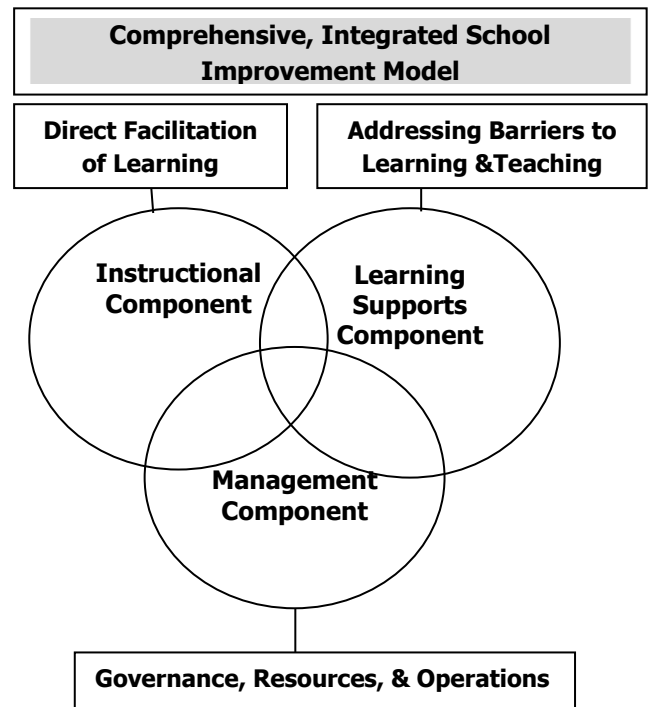
- 1. Allow for blended, flexible use of funding streams.** The Department of Education should work with the Department of Health and Human Services and Congress to release guidance that gives schools' access to various funding streams (e.g., SAMHSA and Title I) to ensure adequate and sustained funding dedicated to improving school safety. One-time grants are beneficial in some circumstances; however, one-time allotments of money for schools are insufficient for sustained change to occur. Similarly, district superintendents must be able to anticipate the availability of future funding in order to collaborate with school principals to effectively plan for and implement meaningful changes that will result in positive, sustainable outcomes for students.
- 2. Strive to improve staffing ratios to allow for the delivery of a full range of services, including school–community partnerships, and set standards that will help schools effectively and accurately assess their needs.** This will require providing additional funding for key personnel such as school counselors, school psychologists, school social workers, and school nurses.
- 3. Outline standards for district-level policies to promote effective school discipline and positive behavior.** Although it has been briefly discussed in this document, we urge the Department to release guidance regarding effective school discipline policies. Far too many schools continue to use punitive discipline measures, such as zero-tolerance policies, that result in negative outcomes for students and contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline.
- 4. Provide funding for continuous and sustainable crisis and emergency preparedness, response and recovery planning and training (utilizing evidence-based models).** The minimum standards include:
  - a. establishment of a school safety and crisis team that includes the principal, school-employed mental health professionals, school security personnel, and appropriate community first responders;
  - b. a balanced focus on promoting and protecting both physical and psychological safety;
  - c. a crisis team and plan based on the Department of Homeland Security's Incident Command Structure;
  - d. ongoing professional development for all school employees to help identify key indicators of students' mental health problems as well as employees' specific roles in implementation of crisis response plans;
  - e. professional development for school-employed mental health professionals and other relevant staff (e.g., key administrators, school resource officers) on how to implement effective crisis prevention, intervention, and postvention strategies, including the critical mental health components of recovery.
- 5. Provide incentives for intra- and inter-agency collaboration.** All levels of government need to take preemptive measures to strengthen the ability of schools to provide coordinated services to address mental health and school safety. We urge the federal government to set the standard and issue guidance on how various government, law enforcement, and community agencies can work together to provide services to students and families. At all levels, we must remove the barriers between education and health service agencies. Schools serve as the ideal "hub" for service delivery; however, schools must be adequately staffed with school counselors, school psychologists, school social workers, and school nurses who can provide the proper services in the school setting, connect students and families to the appropriate services in the community, and work collaboratively with external agencies to ensure streamlined service delivery and avoid redundancy.
- 6. Support multitiered systems of supports.** A full continuum of services ranging from building-level supports for all students to more intensive student-level services is necessary to effectively address school safety and student mental health.

## BEST PRACTICES FOR CREATING SAFE AND SUCCESSFUL SCHOOLS

School safety and positive school climate are not achieved by singular actions like purchasing a designated program or piece of equipment but rather by effective comprehensive and collaborative efforts requiring the dedication and commitment of all school staff and relevant community members. Schools require consistent and effective approaches to prevent violence and promote learning, sufficient time to implement these approaches, and ongoing evaluation.

### 1. Integrate Services Through Collaboration

Safe and successful learning environments are fostered through collaboration among school staff and community-based service providers while also integrating existing initiatives in the school. Effective schools and learning environments provide equivalent resources to support instructional components (e.g., teacher quality, high academic standards, curriculum), organizational/management components (e.g., shared governance, accountability, budget decisions), and learning supports (e.g., mental health services). Rather than viewing school safety as a targeted outcome for a single, stand-alone program or plan developed by the school building principal alone, this model seeks to integrate all services for students and families by framing the necessary behavioral, mental health, and social services within the context of school culture and learning. Integrated services lead to more sustainable and comprehensive school improvement, reduce duplicative efforts and redundancy, and require leadership by the principal and a commitment from the entire staff (See Role of the School Principal, below.).



Source: National Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA and the National Association of School Psychologists (2010).

### 2. Implement Multitiered Systems of Supports (MTSS)

The most effective way to implement integrated services that support school safety and student learning is through a school-wide multitiered system of supports (MTSS). MTSS encompasses (a) prevention and wellness promotion; (b) universal screening for academic, behavioral, and emotional barriers to learning; (c) implementation of evidence-based interventions that increase in intensity as needed; (d) monitoring of ongoing student progress in response to implemented interventions; and (e) engagement in systematic data-based decision making about services needed for students based on specific outcomes. In a growing number of schools across the country, response to intervention (RTI) and positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS) constitute the primary methods for implementing an MTSS framework. Ideally though, MTSS is implemented more holistically to integrate efforts targeting academic, behavioral, social, emotional, physical, and mental health concerns. This framework is more effective with coordination of school-employed and community-based service providers to ensure integration and coordination of services among the school, home, and community.

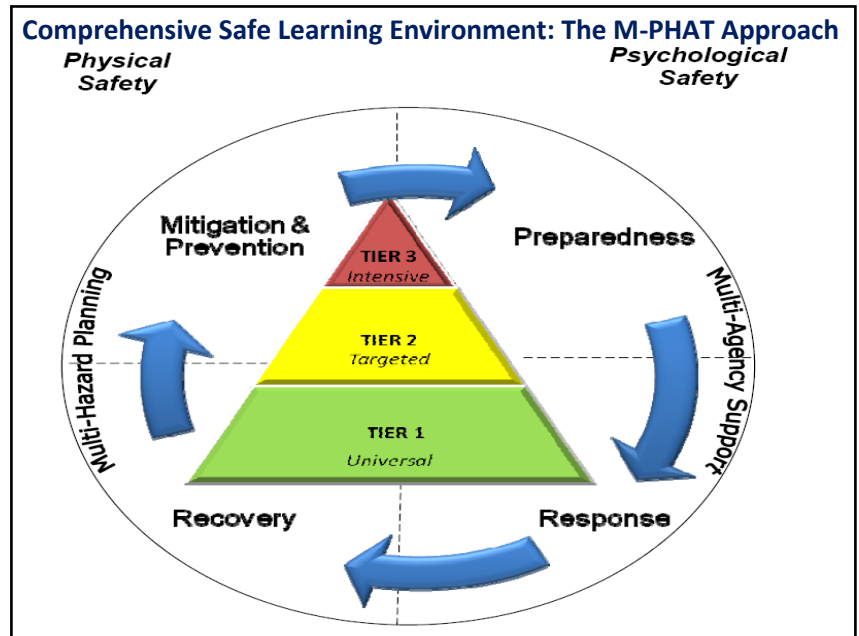
Effective MTSS requires:

- adequate access to school-employed specialized instructional support personnel (e.g., school counselors, school psychologists, school social workers, and school nurses) and community-based services;
- collaboration and integration of services, including integration of mental health, behavioral, and academic supports, as well integration of school-based and community services;

- adequate staff time for planning and problem solving;
- effective collection, evaluation, interpretation, and use of data; and
- patience, commitment, and strong leadership.

One approach to integrating school safety and crisis management into an MTSS framework is the M-PHAT model. M-PHAT stands for:

- **Multi-Phase** (prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery)
- **Multi-Hazard** (accidental death, school violence, natural disasters, terrorism)
- **Multi-Agency** (school, police, fire, EMS, mental health)
- **Multi-Tiered** (an MTSS framework)



Source: PREPARE School Crisis Prevention and Intervention Training Curriculum. Adapted with permission from Reeves, Kanan, & Plog (2010).

### 3. Improve Access to School-Based Mental Health Supports

Mental health is developed early in life and educators play a significant role in ensuring that students' experiences throughout their school careers contribute to their positive mental health. Access to school-based mental health services and supports directly improves students' physical and psychological safety, academic performance, and social-emotional learning. This requires adequate staffing levels in terms of school-employed mental health professionals (school counselors, school psychologists, school social workers, and in some cases, school nurses) to ensure that services are high quality, effective, and appropriate to the school context. Access to school mental health services cannot be sporadic or disconnected from the learning process. Just as children are not simply small adults, schools are not simply community clinics with blackboards. School-employed mental health professionals are specially trained in the interconnectivity among school law, school system functioning, learning, mental health, and family systems. This training ensures that mental health services are properly and effectively infused into the learning environment, supporting both instructional leaders and teachers' abilities to provide a safe school setting and the optimum conditions for teaching and learning. No other professionals have this unique training background.

Having these professionals as integrated members of the school staff empowers principals to more efficiently and effectively deploy resources, ensure coordination of services, evaluate their effectiveness, and adjust supports to meet the dynamic needs of their student populations. Improving access also allows for enhanced collaboration with community providers to meet the more intense or clinical needs of students.

School counselors, school psychologists, and school social workers all offer unique individual skills that complement one another in such a way that the sum is greater than the parts (See Roles of School Mental Health Professionals, below.) When given the opportunity to work collectively, they are ready and capable of providing an even wider range of services, such as:

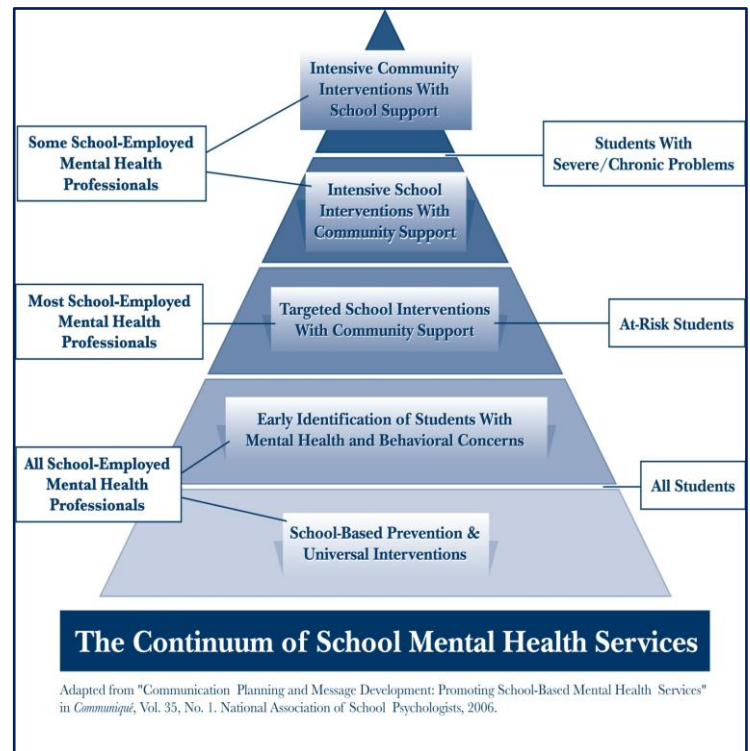
- collecting, analyzing, and interpreting school-level data to improve availability and effectiveness of mental services;
- designing and implementing interventions to meet the behavioral and mental health needs of students;
- promoting early intervention services;
- providing individual and group counseling;
- providing staff development related to positive discipline, behavior, and mental health (including mental health first aid);
- providing risk and threat assessments;
- supporting teachers through consultation and collaboration;
- coordinating with community service providers and integrating intensive interventions into the schooling process.

**Addressing Shortages:** Fully providing effective, integrated, and comprehensive services requires schools to maintain appropriate staffing levels for their school-employed mental health professionals.

Every district and school must be supported to improve staffing ratios. Unfortunately, significant budget cuts, combined with widespread personnel shortages, have resulted in reduced access to school-employed mental health professionals in many schools and districts. In these districts, school counselors, school psychologists, school social workers, and school nurses often have inappropriately high student-to-professional ratios that far exceed the recommendations provided by their respective professional organizations. Poor ratios restrict the ability of these professionals to devote time to important initiatives, including school-wide preventive services (e.g., bullying, violence, and dropout prevention), safety promotion, and sustained school improvement. Many districts go without prevention and early intervention services that effectively link mental health, school climate, school safety, and academics instruction. Partnerships with community providers or school-based health centers can provide important resources for individual students. However, community providers sometimes lack familiarity with specific processes in teaching and learning and with systemic aspects of schooling. Successful school-community partnerships integrate community supports into existing school initiatives utilizing a collaborative approach between school and community providers that enhances effectiveness and sustainability. Many schools have limited access to community supports making overreliance on community partners as primary providers of mental health services potentially problematic

District-wide policies must support principals and school safety teams to provide services in school-based settings and strengthen the ability of schools to respond to student and family needs directly. While working to improve ratios, districts can begin to move toward more effective and sustainable services by:

- Assigning a school psychologist, school counselor, or school social worker to coordinate school-based services with those provided by community providers.
- Ensuring that the school data being collected and resulting strategies are addressing the most urgent areas of need with regard to safety and climate.
- Providing training that targets the specific needs of individual schools, their staffs, and their students.
- Reviewing current use of mental health staff and identifying critical shifts in their responsibilities to bolster prevention efforts.



#### 4. Integrate School Safety and Crisis/Emergency Prevention, Preparedness, Response, and Recovery

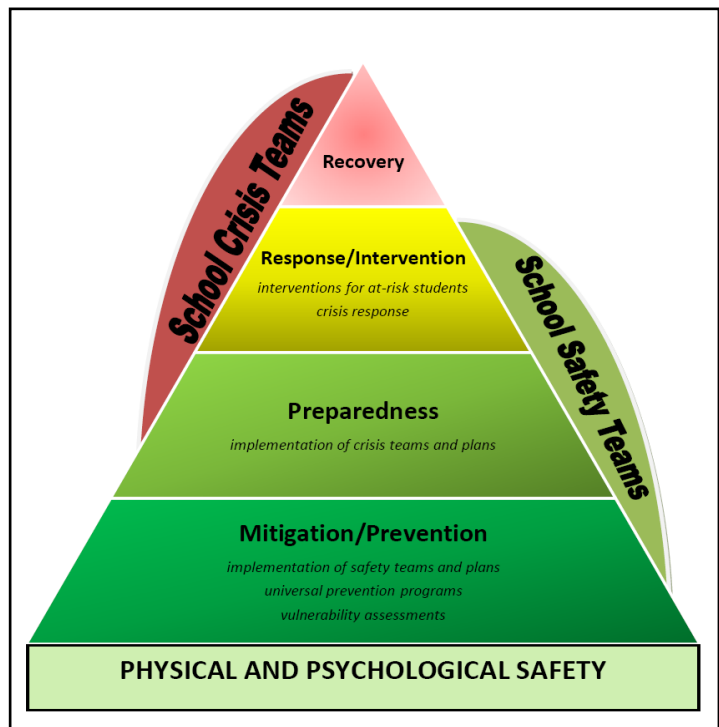
Schools must be supported to develop an active school safety team that focuses on overall school climate as well as crisis and emergency preparedness, response, and recovery. School safety and crisis response occur on a continuum, and crisis planning, response and recovery should build upon ongoing school safety and mental health services. School crisis and emergency preparedness training should encompass prevention/mitigation, early intervention (which is part of ongoing school safety), immediate response/intervention, and long-term recovery. These four phases are clearly articulated by the Departments of Education and Homeland Security.

Training and planning must be relevant to the learning context and make maximum use of existing staff resources. The safety and crisis team should, at a minimum, include principals, school mental health professionals, school security personnel, appropriate community stakeholders (such as representatives from local law enforcement and emergency personnel), and other school staff or district liaisons to help sustain efforts over time. Additionally, crisis and emergency preparedness plans must be consistently reviewed and practiced, which is more easily facilitated by an actively engaged team that links the school to the broader community. Active engagement of the team is often directly linked to appropriate staffing levels that allow time for collaboration and planning. Effective, engaged teams and plans:

- Contribute to ongoing school safety and improved school climate by supporting a school-wide, evidence-based framework that is appropriate to the unique school culture and context.
- Balance efforts to promote and protect physical and psychological safety.
- Minimize unsafe behaviors such as bullying, fighting, and risk-taking by providing quality prevention programming.
- Improve early identification and support for students at risk of harming themselves or others (e.g., threat assessment).
- Model collaborative problem solving.
- Provide for consistent, ongoing training of all school staff.
- Address the range of crises that schools can face with a focus on what is most likely to occur (e.g., death of a student or staff member, school violence, natural disaster).
- Improve response to crises when the unpreventable occurs.
- Ensure an organized plan that has appropriately assessed risks to the school and the learning environment and has been adopted by the school safety team to promote a return to normalcy following a crisis or emergency.
- Promote efforts for ongoing learning and long-term emotional recovery for every student and family.

#### 5. Balance Physical and Psychological Safety

Any effort to address school safety should balance building security/physical safety with psychological safety. Relying on highly restrictive physical safety measures alone, such as increasing armed security or imposing metal



Source: PREPaRE School Crisis Prevention and Intervention Training Curriculum. Adapted with permission from Cherry Creek School District. (2008). Emergency response and crisis management guide. Greenwood Village, CO: Author.



detectors, typically does not objectively improve school safety. In fact, such measures may cause students to feel *less safe* and more fearful at school, and could undermine the learning environment. In contrast, combining reasonable physical security measures with efforts to enhance school climate more fully promotes overall school safety. Effectively balancing physical and psychological safety entails:

- Assessing the physical security features of the campus, such as access points to the school grounds, parking lots and buildings, and the lighting and adult supervision in lobbies, hallways, parking lots, and open spaces.
- Employing environmental design techniques, such as ensuring that playgrounds and sports fields are surrounded by fences or other natural barriers, to limit visual and physical access by non-school personnel.
- Evaluating policies and practices to ensure that students are well monitored, school guests are appropriately identified and escorted, and potential risks and threats are addressed quickly.
- Building trusting, respectful relationships among students, staff, and families.
- Providing access to school mental health services and educating students and staff on how and when to seek help.
- Providing a confidential way for students and other members of the school community to report potential threats, because educating students on “breaking the code of silence” is one of our most effective safety measures.

Schools also should carefully weigh the unique needs of their communities when determining the need to hire additional security personnel or school resource officers (SROs). It is important to recognize that SROs differ from other school security personnel or armed guards. SROs are commissioned law enforcement officers who are specially trained to work within the school community to help implement school safety initiatives as part of the school safety leadership team. They should be integral participants in school life and student learning. Additionally, if a school determines that it needs to have an armed professional on school grounds, SROs are the *only* school personnel of any type who should be armed. (See Role of the School Resource Officer, below.)

## **6. Employ Effective, Positive School Discipline**

School discipline policies are ultimately the responsibility of the school principal; however, all school staff play a role in their effective development and implementation. Discipline practices should function in concert with efforts to address school safety/climate. When positive discipline is incorporated into the overall MTSS, students feel respected and supported, positive behavior is continually reinforced, and school climate improves. Additionally, this structure allows for the use of restorative practices that seek to build positive relationships within the school community. In contrast, overly harsh and punitive measures, such as zero tolerance policies, lead to reduced safety, connectedness, and feelings of belonging, and have historically been unsuccessful at improving student behavior or the overall school climate. Additionally, utilizing SROs or other security personnel primarily as a substitute for effective discipline policies is inappropriate, does not contribute to school safety or students’ perceptions of being safe, and can perpetuate the school-to-prison pipeline. Effective school discipline:

- is viewed within the context of a learning opportunity and seeks to teach and reinforce positive behaviors to replace negative behaviors;
- is clear, consistent, and equitably applied to all students;
- employs culturally competent practices;
- safeguards the well-being of all students and staff;
- keeps students in school and out of the juvenile justice system; and
- incorporates family involvement.

## **7. Allow for the Consideration of Context**

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to creating safe and successful schools. To be most effective, schools should assess the structures and resources already in place and determine what additional resources are

needed. Schools should provide universal, secondary, and tertiary interventions that are most appropriate and culturally sensitive to their unique student populations and learning communities. Additionally, decisions regarding appropriate security measures, including the use of SROs, should be determined by each school's leadership team and not via universal mandate.

#### **8. Acknowledge That Sustainable and Effective Improvement Takes Patience and Commitment**

School districts will vary considerably in their readiness to change and in their ability to accept the suggestions included within this document. Recognizing that sustainable change takes time both to improve acceptability and allow for full implementation will help set districts up for success rather than setting unrealistic goals. Efforts for change should not be abandoned if goals are not immediately met, as frequent programmatic changes lead to more resistance to change among school personnel in the future.

### **ROLES OF KEY LEADERSHIP PERSONNEL REGARDING SCHOOL SAFETY AND CLIMATE**

#### **Role of School Principals**

Effective principals and assistant principals recognize the potential they have to create a school environment where teachers thrive and students achieve their greatest potential in a safe and nurturing school setting. As instructional leaders, principals maintain a constant presence in the school and in classrooms, listening to and observing what is taking place, assessing needs, and getting to know teachers and students. Principals set high expectations and standards for the academic, social, emotional, and physical development of all students. They bring together a wide range of stakeholders within the school community, take into account the aspirations, and work to create a vision that reflects the full range and value of a school's mission. Principals encourage the development of the whole child by supporting the physical and mental health of children, as well as their social and emotional well-being, which is reinforced by a sense of safety and self-confidence. High-quality early childhood education and learning experiences are crucial to an elementary level principal's shared vision to shape the school culture and instructional leadership. School leaders must mobilize the staff, students, parents, and community around the mission and shared values, as well as school improvement goals and set the parameters of high expectations for the school. Effective practice requires:

- building consensus on a vision that reflects the core values of the school community to support student safety and well-being;
- valuing and using diversity to enhance the learning of the entire school community;
- broadening the framework for child development beyond academics; and
- developing a learning culture that is adaptive, collaborative, innovative, and supportive by taking into account the contributions of every member of the school staff.

#### **Roles of School-Employed Mental Health Professionals**

Many professionals within a school help to support students' positive mental health. This includes school counselors, school psychologists, school social workers, school nurses, and other specialized instructional support personnel. For the purposes of these recommendations, however, we are focusing on the mental health professionals who should serve in critical leadership roles in terms of school safety, positive school climate, and providing school-based mental health services: school counselors, school psychologists, and school social workers. Their training and expertise help link mental health, behavior, environmental factors (e.g., family, classroom, school, community), instruction, and learning. Each of these professionals helps to create school environments that are safe, supportive, and conducive to learning. Each may deliver similar services such as counseling, social-emotional skill instruction, and consultation with families and teachers; however, each profession has its own unique focus based upon its specializations, which result in different, albeit interrelated, services. The specific services and expertise of individual practitioners may vary, but the following describes the core competencies and specialized instructional services of each profession.

**School counselors** have a minimum of a master's degree in school counseling. School counselors are generally the first school-employed mental health professional to interact with students as they commonly are involved in the provision of universal learning supports to the whole school population. School counselors have specialized knowledge of curriculum and instruction and help screen students for the basic skills needed for successful transition from cradle to college and career. School counselors focus on helping students' address their academic, personal/social, and career development goals and needs by designing, implementing, and evaluating a comprehensive school counseling program that promotes and enhances student success. School counselors work to promote safe learning environments for all members of the school community and regularly monitor and respond to behavior issues that impact school climate, such as bullying, student interpersonal struggles, and student–teacher conflicts. Effective school counseling programs are a collaborative effort between the school counselor, teachers, families, and other educators to create an environment promoting student achievement, active engagement, equitable access to educational opportunities, and a rigorous curriculum for all students.

**School psychologists** have a minimum of a specialist-level degree (60 graduate semester hour minimum) in school psychology, which combines the disciplines of psychology and education. They typically have extensive knowledge of learning, motivation, behavior, childhood disabilities, assessment, evaluation, and school law. School psychologists specialize in analyzing complex student and school problems and selecting and implementing appropriate evidence-based interventions to improve outcomes at home and school. School psychologists consult with teachers and parents to provide coordinated services and supports for students struggling with learning disabilities, emotional and behavioral problems, and those experiencing anxiety, depression, emotional trauma, grief, and loss. They are regular members of school crisis teams and collaborate with school administrators and other educators to prevent and respond to crises. They have specialized training in conducting risk and threat assessments designed to identify students at-risk for harming themselves or others. School psychologists' training in evaluation, data collection, and interpretation can help ensure that decisions made about students, the school system, and related programs and learning supports are based on appropriate evidence.

**School social workers** have master's degrees in social work. They have special expertise in understanding family and community systems and linking students and their families with the community services that are essential for promoting student success. School social workers' training includes specialized preparation in cultural diversity, systems theory, social justice, risk assessment and intervention, consultation and collaboration, and clinical intervention strategies to address the mental health needs of students. They work to remedy barriers to learning created as a result of poverty, inadequate health care, and neighborhood violence. School social workers often focus on providing supports to vulnerable populations of students that have a high risk for truancy and dropping out of school, such as homeless and foster children, migrant populations, students transitioning between school and treatment programs or the juvenile justice system, or students experiencing domestic violence. They work closely with teachers, administrators, parents, and other educators to provide coordinated interventions and consultation designed to keep students in school and help their families access the supports needed to promote student success.

### **Roles of School Resource Officers**

The presence of school resource officers in schools has become an important part of the duty to protect students and staff on campus. Families and school officials in communities around the country benefit from a more effective relationship with local police as part of a school safety plan. Specialized knowledge of the law, local and national crime trends and safety threats, people and places in the community, and the local juvenile justice system combine to make SROs critical members of schools' policy-making teams when it comes to environmental safety planning and facilities management, school-safety policy, and emergency response preparedness.

In order to fully realize the benefits of the presence of local police, the SROs must be trained properly. Officers' law-enforcement knowledge and skill combine with specialized SRO training for their duties in the education setting. This training focuses on the special nature of school campuses, student needs and characteristics, and the educational and custodial interests of school personnel. SROs, as a result, possess a skill set unique among both law enforcement and education personnel that enables SROs to protect the community and the campus while supporting schools' educational mission. In addition to traditional law enforcement tasks, such as investigating whether drugs have been brought onto campus, SROs' daily activities cover a wide range of supportive activities and programs depending upon the type of school to which an SRO is assigned. This can include conducting law-related education sessions in the classroom, meeting with the school safety team, conducting safety assessments of the campus, and problem-solving with students or faculty. Trained and committed SROs are well suited to effectively protect and serve the school community. They contribute to the safe-schools team by ensuring a safe and secure campus, educating students about law-related topics, and mentoring students as informal counselors and role models.

### **ACTIONS PRINCIPALS CAN TAKE NOW TO PROMOTE SAFE AND SUCCESSFUL SCHOOLS**

Policies and funding that support comprehensive school safety and mental health efforts are critical to ensuring universal and long-term sustainability. However, school leaders can work toward more effective approaches now by taking the following actions.

- Establish a school leadership team that includes key personnel: principals, teachers, school-employed mental health professionals, instruction/curriculum professionals, school resource/safety officer, and a staff member skilled in data collection and analysis.
- Assess and identify needs, strengths, and gaps in existing services and supports (e.g., availability of school and community resources, unmet student mental health needs) that address the physical and psychological safety of the school community.
- Evaluate the safety of the school building and school grounds by examining the physical security features of the campus.
- Review how current resources are being applied, for example:
  - Are school employed mental health professionals providing training to teachers and support staff regarding resiliency and risk factors?
  - Do mental health staff participate in grade-level team meetings and provide ideas on how to effectively meet students' needs?
  - Is there redundancy in service delivery?
  - Are multiple overlapping initiatives occurring in different parts of the school or being applied to different sets of students?
- Implement an integrated approach that connects behavioral and mental health services and academic instruction and learning (e.g., are mental health interventions being integrated into an effective discipline or classroom management plan?).
- Provide adequate time for staff planning and problem solving via regular team meetings and professional learning communities. Identify existing and potential community partners, develop memoranda of understanding to clarify roles and responsibilities, and assign appropriate school staff to guide these partnerships, such as school-employed mental health professionals and principals.
- Provide professional development for school staff and community partners addressing school climate and safety, positive behavior, and crisis prevention, preparedness, and response.
- Engage students and families as partners in developing and implementing policies and practices that create and maintain a safe school environment.

## SUMMARY

Modern-day schools are highly complex and unique organizations that operate with an urgent imperative: Educate and prepare all children and youth to achieve their highest potential and contribute to society, no matter their socioeconomic background or geographic location. Creating safe, orderly, warm, and inviting school environments is critical to ensuring that all of our schools meet this goal. In order to create this type of environment, schools must work towards integrating services (academic, behavioral, social, emotional, and mental health) through collaboration using a multitiered system of support. Schools should strive to increase access to mental health services, increase the number of school employed mental health staff, and ensure that measures to improve school safety balance physical safety with psychological safety. To further support student safety, schools must develop effective emergency preparedness and crisis prevention, intervention, and response plans that are coordinated with local first responders. We look forward to working with the Administration, Congress, and state and local policy makers to help ensure that all schools are safe, supportive, and conducive to learning.

## GUIDELINES FOR EFFECTIVE PRACTICE

ASCA: <http://www.ascanationalmodel.org/>

- *ASCA National Model, 2008*

NAESP: <http://www.naesp.org/resources/1/Pdfs/LLC2-ES.pdf>

- *Leading Learning Communities: Standards for What Principals Should Know and Be Able to Do, 2008*

NASP Professional Standards: <http://www.nasponline.org/standards/2010standards.aspx>

- *Model for Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services, 2010*

NASRO: [http://www.nasro.org/sites/default/files/pdf\\_files/NASRO\\_Protect\\_and\\_Educate.pdf](http://www.nasro.org/sites/default/files/pdf_files/NASRO_Protect_and_Educate.pdf)

- *To Protect and Educate: The School Resource Officer and the Prevention of Violence in Schools, 2012*

NASSP: <http://www.nassp.org/school-improvement>

- *Breaking Ranks: The Comprehensive Framework for School Improvement, 2011*

SSWAA: <http://sswaa.org/associations/13190/files/naswschoolsocialworkstandards.pdf>

- *NASW School Social Work Standards, 2012*

## SUPPORTING RESEARCH AND RESOURCES

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- American School Counselor Association (ASCA): [www.schoolcounselor.org](http://www.schoolcounselor.org)  
 National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP): [www.naesp.org](http://www.naesp.org)  
 National Association of School Psychologists (NASP): [www.nasponline.org](http://www.nasponline.org)  
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 National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP): [www.nassp.org](http://www.nassp.org)  
 School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA): [www.sswaa.org](http://www.sswaa.org)

**Endorsing Organizations:**

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- |   |  |
|---|--|
| American Association of School Administrators | Alberti Center for Bullying Abuse Prevention |
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| American Council for School Social Work       | Character Education Partnership              |
| American Dance Therapy Association            | Child Mind Institute                         |
| American School Health Association            | Coalition for Community Schools              |

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Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders  
Council for Exceptional Children  
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International School Psychology Association  
Mental Health America  
Midwest Symposium for Leadership in Behavior Disorders  
National Association of School Nurses  
National Association of School Safety and Law Enforcement Officials

***State Associations***

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