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***School climate and culture:
Safety teams prevent, intervene***
By Rosario C. Pesce

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) provides for much greater emphasis on and flexibility in a number of areas — areas that are tied to funding. Among these is improving school climate and safety. ESSA recognizes the connection that has been supported by a considerable amount of research showing that there is a strong relationship between school climate and school learning and success. The degree to which students feel connected, accepted, and respected heavily influences students' academic achievement, mental health, and overall school success.

The PREPaRE model curriculum developed by the National Association of School Psychologists recommends the establishment of safety teams along with crisis response teams in order to balance the importance of psychological or emotional safety along with physical safety. Crisis response teams are trained to be involved with mitigation efforts and to provide response and recovery interventions and support. The functioning of such teams has received a lot of attention, significantly more than that paid to safety teams. The main focus of safety teams is overseeing the procedures and programs that help create a safe, respectful, and inclusive school environment that builds social competence and academic excellence. On the other hand, a crisis response teams' main responsibility is planning for and mobilizing during short- and long-term crisis interventions and providing recovery support.

Safety teams exist at both the district and school levels and have parallel functions:

- Providing leadership at the district and at the school level, specific to comprehensive safety and overall school climate;
- Providing district and school staff with needed support and training;
- Making district-wide and school-wide comprehensive school safety and climate initiatives sustainable;
- Conducting evaluations such as vulnerability assessments, safety audits, and other data-generating evaluations to make informed decisions on priorities for safety and for future directions to be taken; and
- Providing guidance, at the district level, on how to use behavioral and academic data for decision making; developing at the school level a comprehensive school safety plan.

District safety teams can be comprised of central office administrators, district leaders, mental health coordinators, preventions and intervention coordinators, special education administration, building and grounds leader, transportation head, and representatives from the community's first responders' groups, among others. Comparable types of individuals should be included in school safety teams. District and school improvement teams, PBIS committees, and other such groups might already exist and potentially can take on some of the functions listed above. There may be

no need to form a brand-new group if existing structures can carry on the tasks of the safety team. The work of the safety team is foundational, primarily focused on prevention and, therefore, at efforts aimed at all students of a school or district (or sometimes a segment of the school population) requiring prevention efforts. Safety teams and their core functions fit in well with ESSA's focus on school climate.

Among the critical tasks of a safety team is to conduct regular vulnerability assessments at the district and school levels. Vulnerability is assessed across four broad categories: sites, culture and climate, school threat assessment, and capacity assessment. For culture and climate, student and staff perceptions of school safety and students' connectedness are examined. The goal of assessing this area is to obtain data regarding staff perceptions of safety and data on problem behaviors to address to improve school climate. The assumption is that as school climate is improved there will be an increased likelihood that students will report concerns and in some cases prevent crises from occurring. Reviews of school climate measures include *The American Institute for Research's National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments*, which presents a compendium of school climate measures (see resources, below).

Universal programs aimed at addressing climate and culture can be categorized into three major groups: school-wide positive behavior and support, social emotional learning, and specific prevention programs. The primary goals of school-wide positive approaches are preventing behavior problems and promoting a positive school climate characterized by safety, caring, and student engagement in learning. Many times such efforts also include helping students develop social, emotional, and behavioral competencies. Prominent among such programs are Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support (PBIS) and Safe and Civil Schools.

We are indeed fortunate to be the first state to adopt social emotional learning standards (SEL). Addressing these standards can be incorporated into curriculum programming. The Illinois SEL standards mirror those espoused by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) located at the University of Illinois-Chicago. CASEL provides the recently updated guides for Effective Social and Emotional Learning Programs for preschool and elementary students, and another for middle and high school students. After having conducted climate surveys and having obtained other data indicating school trends, safety teams could use such guides to help inform stakeholders as to which program(s) might be best suited to the district and/or schools. It is important that once such programs are selected, the safety teams continue monitoring the integrity of delivering such programs and the effectiveness of such intervention. Many times the programs include the necessary evaluation tools.

Evaluation data may lead a safety team to consider adopting a program aimed at prevention efforts for specific challenges: bullying, anger management, trauma, in-school gang behavior, dating violence, etc. The safety team's next step would be to examine programs that have strong research support and which matches the demographic profile of the student population and community.

Sometimes such programs may require expertise that might be beyond that of school staff. A few years ago, a school district with which I was connected gathered data from students in grades 8,

9, and 11. In this health and safety survey of 149 questions, respondents answered “Yes” at an alarming rate to the question:

“During the past 12 months, did your boyfriend or girlfriend ever hit, slap, or physically hurt you on purpose?”

To develop a plan, the school formed a task force that included a dean, school psychologist, school social worker, teacher, two counselors, and staff from a local domestic violence agency. The group studied what dating violence prevention programs were available at the time and selected one which was developed and field-tested on a similar population. We used the services of the local domestic violence agency to help deliver the curriculum to all ninth-grade students. Evaluation data showed positive effects of the curriculum training. Using an evaluation tool developed by the domestic violence agency, participants were noted to have made significant gains in their knowledge of important teen dating relationship concepts. A process like this would be led by and coordinated through the efforts of a school safety team.

The trend — or requirement — from most funding sources in selecting programs for use is finding those that are evidence-informed. There are clearinghouses and databases that provide evaluations of programs. Typically such sites rate the strength of a program on a number of dimensions, most important being the strength of the scientific framework and procedures used to assess a program’s effectiveness. Schools also should take into consideration how well a program fits the context in which it will be applied, aspects such as other current school climate challenges, cultural variables, time commitment, cost, community and parent involvement, staff training, etc. There are a number of places to seek such information. Here are four I recommend, with links in the resources section below:

- The Campbell Collaboration is a registry of randomized and somewhat randomized social, psychological, educational, and criminological trials, as well as a list of reviews of interventions and policy evaluations in education, crime and justice, social welfare, and methods. The Campbell Collaboration is known for its use of meta-analyses, or studies of a number of studies on a topic.
- The Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence includes Blueprints for Violence Prevention, which describes each program’s theoretical rationale, components, evaluation design and results, and implementation experiences. Sometimes interviews with the developer(s) of a program area included.
- The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), in addition to including guides that rate various social emotional learning programs, also provides summaries of studies that evaluate the effectiveness of social emotional learning programs and their application at various schools.
- SAMHSA Model Programs and Effective Substance Abuse and Mental Health Programs for Every Community is a searchable registry of promising, effective, and model evidence-based programs reviewed by the National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs and Practices, including links to the programs themselves as well as to publications about prevention.

In conclusion, safety teams or current groups that perform many of the functions of safety teams can serve the needs of districts seeking to foster a school culture and climate that will promote learning and academic success. Safety teams can guide districts and schools in seeking programs and developing policies that promote school safety for all students, create positive prevention systems and effective interventions. They can also assist by selecting, implementing, and evaluating programs that increase school connectedness while mindful of the importance of considerations around cultural competence and home-school collaboration.

Resources

PREPaRE Model: www.nasponline.org/professional-development/prepare-training-curriculum

Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans (USDOE and other federal departments): rem.s.ed.gov/docs/rem_s_k-12_guide_508.pdf

The American Institute for Research's National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments: www.air.org/topic/p-12-education-and-social-development/school-climate-and-safety

PBIS: www.pbis.org/

Safe & Civil Schools: www.safeandcivilschools.com/

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning: www.casel.org/

The Campbell Collaboration, www.campbellcollaboration.org

Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence: <http://www.colorado.edu/cspv>

SAMHSA Model Programs and Effective Substance Abuse and Mental Health Programs for Every Community: nrepp.samhsa.gov/01_landing.aspx

References

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Brock, S. E., Nickerson, A. B., Louvar Reeves, M. A., Conolly, C. N., Jimerson, S. R., Pesce, R. C., Lazzaro, B. R. (2016) School Crisis Prevention and Intervention: The PREPaRE Model (2nd ed.). Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.

National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) PREPaRE Training Curriculum.

U.S. Department of Education (2013, June). Guide for developing high-quality school emergency operations plans. Washington, D.C.

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