

# **WORKING TOGETHER TO CREATE SAFE SCHOOLS**



The **National School Safety Center** was created to help combat school safety problems so that schools can be free to focus on the primary job of educating our nation's children. NSSC was established by Presidential directive in 1984 as a partnership of the United States Departments of Justice and Education. NSSC is now a private, non-profit organization serving school administrators, teachers, law officers, community leaders, government officials and others interested in creating safe schools throughout the United States and internationally. For more information about our organization, products and services, please visit our website [www.nssc1.org](http://www.nssc1.org) or call us at 805/373-9977.

## **NATIONAL SCHOOL SAFETY CENTER**

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While most schools have existing safety programs, these programs often need conscientious, creative application to improve their effectiveness. Following is a list of ideas and activities that will work to create safer schools. Some of these suggestions may already be part of district or school site programs. Many of these ideas may be initiated and carried out by school-site principals or parents' groups working with local school administrators or by school district public relations directors, working cooperatively with school superintendents and other district administrators.

Perhaps the most important strategy is to place school safety on the educational agenda. This includes developing a safe schools plan — an ongoing process that encompasses the development of district-wide crime prevention policies, in-service training, crisis preparation, interagency cooperation and student/parent participation. An appointed task force should develop and implement the plan with representatives from all elements of the school community — board members, employees, students, parents, law enforcers, government and business leaders, the media and local residents.

The following ideas address school safety. They work toward achieving quality education and safer schools. Through such activities, schools can improve campus climate and discipline, as well as enlist participation from various groups to create partnerships in this important effort. Educators who take active roles and initiate positive programs — rather than just react when negative conditions arise — help create successful schools.

### **PRIMARY STRATEGIES**

*Primary strategies to help inform, persuade, and integrate school safety and public opinion. These ideas will facilitate planning and the implementation of the remaining strategies.*

- Place school Safety on the education agenda. Convince your school board, superintendent and principals that quality education requires safe, disciplined and peaceful schools. Stress the basic concept that school safety is a community concern requiring a community response. School administrators should facilitate and coordinate community efforts which promote safe schools.
  - Develop a district-wide safe schools plan, as well as individual plans for each school in the system. Include systematic procedures for dealing with specific types of crises and ensuring the safety of students and school personnel.
  - Develop a school safety clearinghouse for current literature and data on school safety issues. Key topics to include are school crime and violence, drugs, discipline, attendance and dropouts, vandalism, security, weapons, youth suicide, child abuse and school law.
  - Establish a systematic, district-wide mandatory incident reporting system. The policy should include the development of a standard form to provide complete and
- consistent information on accidents, discipline problems, vandalism and security problems as well as suspected child abuse. After the policy and reporting form are developed, distribute them to all district personnel and monitor compliance.
- Prepare a school safety public information brochure. Briefly explain the important issues and the specific roles individuals and groups can play in developing schools that are safe havens for learning.
  - Develop safety policies. Keep current with trends and exemplary programs in education, public relations and school safety. Make plans and implement them with authority and conviction. (Confidence and willingness to accept responsibility are persuasive qualities in the minds of district administrators and other school employees.)
  - Develop and regularly update a school safety fact sheet for your district. Provide current statistics on incidents of crime and violence, disciplinary actions and suspensions, attendance and dropouts, and

vandalism and repair costs. Compare school crime and violence rates with crime rates of the local community. Use this data to inform and educate the public and media.

- Create a school safety advisory group. This advisory group should include representatives from all constituencies, especially law enforcers, judges, lawyers, health and human services professionals, parents and the media. Individuals should be able to articulate the desires of the groups they represent and relate advisory group actions back to their peers. Select members who can be relied upon for consistent, continued support and who seek solutions rather than recognition and status from their participation. Recruit group members with special qualifications, such as policy-making authority, access to the media, ability to mobilize volunteers or expertise in raising funds.
- Support America's Safe Schools Week. The third week (Sunday through Saturday) in October is designated each year as America's Safe Schools Week. This week is an appropriate time to initiate many school safety ideas.
- Develop and maintain a community resource file of people known for their abilities to shape public opinion and accomplish goals. Rely on advice from community leaders and the local media to develop a comprehensive list. Solicit the support of these individuals. Keep them informed about district news and issues, invite them to various school activities, and seek their involvement in the safe schools planning process.
- Build a public relations team, starting with school employees. The education of students is a business that must compete with other interests for public support. School employees are the best public relations people because they are inside authorities. Treat these people as important team players. Print business cards for all school employees. This is a simple and relatively inexpensive

expression of the district's respect for its employees and their work. Honor meritorious service of school employees with special recognition days and awards. Nominate school principals, teachers and staff for recognition awards and programs sponsored by local groups or state and national associations and government agencies.

- Create a comprehensive identity program for your district. An institution's identity or image is, in many ways, a direct reflection of its administration, school employees and students. Develop a symbol to be used on all printed material. Special promotional items using this symbol can include shirts, hats, lapel pins, coffee mugs and bumper stickers. Award these items to teachers and staff, volunteer parents and students for exemplary work that has promoted a positive campus climate. A thoughtfully developed slogan can also have a positive effect on the public's perception of the district.
- Publish a district magazine or newsletter. Distribute it as widely as possible to board members, district employees, parents, students, community residents, business and civic leaders, local government officials and the media. The content should be balanced, with specific district news and special features on topical education issues. Distinguish the publication with a name, not a generic title such as "bulletin" or "newsletter." Readers are more inclined to relate to a publication if aided by a mental association between the title and the contents. Additionally, it is important to take the advice of the advertising industry and package your product as attractively as possible to encourage the public to examine the contents.

## **ADDITIONAL STRATEGIES**

*There is no foolproof menu of "perfect strategies" for safe schools. However, these additional suggestions can provide some working ideas for the development of your individualized "Safe School Plan." They can assist you in working with school board members, school employees, students, parents, community residents (including senior citizens), service groups, business leaders, government representatives, law enforcers and media representatives. School safety is about community will. It is about adapting strategies to fit your needs as opposed to simply adopting someone else's program.*

## **WORKING WITH SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS**

*Board of education members need to "buy into" the importance of public support for school safety.*

- Place board members at the top of your mailing list. Include them in school safety programs and initiatives. Ensure that they receive copies of every internally and externally distributed communication: the district magazine, student newsletters, events calendars, teacher memorandums, parent notices, activity announcements, news releases and letters of commendation. For especially significant or controversial issues, see that board members receive advance copies of materials.
- Invite board members to visit school sites regularly. Vary the itinerary for a comprehensive look; include lunch with students and staff. This personal contact helps break down barriers and stereotypes.
- Add school safety to the education mission of the school district. A phrase which states that: "It is the goal of {ABC Public Schools} to provide a safe, welcoming and secure environment for all children and those professionals who serve them," is an excellent beginning. Such a statement then allows the school district to develop a series of supporting policies related to safe, welcoming and secure schools.

## WORKING WITH SCHOOL EMPLOYEES

*Often school employees are the only contacts community residents have with a school. As inside authorities, employees' attitudes and opinions carry a great deal of weight locally. Consistent district communication can minimize internal conflict and promote teamwork. Take the time to circulate among school employees, asking for advice based on their firsthand experiences.*

- Coordinate school safety workshops that outline the relationship of school safety to quality education and emphasize the need for public support of schools. Educate employees about their specific safety responsibilities. Invite law enforcers, lawyers, judges, health and human services officials, and probation officers to teach about the juvenile justice system and its relationship to effective schools.
- Sponsor classroom management seminars. Use actual case studies, such as student misbehavior problems from local schools, as part of the training. This helps teachers identify more readily with such situations and mitigates an attitude of "that doesn't happen here."
- Encourage teachers to contact parents regularly to inform them about the good things students are doing. Develop a system to enable teachers to call or write parents routinely and conveniently. Provide space and time for teachers to meet regularly with parents at school and recommend that teachers initiate these informal meetings as frequently as possible. Monitor the participation.
- Incorporate safety topics into the curriculum. For instance, social studies or civics classes can discuss Gallup's annual poll of the public's attitudes toward the public schools; physical education courses can include instruction on physical safety; chemistry classes can examine the negative effects of drugs on the human body; English classes can correlate literature study with essays on self-esteem, character-building or student misbehavior; and graphics classes can promote safer campuses by designing posters featuring effective safety messages.
- Develop a policy, form or box for suggestions to improve campus climate. Respond to all messages promptly and, when appropriate, personally thank the individual who offered the advice.
- Include retired school employees on the publication's mailing list. These individuals often can be a school's most vocal supporters and active volunteers.

## WORKING WITH STUDENTS

*Students are both causes and victims of much of the crime and misbehavior on campuses. Most of the following ideas and activities require initiation by administrators and teachers. Once students experience the positive results of the activities, however, they likely will assume the responsibility for maintaining such activities.*

- Initiate programs to promote student responsibility for safer schools. Create a "student leader" group consisting of leaders from all formal and informal campus groups. Assist this representative group in modeling and encouraging school safety activities among their peers. Student government representatives can also form a student safety committee to identify safety problems and solutions.
- Encourage student input in district policy. Appoint one or more student representatives to the school board. These students would participate in discussions and planning but not be voting members.
- Create and publicize safety incentive programs that share a percentage of the district's savings with schools if vandalism is reduced. Such programs encourage students to take responsibility for vandalism prevention. Often students are allowed to help decide what projects to help fund.
- Coordinate student courts. Student judges, lawyers, jurors, bailiffs and court clerks, trained by local justice system experts, hear and try cases involving fellow students. Student courts make real judgments and pass real sentences.
- Purchase conflict resolution curricular materials that will provide staff and student training in solving problems and conflicts. Enlist student mediators to calm tensions among classmates and to provide a positive influence on school climate.
- Establish local branches of student safety groups, such as SADD (Students Against Driving Drunk) and Arrive Alive, which sponsor alcohol-free social activities. Consider promoting student and parent groups that provide rides home to teen-agers who have been drinking.
- Develop a "buddy system." Assign current students to newcomers to facilitate easy transitions. Assign older, bigger students to look out for students who seem to be bullied by others.
- Plan a community beautification campaign for the school and neighborhood using students as a work crew. Graffiti and vandalized areas should be priorities. With professional guidance, students can help maintain campuses, parks and other community areas. Beautification projects enhance the appearance of the community and develop a strong sense of pride among participants.
- Consider establishing a student tip line which provides an anonymous, non-threatening way for young people to report school crime.

## WORKING WITH PARENTS

*In Discipline: A Parent's Guide, the National PTA identifies parents' main responsibility: Set a good example. Children learn more by parents' actions than from parents' words. Parental pride and involvement in the school sets a positive example for children.*

- Make time for any parent who wants to meet. Treat visiting parents as colleagues in the business of educating children. Always listen before talking — parents often just need to be heard. Try to conclude sessions with a commitment of support from parents.
- Develop a parent-on-campus policy that makes it convenient and comfortable for parents to visit the school. Get the program off the ground by inviting an initial group of parent participants who can spread the word. Initiate breakfast or lunch clubs for working parents. Flexible meeting times will accommodate working parents.
- Develop a receptive, systematic policy regarding meeting with parents. Many parents are concerned about their children's educational progress and safety, about school policies and programs, and about taking a proactive part in bettering the school climate. Ensure that parents are treated with respect and courtesy as colleagues in the education and development of their children.
- Call parents at home or even at work to congratulate them on a child's special achievement or to thank them for support on a special project. Write short letters of appreciation or thank-you notes.
- Help establish a policy in which parents become financially liable for damage done by their children. Parents and children need to be made aware of the serious consequences for criminal actions. (This already is state law in many parts of the country.)

## WORKING WITH COMMUNITY LEADERS

*Just as communities work together to prevent crime with "Neighborhood Watch" programs, local residents can mobilize to make schools safer. Such mobilization efforts target community residents without school-aged children. It is essential to communicate to this critical group that they do have direct as well as indirect relationships to local schools. Public opinion polls suggest that the more citizens are involved in schools, the more likely people are to have a favorable opinion of schools.*

- Hold a series of briefings for community residents to inform them about school problems directly affecting the neighborhood. Property values decline when neighborhood schools have poor reputations and surrounding areas suffer from vandalism, crime by truants and drug trafficking. Form "School Watch" programs in which neighbors around the school are asked to watch for and report suspicious activities to school or law enforcement officials. Post signs on the school grounds: "This school is protected by a neighborhood School Watch." Solicit advice from community residents and conduct follow-up meetings to keep community representatives updated on progress.
- Start a "Safe House" program that recruits responsible community residents. Children learn that homes posting "Safe House" signs are safe places to go if they are in danger or need assistance. Volunteers need to be closely screened before they are accepted as participants.
- Use outdoor posters or school marquees to announce school events to area residents; invite their participation or attendance. Roadside signs declaring, "A community is known by the schools it keeps," also have been used to stimulate community partnerships.
- Recruit parents, community residents without school-aged children, retired teachers and senior citizens to form a welcoming committee to greet new residents. Enlist volunteers to provide information, answer questions about school activities, encourage participation and prepare school activity packets for distribution.
- Use school facilities to offer adult education classes and health clinics. Course topics can range from arts and crafts to exercise and aerobics to income tax preparation. These classes are beneficial to community residents and integrate them into the school community. Encourage senior citizens to participate in such activities. Time and experience are prized assets in all public relations planning, and senior citizens are often able to supply those two commodities. The most important outgrowth of such enlistment is the development of mutual respect and appreciation among students, school personnel and seniors.
- Recruit senior citizens in your community to participate at local schools. Arrange for seniors to make school presentations to history classes about public attitudes and "firsthand" experiences during significant times in our country's history. Small group discussions, facilitated by senior volunteers, can be especially educational. Seniors can also participate as teacher or staff aides, student advisors, mentors and tutors, special activity organizers, playground supervisors and dance chaperones.
- Issue "Golden Apple Cards" to senior volunteers who work on school projects. The cards could allow free or reduced-price admission to school programs such as musical concerts, plays or athletic events.
- Help integrate students and senior citizens by arranging for students to visit senior centers, convalescent centers or retirement homes. Students can present plays and musical programs; home economic classes can prepare special meals; art classes can decorate the facilities; and engineering or shop classes can make small repairs. Younger children particularly can add a great deal of joy with regular visits to seniors. Some school groups may wish to participate in "adopt-a-grandparent" programs.

## **WORKING WITH SERVICE GROUPS**

*Most communities have dozens of service, civic, religious and other special-interest groups. Each organization's headquarters or the president's address should be included on the mailing list to regularly receive the district magazine and other important announcements and publications.*

- Use school facilities and available resources to help youth groups such as scouting or Camp Fire troops, boys' and girls' clubs, YMCA and YWCA, 4-H, Red Cross youth programs and youth sports clubs. Schools should make every effort to foster continuing relationships with the groups, families and individuals who support schools and use school facilities and resources. Establish an advisory council of representatives from all the groups to coordinate needs and resources and plan future joint ventures.
- Encourage the participation of clergy in the development of citizenship education programs. Character, respect and self-discipline are appropriate topics for both sermons and classroom lectures. Consider organizing a representative group of parents, educators and religious leaders to develop a booklet that discusses these issues.
- Use service group newsletters to inform members about special school programs. Submit filler, including student essays and art, to editors. Use these forums to encourage school volunteerism as part of public service work.

## **WORKING WITH BUSINESS LEADERS**

*The business community is a natural partner for local schools. Businesses have an immediate vested interest in good schools: quality education for children of their employees. Businesses also have a long-range interest: a well-trained work force. The quality of life and the quality of education in the community are inseparable. The following ideas are suggested to take advantage of this vested interest. The logical way to start business partnerships is to meet with representatives from the local chamber of commerce and labor unions.*

- Arrange regular presentations by business leaders to students, teachers and parents. Professional, practical advice is invaluable in describing various professions and career opportunities. Coordinate career days where business leaders participate in seminars, distribute information packets and present demonstrations. Coordinate field trips to business offices and production plants. Witnessing the practical application of skills can make students more appreciative and understanding of classroom instruction.
- Promote "adopt-a-school" programs. This trend in school-business partnerships unites a business with a school needing resources the business can donate, such as equipment or excess supplies. Businesses can provide company or staff services, such as bookkeeping, transportation, building repairs, maintenance and professional instruction on computers or other equipment.
- Develop a qualified student employment pool. Work with business leaders to develop the criteria for a desirable employee. Closely screen applicants for the pool based on the qualifications requested by prospective employers. Advertise the availability of this conscientious, willing work force to local businesses.
- Help realtors "sell" your schools. Quality schools are a high priority with prospective homebuyers. Work with real estate agents, brokers and boards to promote the positive qualities of your schools. Create a special task force to address problems such as vandalism, graffiti, loitering students, unkempt school grounds or even low test scores. General information and training seminars, which explain how real estate personnel can "sell" schools, can be added to regular office and real estate board meetings.
- Solicit support from local businesses patronized by students and their parents. Develop a marketing strategy that provides discounts to students and parents and that simultaneously promotes local businesses' products or services. Retail outlets of all kinds, including gas stations, can benefit from such promotions.
- Trade advertising space in your district magazine for "in-kind" services. This often is a valuable "foot in the door" with future major donors.

## **WORKING WITH GOVERNMENT REPRESENTATIVES**

*Unanimous political support for quality education presents schools with a variety of opportunities. Many federal, state and local agencies and officials provide resources and services that can be helpful to schools. Identify the key government officials and political representatives in your area and add their names to your mailing list. At the same time, start a file on materials, resources and services they have to offer. Learn their primary interests in schools and explore means to effectively integrate those interests with your needs. If top policymakers are not easily accessible, request that they assign a regular contact person to work with you.*

- Establish a school district orientation plan for newly elected government representatives. By initiating these relationships, you enhance opportunities for future access. Offer to compile data needed by government officials to support education proposals and provide lawmakers with the implications of particular legislation from a practitioner's point of view.

- Routinely invite your government representatives to school functions. Always recognize them formally when they attend. Give elected representatives advance warning if the audience's attitudes may create or reflect conflict. Although you may disagree with officials over policies, as fellow public servants, your professional courtesy will be appreciated.
- Ask government officials to sponsor student government days. Consider teaming government representatives with students to propose solutions to real problems faced by students and schools, including drug abuse, dropouts, vandalism, personal safety, and fiscal and social problems.

## **WORKING WITH LAW ENFORCERS**

*Law enforcers and school personnel represent highly trained professionals who have the welfare of the students and school community in mind. Annual planning sessions and monthly meetings with law enforcement representatives, district administrators and school employees can provide the opportunity for reciprocal briefings on safety issues and prevention and intervention strategies.*

- Request a risk management or safety assessment of your schools by local law enforcement agency personnel. This procedure will validate safety concerns and help establish response strategies.
- Create a "Joint Power Agreement" or "Memorandum of Understanding" as to how the school and local law enforcement agencies will work together in terms of handling a crisis or campus disruptions. The agreement should cover such aspects as reciprocal crime reporting, procedures for handling rumors and threats, crisis prevention and response.
- Establish an "Officer Friendly" program at your schools. Invite local law enforcers to make presentations to students on child safety, drug abuse prevention, and juvenile justice practices and policies. Visiting law enforcers can demonstrate tools of their trade, including trained police dogs, breathalyzers and emergency vehicles. When students become comfortable in relating to law enforcers, students learn to further appreciate both the officers and the laws they enforce.
- Coordinate student and staff "ride-along" programs. The one-on-one time with officers on patrol is an effective means for law enforcers to gain respect and inspire confidence.
- Work with law enforcers and parents to fingerprint young children as a safety measure. Fingerprinting is usually done at a school site by law enforcers. The prints then are given to the parent or guardian.
- Pair law enforcers with high-risk youths, similar to the "Big Brother" program. Such relationships can be an important step in changing delinquent behavior patterns.

## **WORKING WITH THE MEDIA**

*Tapping existing channels of communication is perhaps the most efficient means of information dissemination. The media are considered "independent," objective sources of information. Consequently, a school issue reported by the media is likely to have considerably more impact on public attitudes than the same message presented in the district magazine or delivered by the district administration. Do not argue with those who incorrectly report or quote information. Take a positive approach. Contact the media outlet and provide the corrected account. Often the media will update the report or offer a retraction. Even if this does not occur, the contact may make the reporter more careful to be accurate with your material in the future.*

- Learn all you can about the media's needs, operations, deadlines, services, and particularly the reporter and editor who cover school news and receive district news releases and advances. Know the deadlines — release stories so all or most of the media will get them at the same time.
- Encourage the media to support school events and issues. Propose feature or documentary topics of potential viewer or reader interest that also promote schools. Extend an open invitation for media staff to visit the schools and learn about programs.
- Send public service announcements to the media. Learn what public service directors want and submit announcements appropriate to those needs, including camera-ready art for print media; 10-, 20- or 30-second spots for radio (submitted on paper or prerecorded); or slides, copy or background information for television. Often TV and radio stations will work with local public service institutions to produce original announcements. Give this option serious consideration, because when jointly produced, public service announcements are virtually guaranteed regular broadcast placements, and costs are reduced to little or nothing.
- Solicit free or discounted copies of daily newspapers. Encourage teachers to incorporate news coverage into English, civics and social studies courses.

While considering these ideas, it is important to remember two things. First, what works is good public relations. Second, what does not work is not necessarily bad public relations. Undoubtedly, there are dozens of other strategies and positive options that will emerge out of safe school planning. It is our hope that these suggested strategies will spark additional ideas that promote the safety and success of all children.

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