

Student Perceptions of Safety and Their Impact on Creating a Safe School Environment

Background

A safe school environment is crucial to the healthy academic and social development of students, and the safety of a school environment affects a range of factors, from staff retention to parent satisfaction. Perhaps most important, student perceptions of safety affect their academic achievement. When students feel safe, they are better able to focus on learning, which in turn leads to increased academic achievement. Therefore, stakeholders in school emergency preparedness should strive to determine whether their students and staff are comfortable in their school environment, both physically and emotionally, and whether students' families are comfortable with the school environment in which their children learn.

Threats to student and staff safety within their school environment present a challenge to school emergency planning teams as they work to ensure that the instructional environment for students is safe. Recent research even suggests that *perceptions* of school safety may have a greater impact on student success than *actual* safety.¹ These perceptions should be kept in mind as planning teams address potential or actual threats before, during, and after an occurrence and as they incorporate the five mission areas of prevention, protection, mitigation, response, and recovery into their preparedness protocols.

A Look at the Issue Today

Schools, school districts, and state education agencies should ensure that perceptions of safety are positive and actual safety is high, and address threats such as bullying and harassment that can affect safety. The [2016 Indicators of School Crime and Safety](#) report, published by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), states that in 2015 there were approximately 841,100 nonfatal victimizations at school among students ages 12–18 and that about 21% of students ages 12–18 reported being bullied at school during the school day. According to the 2015 national [Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey \(YRBSS\)](#), administered by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 5.6% of students in grades 9–12 that year did not go to school because they felt unsafe.² For girls, sexual harassment was associated with feeling unsafe at school,³ and 46% of girls in grades 7–12 and 22% of boys in the same group had

¹ Godstein, S. E., Young, A., & Boyd, C. (2008). Relational aggression at school: Associations with school safety and social climate. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 37, 641.

² U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2015). Trends in the prevalence of behaviors that contribute to violence on school property: National YRBS: 1991–2015. Retrieved from https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/yrbs/pdf/trends/2015_us_violenceschool_trend_yrbs.pdf

³ Chiodo, D., Wolfe, D. A., Crooks, C., Hughes, R., & Jaffe, P. (2009). Impact of sexual harassment victimization by peers on subsequent adolescent victimization and adjustment. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 45(3), 246–252

experienced such harassment at least once.⁴ Bullying, perhaps the most influential determinant of whether a student feels safe at school, has affected 28% of students in grades 6–12, according to NCES. In the 2015 YRBSS, 20.2% of high school students reported being bullied on school property, while for middle school students this statistic jumps to 45%. The 2015 YRBSS also found that 16% of high school students have been cyberbullied, a topic of increasing concern in schools.

Studies have also revealed the effects of safety on student achievement. Data from *Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2016* reveal that third-graders who reported that they were frequently victimized scored lower in reading, mathematics, and science than their peers. Data on parents who homeschool their children are revealing as well—91% of parents who homeschool cite a concern about the environment of schools as an important reason for homeschooling, with 25% of parents citing it as the most important reason.⁵ Further, research has found that although parent perceptions of school climate and safety do not directly affect student outcomes, they do influence them indirectly via three factors: influencing the student’s perception of school and attitude toward it, influencing student engagement with the school, and deciding where the student will ultimately attend school.⁶

The Research Alliance for New York City Schools also analyzed longitudinal data, comprising teacher responses to the New York City School Survey from 278 middle schools between 2007 and 2012. Kraft and colleagues (2016) looked at four dimensions of school climate: leadership and professional development, high academic expectations for students, teacher relationships and collaboration, and school safety and order. The study findings were consistent with those of other research that found larger improvements in student achievement are associated with schools with higher quality climates/contextual. The study also revealed that climate/contextual improvements were associated with corresponding achievement gains. Specifically, of the four dimensions identified, safety was most strongly associated with academic improvement.⁷

⁴ American Association of University Women. (2011). *Crossing the line: Sexual harassment at school*. Retrieved from <https://www.aauw.org/files/2013/02/Crossing-the-Line-Sexual-Harassment-at-School.pdf>

⁵ Noel, A., Stark, P., and Redford, J. (2016). *Parent and family involvement in education, from the National Household Education Surveys Program of 2012* (NCES 2013-028.REV2), National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC. Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2013/2013028rev.pdf>

⁶ Schueler, B. E., Capotosto, L., Bahena, S., McIntyre, J., & Gehlbach, H. (2014). Measuring parent perceptions of school climate. *Psychological Assessment*, 26(1), 314. Retrieved from https://dash.harvard.edu/bitstream/handle/1/11143738/PAS_Schueler%20et%20al_FINAL_for%20distribution.pdf?sequence=1

⁷ Kraft, M. A., Marinell, W. H., & Shen-Wei Yee, D. (2016). School organizational contexts, teacher turnover, and student achievement: Evidence from panel data. *American Education Research Journal*, 53(5), 1411–1449.

Relation to Emergency Operations Plan (EOP) Development and Emergency Preparedness

Perceptions of school safety help determine school climate, which is defined by the [Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans \(School Guide\)](#) as “a range of campus conditions, including safety, relationships and engagement, and the environment, that may influence student learning and well-being” (p. 53). The *School Guide* was developed in partnership with six federal departments and agencies, including the U.S. Department of Education (ED), with roles and responsibilities in school safety, security, and emergency management.

School climate and emergency preparedness, including the five mission areas of prevention, protection, mitigation, response, and recovery, have a reciprocal relationship—a positive school climate will assist with emergency preparedness efforts, and being well prepared will help with creating a positive school climate. For example, a student who identifies with and talks often with a positive role model within the school is more likely to report potential threats to the trusted adult; such reports could help the school’s threat assessment team. As another example, planning teams can write broad and targeted violence prevention efforts into the school EOP to decrease the prevalence of violence (and, subsequently, increase school safety and school preparedness).

Additionally, a positive school climate can influence how well a school is able to prevent, respond to, and recover from emergencies. A positive school climate can reduce the incidence of behaviors, such as bullying and harassment, that can create emergencies, and students are more likely to report potential threats with trusted adults. Schools with positive climates promote the social and emotional competencies that enable students to cope with the challenges that may be brought on during and following emergencies in a healthy manner, and staff are able to handle problematic behavior in students before it becomes a serious threat to the school or to the students. Finally, a positive school climate can assist in recovery by fostering an environment in which members of the school community understand the importance of social and emotional health in the aftermath of an emergency.

The *School Guide* outlines a six-step planning process for developing, reviewing, or revising a high-quality school EOP. Schools can incorporate student perceptions of safety—under the overarching goal of creating a positive school climate—into this federally recommended planning process in the following ways.

In **Step 1: Form a Collaborative Planning Team**, schools should include staff with a role in improving school climate on the planning team so that their efforts are coordinated and integrated throughout the school EOP. Members could include classroom staff and non-classroom-based staff who interact with students outside of the classroom (e.g., cafeteria workers, coaches, and librarians). A representative of parents and guardians

can also provide valuable input into perceptions of safety and how problem areas can be addressed.

In **Step 2: Understand the Situation**, the planning team identifies threats and hazards that are likely to affect the school community. One integral source of such information is culture and climate assessments. The purpose of a culture and climate assessment is to gain knowledge of students' and staff's perceptions of their safety and to learn of any problem behaviors that need to be addressed to improve school climate, such as bullying or online trends. Some adversarial, incidental, and human-caused threats that relate to school climate and may be identified and then prioritized during this step include bullying, cyberbullying, bomb threats, criminal threats or actions, gang violence, active aggressors, and suicide.

In **Step 3: Determine Goals and Objectives**, the planning team develops goals and objectives for each of the threats and hazards identified and prioritized in Step 2. These may include threats that relate to school climate and, therefore, the goals and objectives may address creating a positive school climate. Planning teams should work to determine goals and objectives to achieve the best outcome for (1) before, (2) during, and (3) after an incident or emergency occurs, as illustrated in the *before* examples below.

Active Aggressor Goal Example 1 (before): Reduce instances of violence on school grounds.

- Objective 1.1: Provide training to staff on threat assessment.
- Objective 1.2: Establish an anonymous reporting system for parents, students, and staff.

Bullying Goal Example 1 (before): Reduce the incidence of bullying within the school.

- Objective 1.1: Initiate a comprehensive schoolwide antibullying program.

In **Step 4: Plan Development**, the planning team develops courses of action for accomplishing each of the objectives developed in Step 3. An important component of this step is to use scenario-based planning to imagine the different ways that a threat or hazard may unfold, and the steps the school and community partners should take to address that threat or hazard. These procedures, paired with their goals and objectives, will likely result in the creation of an annex (Step 5) for each threat and hazard addressed in Step 3, such as an Active Aggressor Annex and Bullying Annex.

In **Step 5: Plan Preparation, Review, and Approval**, the school EOP is formatted, reviewed, approved, and shared. Those threats relating to school climate that were

identified in Step 2 and then addressed and included in annexes in Steps 3 and 4, such as the Active Aggressor Annex and Bullying Annex, will be organized into the Threat- and Hazard-Specific Annexes section of the school EOP.

Finally, in **Step 6: Plan Implementation and Maintenance**, the plan is shared with stakeholders, who are trained on the plan and their responsibilities. It is also important to exercise the plan and its annexes by conducting drills, tabletop exercises, functional exercises, or full-scale exercises. As with the rest of the school EOP, the school planning team should review and revise any annexes over time, including after actual events and exercises.

Key Resources

Several federal resources are available to support student perceptions of safety. These include:

- **School Climate Improvement Resource Package, NCSSE**. This Web page contains a collection of resources for stakeholders interested in addressing and improving school climate. Components include a Quick Guide that provides an overview of methods to improve school climate, a reference manual that provides lists of goals, strategies, outputs, and resources on improving school climate; an Action Guide for school leaders that provides steps on how to support a healthy school climate; a resource list for stakeholders to assist in interpreting school climate data; and online modules that provide an opportunity to practice skills related to managing school climate. <https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/scirp/about>
- **School Climate and Discipline, ED**. This Web page contains federal guidance, tools, data, and resources for creating a supportive school climate while decreasing suspensions and expulsions. Resources include a School Discipline Guidance Package released jointly by ED and the U.S. Department of Justice. <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/index.html>
- **Office of Special Education Programs TA Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), ED**. PBIS improves social, emotional, and academic outcomes for all students, including students with disabilities and students from underrepresented groups. Its Website offers training, technical assistance, briefs, policies, tools, videos, and presentations to building systems capacity for implementing a multi-tiered approach to social, emotional, and behavior support, including transforming school climate. <https://www.pbis.org/>
- **School Climate and Emergencies, REMS TA Center**. This Web page offers information on criteria for a positive school climate within the framework of prevention of, response to, and recovery from an emergency. Sections on conducting a comprehensive needs assessment and using multi-tiered interventions and supports provide data-driven information on these topics within school climate, providing users with in-depth

information and links that may inform approaches to addressing school climate.

<https://rems.ed.gov/K12SchoolClimateAndEmerg.aspx>

- **How Positive School Climate Can Enhance School Safety, REMS TA Center.** This Webinar provides an overview on how a positive school climate can help schools and communities prevent emergencies and enhance school safety. It also provides information on effective strategies for creating positive conditions for learning to achieve academically and behaviorally important outcomes for all students.
<https://rems.ed.gov/EnhanceSchoolSafety.aspx>
- **Addressing Adversarial- and Human-Caused Threats That May Impact Students, Staff, and Visitors, REMS TA Center.** This topic-specific Web page contains resources from the REMS TA Center, ED, and federal agency partners related to planning for adversarial- and human-caused threats that may affect school districts, schools, community partners, and parents. Such school climate-related issues covered on this Web page include bullying, criminal threats or actions, gang violence, protests and walkout demonstrations, sextortion, sexual violence or assault, suicide, bomb threats, active shooters, and adult sexual misconduct. https://rems.ed.gov/Resources_Hazards-Threats_Adversarial_Threats.aspx
- **Step 2: Understand the Situation, REMS TA Center.** This Web page presents information on Step 2 of the recommended six-step planning process for developing a high-quality school EOP. The process for identifying, assessing, and prioritizing threats and hazards is described, and a table describing the various types of assessments that planning teams should undertake is included. A sample risk assessment worksheet is also provided.
<https://rems.ed.gov/K12PPStep02.aspx>