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# School Safety Assessment: Responses from School Principal Interns

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*School shootings in America occur with alarming frequency and little predictability or allowance for preparation and planning. This crisis demands attention and assessment from a variety of stakeholders, especially school leaders. Future school leaders require a curriculum that includes safe school assessment and intervention. Washington state school administrator interns responded to a safe school assessment checklist of key attributes to assess their knowledge of safe school planning and intervention. The findings indicate inconsistency in preparation and planning and provide an opportunity for school leaders to address school safety that can lead to the preparation and development of an extensive network to protect students and those who care for them.*

**Keywords:** School safety, safety assessment, principal interns, safety procedures

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## **Introduction**

I started my career as an educator in the 1990s, when school violence was either less frequent or had limited reporting. It was rarely discussed, and emergency plans mainly consisted of fire and earthquake drills. The first time the topic came up was in 1996 when I was teaching in a middle school and a shooter killed three and wounded one at a middle school in Moses Lake, WA. I was educated about school violence; the process was to lock the door, cover the windows, and hide the students. As an educator, I thought about what could happen, but I never thought it would happen. In the year 2000, everything changed.

I took on my first principal position at a middle school and within two weeks our school was notified to go into a lockdown with no one permitted to enter or leave the building. For more than a hour, no other information was provided. I thought to myself, “Welcome to the role of school leader without clear procedures.” My job was keeping all students and faculty safe—period. Later in the day I was informed that there was a gang-related shooting one block from the school. During that same year, we had a student hold his classmates and a teacher hostage. Fortunately, we were able to de-escalate the situation and no one was injured. From these experiences, I knew we were facing new challenges for which

schools were not ready nor trained.

### **A National Concern**

It is clear that our country has a serious issue with school violence and unclear answers on how to solve the problem. According to Pane (2018), as of Fall 2019 there have been 283 school shootings since the Sandy Hook shooting in 2012. Pane posits that the “shock factor” has disappeared; school shootings feel like common, everyday events. Guns are part of the culture in the United States and in some schools teachers and administrators carry weapons. For example, the Toppenish School District in the Yakima Valley of Washington State has allowed educators to carry concealed weapons on campus since 2014. According to the district superintendent, the board made the decision after the Sandy Hook Shooting (Guerrero, 2016). Additionally, many schools are locked and visitors must use a buzzer to gain permission to enter the building. According to law enforcement, a buzzer system makes each campus feel more secure (Davis, 2019).

Schools around the country engage in active-shooter drills and create emergency plans that schools hope will reduce injuries or death. The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) has suggested that safety planners must tailor simulations to meet the needs of the various participants (Paine, 2018). Simulations provide the imitation of situations so that schools can practice drills to prepare adults and children for real-life circumstances. In addition, the National Association of School Resource Officers (2017) found that when conducting simulations, it is important to provide education and consider whether participants will find the experience traumatic.

### **Complexity of School Safety**

Alongside processes and procedures, there are additional issues that impact school safety. First, schools serve students who experience emotional issues, including depression, bullying, abuse, and neglect. Emotional issues often present in behavior issues. An additional complication is the lack of a strong social services component available for school-age children. A NASP report concluded “school safety is not achieved with a single program or piece of security equipment. Rather, effective school safety starts with prevention; provides for students’ mental health; integrates physical and psychological safety; and engages schools, families, and communities as partners” (Cowan, 2013, p. 1). The providing of mental health services can lead to improved behavior, climate, and academic gains, which can contribute to increased school safety (NASP, 2013). Additionally, failure to meet the needs of at-risk students can have a lasting effect on schools, school safety, and the future of students. The Parent Advocacy Coalition for Educational Rights (Pacer Center) wrote

Youth with disabilities are at a higher risk for involvement in the juvenile

justice system. Numerous studies show that special education students and those with emotional or behavioral disorders or learning disabilities are arrested and incarcerated at a higher rate than their nondisabled peers. A 2005 national survey of education services in juvenile corrections found that on average, 33 percent of youth in the education programs were receiving special education services. The study also found that almost 20 percent of the youth with emotional and behavioral disorders were arrested while in secondary school, approximately 13 percent of juvenile offenders had developmental disabilities, and 36 percent had learning disabilities. Many of these young people are referred to the corrections system directly from school. (2013, p.1)

Failure to provide necessary emotional, social, and academic supports increases school safety issues.

### **Firearm Access**

In the United States, weapons are easy to access. According to the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP),

Danger from firearms is a disturbing reality in the lives of our children and adolescents. Almost one-third of all homes contain guns<sup>1</sup> with estimates that 50 million Americans own 300 million guns. Despite continuing educational efforts, the majority of these guns are kept loaded, unlocked, and potentially accessible to children. Research indicates that if a gun is stored in a home, the risk of homicide increases threefold and the risk of suicide increases up to fivefold. (2016, p.1)

Approximately one million children bring guns to school each year (2016). Accordingly, the AACAP has suggested that guns must be restricted, controlled, and supervised; increased funding for gun safety and prevention is critical to reduce gun violence (2016).

It is a vital part of my current role of preparing incoming school administrators to make sure they receive as much training and as many resources as possible to make better decisions regarding school safety. The National Association of Elementary School Principals has asserted that the first job of a principal is to keep all students safe (Patschke, n.d.). The National Association of Secondary Principals purports that, although a principal can never fully prepare for emergencies and that school safety issues are unpredictable, it is critical to have a practiced plan in place so that the response becomes instinctual (Paterson, 2018). School safety is complex and multifaceted, and there is no single or simple solution to make schools safe (Cowan & Paine, 2013).

### **Principal Preparation Coursework**

Due to the complexities of school safety, I have embedded work in this

area within the principal preparation program coursework. I start school safety work by giving all principal certification candidates a Safe School Self-Assessment Checklist. This checklist provides candidates with the information they need to analyze what is taking place in their schools (Safe School Facility Self-Assessment Checklist, n.d.; Safety Planning Toolkit, n.d.). Many candidates find that their schools do not discuss most of the items listed: the schools lack plans, procedures, and training. Once the assessment is completed, reviewed, and analyzed, the next step is for the candidates to work collaboratively to develop various types of emergency plans, along with professional development ideas that all schools should have and can implement. The final step with working in the area of school safety is for the candidates to research, collaborate, and develop a school violence plan that their schools can implement. The process puts in motion a discussion with the candidates' districts and schools and gives them the opportunity to review and make plans for improvement. The conclusions stated in this article are based on principal intern responses to the survey questions.

### **Historical Perspective**

American shootings in K-12 schools date back to the 1700s, yet the largest mass school shooting to gain national interest occurred at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, in 1999. Two teens killed 13 people, wounded more than 21 others, and later committed suicide. This event led to a national debate on school safety and gun control, with lingering questions about the motivations of the gunmen. There was speculation that bullying of the shooters contributed to this tragic event. Following the shooting, many American schools adopted a “zero tolerance” policy about violence and threats (Hodari, 2015). The National Clearinghouse on Supportive School Discipline defines zero tolerance as “school discipline policies and practices that mandate predetermined consequences, typically severe, punitive and exclusionary (e.g., out of school suspension and expulsion), in response to specific types of student misbehavior—regardless of the context or rationale for the behavior” (2019, p. 1) and that zero tolerance policies do not normally provide services for students to help change their behavior. Krebs (2019) wrote a brief on the research of zero tolerance and found that “zero-tolerance discipline policies do not make schools safer but instead put children at risk for dropping out of school and future involvement with the juvenile-justice system.”

Since 1979, there have been numerous documented shootings in the United States, some described as massacres. Too many of these shootings have occurred in K-12 schools, injuring children of all ages. The Final Report of the Federal Commission on School Safety (2018) developed a list of school violence incidents that was incorporated into table 1 provided below. The table is not comprehensive, but it shows the depth of the problem.

| School  | State | Date               | Killed | Wounded |
|---|-------|--------------------|--------|---------|
| Grover Cleveland Elementary School                | CA    | January 29, 1979   | 2      | 9       |
| Hueytown High School                              | AL    | October 31, 1980   | 1      | 0       |
| Valley High School                                | NV    | March 19, 1982     | 1      | 2       |
| Parkway South Junior High School                  | MO    | January 20, 1983   | 1      | 1       |
| Goddard Junior High School                        | KS    | January 21, 1985   | 1      | 3       |
| Spanaway Junior High School                       | WA    | November 27, 1985  | 2      | 0       |
| Pine Forest High School                           | NC    | May 9, 1986        | 0      | 3       |
| Murray Wright High School                         | MI    | April 17, 1987     | 1      | 2       |
| Atlantic Shores Christian School                  | VA    | December 16, 1988  | 1      | 1       |
| Cleveland Elementary School                       | CA    | January 17, 1989   | 5      | 29      |
| Frontier Middle School                            | WA    | February 2, 1996   | 3      | 1       |
| Pearl High School                                 | MS    | October 1, 1997    | 3      | 7       |
| Heath High School                                 | KY    | December 1, 1997   | 3      | 5       |
| Westside Middle School                            | AR    | March 24, 1998     | 5      | 11      |
| Columbine High School                             | CO    | April 20, 1999     | 13     | 21      |
| Santana High School                               | CA    | March 25, 2001     | 2      | 13      |
| Springfield High School                           | MA    | December 5, 2001   | 1      | 0       |
| John McDonogh Senior High School                  | LA    | April 14, 2003     | 1      | 3       |
| Rocori High School                                | MN    | September 24, 2003 | 2      | 0       |
| Red Lake High School                              | MN    | March 21, 2005     | 9      | 0       |
| Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University | VA    | April 16, 2007     | 32     | 0       |
| Chardon High School                               | OH    | February 27, 2012  | 3      | 2       |
| Sandy Hook Elementary School                      | CT    | December 14, 2012  | 27     | 0       |
| 3 Sparks Middle School                            | NV    | October 21, 2013   | 1      | 2       |
| Arapahoe High School                              | CO    | December 13, 2013  | 1      | 0       |
| University of California Santa Barbara            | CA    | May 27, 2014       | 6      | 14      |
| Reynolds High School                              | OR    | June 10, 2014      | 1      | 1       |
| Marysville-Pilchuck High School                   | WA    | October 24, 2014   | 4      | 1       |
| North Park Elementary School                      | CA    | April 10, 2017     | 2      | 2       |
| Marshall County High School                       | KY    | January 23, 2018   | 2      | 18      |
| Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School              | FL    | February 14, 2018  | 17     | 17      |
| Santa Fe High School                              | TX    | May 18, 2018       | 10     | 13      |

Table 1. Most data derived from the final report of the federal commission on school safety. *Minnesota Department of Public Safety*. (2018). Final Report of the Federal Commission on School Safety. (2018, December 18).

The state of Washington has a problematic school shooting record, as shown in Table 2 below. The information is derived from the *SeattleTimes* (2018) and King

5 News (2017).

| School                          | City       | Date               | Killed | Wounded |
|---------------------------------|------------|--------------------|--------|---------|
| Whitman Middle School           | Seattle    | January 31, 1994   | 1      | 0       |
| Ballard High School             | Seattle    | March 23, 1994     | 1      | 0       |
| Frontier Middle School          | Moses Lake | February 2, 1996   | 3      | 1       |
| Foss High School                | Tacoma     | January 3, 2007    | 1      | 0       |
| Garfield High School            | Seattle    | October 31, 2008   | 1      | 0       |
| Birney Elementary School        | Tacoma     | February 26, 2010  | 1      | 0       |
| Clark Elementary School         | Issaquah   | September 2, 2011  | 1      | 0       |
| Armin Jahr Elementary School    | Bremerton  | February 22, 2012  | 0      | 1       |
| Marysville-Pilchuck High School | Marysville | October 24, 2014   | 3      | 1       |
| North Thurston High School      | Lacey      | April 27, 2015     | 0      | 0       |
| Freeman High School             | Spokane    | September 14, 2017 | 1      | 3       |

*Table 2.* Most data retrieved from the news report provided by the Seattle Times and King 5 News. A look at some deadly U.S. school shootings of years past. (2018, February 15), *The Seattle Times*.

Although school administrators, teachers, mental health professionals, government officials, and parents have attempted to understand what is behind school shootings and predict future events, each event is unique, and the ability to forecast is challenging, at best. One thing is certain: educators need to be prepared for the unpredictable. School superintendents and principals are ultimately responsible for the health and well-being of students, teachers, and staff. Paterson (2018) confirmed that building a culture of safety is critical.

Having a culture of safety also includes making preparedness safety plans. Safety plans can provide some security for those who need to navigate acts of violence. The Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) in Washington State and the Washington State Legislature consider school safety a matter of public safety and provide plans and procedures that are consistent with federal law (RCW 28A.320.125). At the OSPI website, educators and administrators can locate various resources and tools to support school safety.

Emergency and school safety education for new or incoming administrators may vary, from meaningful and strategic to limited and haphazard. Due to the variation of safety preparation and training, it is important to begin developing skills and understanding in school leadership programs and continue the training in districts and schools. Even though school shootings are rare, they are disturbing and have a lasting impact on individuals, services, and the overall

community. School shootings, such as the 2018 shooting at Stoneman Douglas High School in Florida, provide reminders that school shootings can happen in any community (Haeney, Ash, & Galletly, 2018). Even though school shootings are rare and unpredictable, the current climate in American schools demands preparation and plans for responsiveness to school violence.

### **Principal Interns**

Principal preparation in Washington State certification is overseen by the Professional Educator's Standards Board. Through collaborative efforts, the board makes decisions that determine what standards programs must follow. The most current set of standards are called the National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) Program Recognition Standards (2018). There are eight required NELP standards:

- Standard 1: Mission, Vision, and Improvement
- Standard 2: Ethics and Professional Norms
- Standard 3: Equity, Inclusiveness, and Cultural Responsiveness
- Standard 4: Learning and Instruction
- Standard 5: Community and External Leadership
- Standard 6: Operations and Management
- Standard 7: Building Professional Capacity
- Standard 8: Internship

Many of these standards tangentially address school safety issues, depending on context and interpretation. Although no standard directly addresses school safety.

Because school safety is such an important and timely topic, I began strategically addressing school safety with principal certification candidates in the spring term of 2017. Discussing school safety issues started with an initial assessment: Safe School Self-Assessment Checklist. After assessment completion, principal candidates had small-group and whole-group discussions. What I found in their reporting was a lack of consistency across the school districts represented. Due to the revelation that everyone had varied practices, I felt it was time to address the topic head-on. I believed for the content to be meaningful, the work had to be imbedded into their professional lives, and in a collaborative format

The initial work around the Safe School Self-Assessment Checklist took place in three program retreats and via online collaboration for interns who were employed as educators at K-12 schools throughout Washington state.

At the October internship retreats in 2017 and 2018 A safe-school assessment checklist was administered to 55 principal interns to assess their knowledge of the level of safe-school planning and intervention in place in their schools. The checklist included the following areas: emergency plan; policy;



drills; building access; keys and identification; visitor procedures; staff training; physical climate; communications; general exterior; buses and parking; playground and recreation areas; deliveries; general interior; cafeteria, gymnasium, and specialized areas; and monitoring and surveillance.

The possible responses were “Yes,” “No,” “N/A,” or “Further study is needed for a response.” What follows are the common trends of the assessment sections which warrant further exploration and possible intervention.

TABLE 3 Safe School Self Assessment Survey\*

| Criterion                   | Yes | No  | NA  | Further Study |
|-----------------------------|-----|-----|-----|---------------|
| Emergency Plan              | 58% | 24% | 15% | 4%            |
| Policy                      | 76% | 15% | 9%  | 0%            |
| Drills                      | 54% | 31% | 15% | 0%            |
| Building Access             | 62% | 31% | 7%  | 1%            |
| Keys & Identification       | 67% | 19% | 12% | 2%            |
| Visitor Procedures          | 67% | 24% | 7%  | 1%            |
| Staff Training              | 42% | 43% | 11% | 3%            |
| Physical Climate            | 67% | 25% | 7%  | 0%            |
| Communications              | 70% | 16% | 12% | 2%            |
| General Exterior            | 72% | 16% | 10% | 2%            |
| Buses & Parking             | 59% | 28% | 13% | 0%            |
| Playground/Recreation Areas | 56% | 11% | 30% | 3%            |
| Deliveries                  | 66% | 16% | 13% | 5%            |
| General Interior            | 72% | 17% | 10% | 2%            |
| Cafeteria                   | 76% | 5%  | 17% | 1%            |
| Gymnasium Area(s)           | 79% | 9%  | 11% | 1%            |
| Specialized Areas           | 71% | 10% | 17% | 2%            |
| Monitoring & Surveillance   | 63% | 21% | 15% | 2%            |

\*N=55

Table 3. \*Data from Safe School Self Assessment Survey completed by principal certification candidates.

Minnesota Department of Public Safety. (2018). Safe school self-assessment checklist.

### Common Trends

In this section, common themes from the assessment results around school safety areas discussed. In the area of school safety, addressing discipline issues are important to help reduce bullying and keep students safe. We found that the types of discipline offered varied (lunch suspension, in-school suspension, Saturday school), and there was a lack of consistency in levels of discipline for the

same offenses. Database and tracking systems for discipline and attendance also differed from school to school. Four schools used restorative practices regularly, but most did not. Three schools were noted to have administrators who shared discipline loads equally, while in other schools administrators were dedicated to discipline (with different levels of calibration between the administrative team).

Nearly all respondents indicated that their schools had similar safety plans for fire drills, lockdown plans, bomb threats, earthquakes, hazardous waste spills and handling, and crisis response. School staff members were cognizant of the importance of safety plans.

However, some responses varied. Seventeen schools had suicide-prevention plans and training, while 25 schools had crisis response teams. Thirty-one schools had plans that addressed bomb threats, fights, or intruders, while 24 schools did not. Plans for severe weather were inconsistent. One school out of 55 had an official Safety Director. There were differences in terms of understanding of safety plans and how they were communicated by and to the staff; not all had designated binders with safety plans, There was also variance in detail and depth of plans, and the frequency of drills varied.

### **Suggestions for Improvement**

Respondents suggested that restorative practices be established and utilized when developing safety plans. According to Porter, “Restorative practices promotes inclusiveness, relationship-building and problem-solving (2007, p.1)”. Porter (2007) asserts that using restorative practices can change student behavior and shape positive school communities. Consistency in plans, actions, and enforcement should be offered with regular yearly updated training for all stakeholders. The group stated the need for clear communication and follow-through with expectations in their schools and amongst faculty members. They also advised that there should be collaboration with all administrative staff and team members on disciplinary actions (calibration meetings). Another idea was that staff should have the technical training to track issues; this allows the administration to review a student’s discipline history. A final thought was to make sure the team discusses a plan and discipline before acting. The group decided that examples of other schools’ plans would be helpful and that plans should be created to empower teachers to keep students in the class.

Overall, the trends suggest that emergency plans be reviewed regularly with staff and students. Recommendations were made to review plans more than once a year, with engaging activities that result in clearer understanding, providing topic-specific training of safety plans monthly, with plan review following an incident. It was also mentioned that there be improved communication of safety plans, with binders of plans for each staff member, providing detailed safety plans, with clear expectations on the teacher’s role,

including regarding first aid and CPR. Respondents stated there need to be safety plans for the emergencies that were not addressed (e.g., suicide, gang prevention, hazardous-waste plans, and bullying), making sure that new staff members are updated and trained on safety plans and that everyone is aware of plans. The candidates indicated that teams should be created to address different plans and that there should be greater involvement by the safety committee.

### **Practioner Suggestions**

From my experience, best practices include having policies that all people understand and can implement. The development of district and school protocols based on research, collaboration, and knowledge of best practices is critical. It is one thing to have plans, but it is critically important to review them more than one time per year, and practicing them often should be included in the process. I recommend that all members of a school have the safety plan information and know-how to follow the protocols. That includes teachers; paraprofessionals; and custodial, food service, transportation, substitute, and office staff. In a time of crisis, all members must know what to do and how to respond.

From working with the interns throughout this process, I suggest that staff have intervention plans and practices that address bullying and monitor bullying daily. Through discussion, it was determined that schools need to find a way to help students feel safe enough to speak to someone so the bullying can be addressed. The counselors in the groups mentioned that it should not be just their responsibility; it takes a unified front to address bullying behaviors. As a group of learning leaders, we suggest that districts and schools collaborate with organizations in the community that can help support school efforts. The interns felt that holding anti-bullying campaigns would have a positive impact on school culture and learning. The group discussed the need to watch for students that change the way they dress, have a shift in behaviors or actions, or become isolated or angry. They suggested paying attention to the chatter in the hallways and classrooms and watching social media and other modes of communication.

Most schools across the country only permit students to miss school due to physical illness, doctor appointments, or various emergencies. Most states have a limit on how many days can be missed. Haily Hardcastle, a 15-year-old student, lobbied Oregon lawmakers to provide mental health days for students. Governor Kate Brown signed the bill into law in June 2019 (Matias, 2019). According to Matias (2019), this is the first law of it's kind. Mental health days for students are long overdue. Mental health days are an essential way to help students that are struggling with behavioral or mental health issues. School districts are also in need of specific funding to hire more social workers, family liaisons, counselors, and crisis staff. Many schools in Washington State have connections with crisis counselors in their communities because of the lack of school staff, but the outside

agencies don't have the resources to support the overwhelming need. From my experience as a school administrator, it is imperative that communities, school districts, and lawmakers come together to solve one of the most critical pieces of the safety issue: addressing the mental health of students and their families.

Lastly, I suggest that both the NELP Standards and the standards from the Association of Washington School Principals must include school safety as a separate standard. The only way for aspects of school safety to be successfully addressed is to make sure that they stand alone as critical standards for all administrators to be able to understand and implement. Due to the complexity of educating children and teens, addressing school safety in principal preparation programs is vital. It strengthens a new leader's ability to address various safety concerns as they arise or, better yet, be proactive because they have the knowledge and skills to put practices in place before an unforeseen event.

### **Summary**

The definition of what constitutes a school shooting may vary, so statistics are not consistent. This crisis demands attention and assessment from a variety of stakeholders. For the purposes of this article, school administrator interns, with extensive experience in a variety of educational settings, responded to a safe school assessment checklist to assess their knowledge of safe school planning and intervention in their own schools. What stood out was the inconsistency in preparation and planning, despite the best of intentions. Inconsistency and lack of preparedness create an opportunity for school leadership programs to provide a curriculum that properly assesses school safety in order to develop an extensive network to protect our students and those who care for them. As the director and instructor responsible for the development of school principals, safety must remain a priority. Only by maintaining this priority will leaders be able to protect all of the individuals they serve each and every day.

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