

The future of school safety

How K-12 leaders can improve campus security and boost student success



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Executive Summary

What is the best way for K-12 school leaders to ensure the safety of their students and educators?

That question has become more critical than ever. Consider these alarming statistics:

- By the start of the 2022–23 school year, parents’ fears for their children’s safety at school had **soared to their highest point since the 1999 Columbine shootings**.¹
- School shootings **reached a record high in 2022**.²
- Weather-related emergency school closures have surged. In California, the number of such closures **increased *ninefold* between 2015 and 2018**.³
- Federal data shows **troubling rates of fighting, bullying, weapons and other threats** in schools.⁴

Given these numbers, it’s no surprise that at least 44 states and the District of Columbia already require schools to have safety plans.⁵ Additionally, districts across the country are experiencing higher demands for metal detectors and more police.⁶

Will such measures even work? If not, what approach to school safety should educators take?



This report provides sensible answers and concrete solutions to help educators make evidence-based decisions even as they face urgent demands to “do something!” It discusses:

- The dramatic impact school safety has on students’ academic success and well-being.
- Why the “obvious” security solutions may not work for many schools — and which technologies best protect school communities.
- The steps to take to begin improving school safety.
- How to find the necessary funding.

Introduction

School safety involves far more than installing security devices. Research shows the importance of attending to students' mental health and well-being, as well as to the school culture.⁷

Nevertheless, implementing security measures remains essential. *But in which measures should schools and districts invest?*

The answer can prove difficult to pin down. As the *Washington Post* has reported, "Many superintendents are under intense pressure from parents to do something — anything — to make their kids safer."⁸

Meanwhile, school leaders are "confronted by a bewildering array of security solutions," in the words of the Center for Safe and Healthy Schools at Johns Hopkins University.⁹ You can find surveillance cameras, metal detectors and even bulletproof whiteboards.

In this report, we'll help school leaders step back from those pressures and see the best path toward a successful school safety plan.

First, let's look at the components of school safety and why safety plays such a key role in student success.



What school safety means — and why it matters in more ways than most people realize

For parents and educators alike, safety is a paramount concern. *But how should we think about school safety?*

The National Institute of Justice (NIJ) is the research arm of the U.S. Department of Justice. The institute notes that among the general public, “thoughts on school safety are often shaped by high-profile school shootings and other tragic incidents that dominate a news cycle.”

To be sure, a school’s safety plan must address active-shooter scenarios. A Washington Post headline tells the horrifying tale: “More Than 356,000 Students Have Experienced Gun Violence at School Since Columbine.”¹⁰

But the NIJ also says that for educators, “issues such as bullying, harassment, and school discipline policies are at the forefront of their thoughts and can affect school safety on a daily basis.”¹¹ A comprehensive school safety plan must also account for these more common issues.

Thus, a narrow understanding of threats to safety poses one challenge to schools. A narrow understanding of the effects of feeling unsafe poses another. Parents and even educators underestimate how much feeling safe affects students.



For example:

- When students feel safe, they are better able to focus on learning, which, in turn, leads to increased academic achievement.¹²
- “Physical safety is related to higher academic performance, fewer risky behaviors, and lower dropout rates,” the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments reports.¹³
- Students who feel safe at school have a much lower risk of chronic absenteeism.¹⁴
- Nearly 1 in 10 high school students skips school because they feel unsafe.¹⁵



“Physical safety is related to higher academic performance, fewer risky behaviors, and lower dropout rates.”

National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments

In short, students attend school more and perform better academically when they feel safe.

Such findings must factor into school safety plans, Dr. Angela Hemingway says. Dr. Hemingway, a former teacher, has held leadership roles in the Idaho Department of Education. She now advises K-12 districts for T-Mobile for Education.

“Often, the discussion of safety focuses on shootings and other high-profile incidents,” she says. “But at a time when reading and math scores have gone down, and chronic absenteeism has risen, we realize that student success and school safety aren’t disconnected issues.”



Why the “obvious” solutions may not be the best ones

Parents and politicians often push for visible security measures like metal detectors, but those recommendations may not make sense for many schools.

For starters, metal detectors may not keep weapons out of schools. “There is little evidence to support their effectiveness at preventing school shootings or successfully detecting weapons at schools,” the nonprofit research agency WestEd reports.¹⁶

The Transportation Security Agency (TSA) has failed to detect weapons 70% of the time in national tests. In other tests, TSA’s failure rate reached 95%.¹⁷ And these numbers come from a federal agency with a multibillion-dollar annual budget.

Researcher David Riesman, who founded a database that tracks school shootings, told the Associated Press, “Schools are already struggling with adequate resources — finding bus drivers, finding enough teachers. To have comprehensive school security with 100% weapons detection . . . [is] not viable.”¹⁸ WestEd adds that metal detectors “are expensive to purchase, staff, and maintain.”¹⁹

Evidence also suggests that visible, “hard” security measures can have a detrimental effect on students. A 2022 study shows that “when schools feel like prisons,” test scores and college attendance drop while suspensions rise.²⁰

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“Only when [districts have determined safety goals] can they begin addressing the question of what solutions will help achieve those goals.”

Dr. Angela Hemingway

K-12 education advisor at T-Mobile for Education

The RAND Corporation surveyed school safety experts from urban, suburban and rural districts. The overwhelming majority said that “metal detectors and X-ray machines increased students’ negative attitudes toward school and made schools seem too fortified.”²¹ A study published in the *Journal of School Violence* confirmed this claim. It showed that the more of these high-visibility measures schools put in place, the less safe students of color feel.²²

In advising districts, Dr. Hemingway of T-Mobile stresses that there is no “one size fits all” technology solution. “Safety needs vary from district to district and even from school to school within a district,” she explains. “Metal detectors may make sense for some communities, but for others, they may not. Districts need to start by asking: What are the goals of the community? Once that question is answered, the district can begin addressing the question of what solutions will help achieve those goals.”

How to get started on improving school safety

So, what should schools do to improve safety?

As Dr. Hemingway suggests, the answer is to start with goals. In the NIJ's words: "What is it that the school system is trying to accomplish?"²³

Dr. Hemingway says, "I've seen districts make wrong decisions when they jumped right into choosing particular security products before they've determined their needs and objectives."

Which safety goals to pursue may not be immediately obvious. The NIJ points out that schools frequently face "a choice between addressing the greatest risk or addressing the most frequent problems, but often the decision made does a little of both."²⁴



Dr. Hemingway recommends two steps for getting started:

1. Know your state requirements:

"Most states now require some sort of school safety plan," Dr. Hemingway says. "Find out what must be included." The Education Commission of the States (ecs.org) offers a state-by-state breakdown of requirements and regulations.²⁵

2. Talk to your stakeholders:

Dr. Hemingway explains, "What do people in your community expect from schools? Talk to students, teachers, educators, parents, community leaders, and front-line public safety teams like police, fire, EMT, etc. Invite these stakeholders to the table, share the data you have collected, discuss the state requirements, and ask them for their input. Listen, learn, and develop a plan of action."

The federal government offers helpful (and free) tools to identify needs. One of the most important is the Safety Readiness Tool at [SchoolSafety.gov](https://www.schoolsafety.gov).²⁶ This assessment gives schools a personalized action plan based on their resources and challenges.

The key for any school is to develop a comprehensive safety plan, not one-off solutions. (See the sidebar for questions your district should answer to ensure you consider safety from all angles.)

Checklist: Questions for developing a comprehensive safety plan²⁷

- Have we conducted a security assessment (including potential threats, previous safety incidents and unique vulnerabilities)?
- What do our current resources look like (safety technology, staff designated to handle safety and threat assessment, etc.)?
- How will we fund the security plan?
- How will the plan align with our community values?
- How will we consult with our educators, families and community members?
- How will we communicate our decisions to those groups?
- What effect will the plan have on our school culture?
- Do we have the resources and proper timeline to execute the plan? (Many districts have never implemented the threat assessment procedures they developed.)
- How will we train educators and students to maximize the plan's effectiveness?
- What technology solutions are best suited to integrating into our current infrastructure?
- What parts of the existing infrastructure need upgrading to achieve our goals? (For example, do we have enough bandwidth and network access points?)
- Can the technology solutions we choose be upgraded over time as needed?
- Do we have the staff to manage the technology solutions we install?
- How often will we revise and update our security plan?
- How will we measure success? How will we know whether our plan is working?

Which safety technologies work?

“Technological improvements are coming onto the market almost daily, and keeping up with the latest innovation is a full-time job. At a minimum, a basic understanding of these devices has become a prerequisite for well-informed school security planning.”²⁸

Those were the words of the National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities — back in 2010.

The rate of tech innovation has only accelerated since then. That’s why successful districts don’t go it alone when developing their security plans.

Dr. Hemingway notes, “A lot of districts come to T-Mobile when they realize they have too many one-off solutions. Their systems aren’t integrated, they’re working with too many different vendors, and their costs are too high.”

When it comes to safety technologies, the evidence points to certain types to prioritize:

Access control systems and “soft” security measures

University of Wisconsin professor Ben Fisher, who researches school safety, speaks bluntly: “You can spend some money and put in metal detectors, or put on a big show of having police dogs come in, but those aren’t the things that make schools safe.”²⁹

One school safety consulting firm said, “Low-cost deterrence items such as signs and the replacing of low-level lighting with brighter bulbs can discourage criminal activity. Motion sensors and duress buttons are examples of detection items that signal the need for security response. Appropriate kinds of doors and locks serve to delay adversarial activity.”³⁰

Dr. Hemingway points to the importance of having access control systems on all doors. This allows the school to know who is coming and going — staff, visitors, and students. “This type of system can also be applied to school buses,” she adds. “That way, you know who is getting on and off the bus and at which stops.”

Video cameras on campus and on buses

Strategically placed video cameras don’t just monitor and record activities. They also help deter potential threats. Cameras can be used in school buildings and on buses.

“Of course,” Dr. Hemingway says, “this is an example of where staffing is critical. Traditional video cameras will be far less effective if you have no one to monitor the feeds. But by leveraging smart video analytics, schools can implement an automated approach with intelligent notifications sent by AI trained to recognize unusual patterns and potential threats.”

Communication systems that you can depend on in an emergency

Communication might matter most of all to a safety plan.

“A campus security plan could be viewed first and foremost as a communication plan,” Dr. Hemingway explains. “How should students and educators act during critical events? Who will you call? Who has the ability to contact emergency services? What means of communication do you have?”

Research reinforces Dr. Hemingway’s emphasis on communication. The NIJ asked the RAND Corporation to study how technology can make schools safer. The resulting report identified two main needs:

1. “Teachers and emergency responders need to be able to engage in direct two-way communication during a crisis rather than having to report emergencies to the school’s main office and then have the office serve as the sole conduit for communication with emergency responders.”
2. “Staff members need easier and faster access to information, possibly through all-in-one software applications, in order to prevent, reduce, and respond to the entire spectrum of school violence.”³¹

Legislation is starting to catch up with these recommendations. As of August 2023, five states had passed some version of Alyssa’s Law, which requires school buildings to have silent panic alarms that alert law enforcement directly. Several other states were considering similar bills.³²

Dr. Hemingway emphasizes three communication components:

1. **Emergency communication plan and systems:** What system or systems will ensure rapid communication during emergencies — among educators and students, with first responders and with the general public? Options include text messages, mobile apps, email, public address systems and duress buttons (like those mandated in Alyssa’s Law). Dr. Hemingway reports that many districts have turned to T-Mobile for handheld devices (much like smartphones) that can come programmed with a range of resources: emergency plans, evacuation routes, building floor plans, reunification plans, critical contacts and more.
2. **Backup and failover:** What happens if your communication network goes down in an emergency? Many schools have chosen to add a high-speed internet backup system to ensure uninterrupted service.
3. **Wireless Priority Service:** Even if cellular communication does not vanish altogether in an emergency, the network can become congested. During a crisis, having priority access to wireless networks can make an extraordinary difference.

CONCLUSION

Making the plan happen

With student test scores plunging, can school leaders afford to focus on safety plans?

The answer is a resounding **yes**.

Remember, when students feel safe, they are more likely to attend school, perform well academically and graduate. Thus, an effective safety plan will only reinforce learning strategies.

Still, a crucial question remains: *How will you fund your safety plan?*

The good news is that various options exist. “I always urge schools to think creatively,” Dr. Hemingway says. “At T-Mobile for Education, we help a lot of districts secure funding through government programs (federal, state, and local), nonprofit grantmaking institutions, corporate sponsors, community-based partners, and alumni. We can help schools build task forces to plan and fund their initiatives.”

American schools spend more than \$3 billion a year on campus security.³³ By choosing security measures wisely, schools can spend that money more effectively.

What’s more, in September 2022, the U.S. Department of Education made available \$1 billion in new federal funding to create safer and healthier learning environments.³⁴

School leaders can explore funding options through:

- **The Bureau of Justice Assistance:** This division of the U.S. Department of Justice lists available funding and grant opportunities on its website.³⁵
- **The COPS School Violence Prevention Program:** This competitive grant program, also part of the Justice Department, helps fund deterrent measures in K-12 districts.³⁶
- **SchoolSafety.gov:** This project of the federal government includes, among other resources, a grants-finder tool.³⁷

Implementing a comprehensive safety plan won’t happen overnight. Yet, as the number and severity of threats grow, schools have never faced a more urgent need to act. Fortunately, we have the evidence, the funding and the technology to make schools safer.

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