



Effects of Safety and Security on Student Outcomes

Toward the bottom of Maslow's pyramid sits safety, only just above necessities like food, water, and shelter. Everyone has the basic need to feel safe in their environment, including where they learn. So how do we deal with the violence in schools we see in the news every day or as we scroll through social media?

During the 2021-2022 school year, [gunfire on K-12 campuses quadrupled](#). During the 2019-20 school year, "about 939,000 violent incidents and 487,000 nonviolent incidents occurred in U.S. public schools. Seventy percent of schools reported having at least one violent incident, and 62 percent reported having at least one nonviolent incident," ([Crime, Violence, Discipline, and Safety in U.S. Public Schools in 2019-20: Findings From the School Survey on Crime and Safety](#)). [The National Center for Education Statistics](#) also found that "cyberbullying and student discipline problems related to teachers and classrooms have become more common over time.

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What students experience directly within their school and their classroom helps shape their feelings of safety and can have an even bigger impact on feeling safe than external events that take place elsewhere, such as school shootings ([Fisher, Nation, Nixon, & McIlroy, 2016](#)).

What are schools doing to account for this increase in anxiety and perceived violence? And more importantly, is what they are doing effective for students and beneficial to their academic achievement?



HOW DOES SAFETY IMPACT STUDENT BEHAVIOR AND OUTCOMES?


We already know that there's a strong link between students' overall well-being and how safe they feel at school. When students don't feel safe at school, they can [experience symptoms of depression](#) and engage in fights. The findings of a [study](#) published in the *Journal of Adolescent Health* "suggested that high schoolers who feel less safe at school have decreased learning potential and more emotional problems."

[Another study](#) specifically found that "feeling unsafe at school had a statistically significant effect on educational attainment as students are exposed to greater in-school violence and disruption." In addition to increased school absences, which can also impact student achievement, feeling unsafe can make students "less able to focus on learning while at school. Students who feel unsafe may also be disruptive in the classroom, causing peers to feel less safe and preventing learning," ([Lacoe, 2](#)).

Student achievement can be also be impacted when instructional time is affected. When teachers and students have to stop their day to deal with a conflict, emergency, or any other incident, that cuts into time that is meant for students to gain understanding and accomplish academic goals. And as teachers already struggle to find adequate time to instruct, plan, grade, and more, this further underscores the importance of administrators addressing this issue and finding solutions that allow teachers and students to address and resolve incidents quickly.

According to the [National Center for Education Statistics](#), "19 percent [of students] indicated that bullying had somewhat or a lot of negative effect on their school work and on their relationships with friends or family, and 14 percent indicated that bullying had somewhat or a lot of negative effect on their physical health."

Of that same study, one head researcher shared that they "found that students who felt safer were more attentive and efficient in the classroom. These students also reported fewer symptoms of depression, such as feeling unhappy and having difficulty enjoying themselves. Making sure that students are engaged and attentive in the classroom can contribute to long-term success above and beyond intellectual capacities such as reading or math skills."

A police officer in a uniform is standing in a classroom, gesturing with his hands as he speaks to a group of students. The students are seated at desks, and the officer is holding a walkie-talkie. The scene is dimly lit, with a blue tint over the entire image.

HOW DO STUDENTS PERCEIVE SECURITY MEASURES LIKE POLICE OFFICERS?

While many “heightened” security measures negatively impact student outcomes, data suggests that SROs and police officers overall make students feel safer in school than other security measures that fall under the “hardening” category. But not all students share that perception equally across demographics.

Students in multiple large California districts were [surveyed](#). Of white students, 61% agreed that they felt safer around the police officer at their school. Of black students surveyed, only 41% reported they felt the same. A [survey](#) in New Orleans found similar results, with 77% of white students and just 54% of black students reporting feeling safer with an SRO present in their school.

New York City also recently conducted a survey throughout their schools and found slightly higher percentages of feeling safer with a school police officer; although there was still a disparity between schools overall and [predominantly black schools](#), with 81% and 76%, respectively, of students reporting feeling safer.

[One study](#) found “that high levels of security make it more likely that a student would be suspended and particular security measures, such as police guards, are associated with higher numbers of arrests — both of which impact minorities disproportionately.” Additionally, the study noted that “Security measures were disproportionately adopted in large schools with high populations of African-American students. The security features adopted in these schools often were above and beyond the level of misbehavior and crime in those schools.”

WHAT SAFETY PROCEDURES, SOLUTIONS, PLANS, ETC. SHOULD BE IN PLACE TO POSITIVELY IMPACT STUDENTS?

When students feel positive about their school environment, [they're more likely to feel safe](#). So how do we keep students safe while maintaining an environment that is conducive to learning, creativity, and connection? School administrators need to look toward areas where safety and security can be subtle but incredibly effective.

Exterior and classroom doors that are working properly and *locked* are one of the most effective tools against intruders and don't convey fear to students. Having a secured campus perimeter is another effective way to increase student safety without increasing perceived surveillance.

Wearable panic buttons given to teachers and staff are discreet and can be worn along with an ID badge. Empowering your staff with the ability to immediately summon help from a first responder team or 911 is a far more effective and subtle way to monitor your campus for emergencies than security cameras – you have eyes in classrooms, on the playground, and everywhere in-between.

With over two decades of experience in schools, CENTEGIX's Chief Development Officer Dr. Rocky Sams has seen the need for this type of technology in schools firsthand. During his time as a principal, there were multiple instances of fights in school. He recalls one specific instance: "There was a rumbling during a talent show. While standing in the crowd, a teacher overheard some students talking about a fight that was supposed to take place after the show. Because of where she was located in the school and with so many people around, she wasn't able to alert administration or security," Dr. Sams shared. He continued, "The fight ended up happening after the show. A few students were arrested or went to the hospital; it was a mess. If she had had a way to quickly alert administration, she could have summoned help to her location and could have gotten the information to the right people beforehand and been more proactive in the situation."

As it relates to school climate, school connection is the single largest contributor to a student's feelings of safety at school. Administrators must strive to create a school climate and culture that celebrates and values safety, one that encourages participation from *everyone*, and one that has a core mission and value system with true stakeholder buy-in. When all the adults are on the same page, promoting and demonstrating the same safe behavior, students can see it.



Relationships are also crucial at school. Ask any educator, and they will impress upon you the importance of teacher-student relationships. When students feel [their teachers genuinely care about them](#) and trust them, they feel safer. As mentioned earlier, bullying is a key factor in a student feeling unsafe, and having a trusted teacher to turn to can provide a tremendous amount of relief to a student and increase their sense of safety. Students that [maintain close friendships](#) and [feel that making friends is easy](#) also report a higher sense of safety in school.

In addition to less tangible strategies to promote a safe school environment like relationship-building and positive school climate, schools “[need increased monitoring](#) of students’ reactions and responses to incidents of bullying and violence. Through continued professional education, we can also increase teachers’ awareness of the importance of feelings of safety – as well as their understanding of how the wider school climate can improve engagement.”

Another important step you can take to increase your students’ sense of safety is to reexamine your school’s safety plan. When an emergency happens, can your staff immediately and easily request help, whether they’re outside, in the classroom, or anywhere else on campus? Does your team of first responders receive notification of the emergency immediately and know exactly where to go? Is everyone that is potentially in danger immediately alerted that there is an emergency so they can find safety? If your school can’t answer yes to all three questions, it’s time to reevaluate the safety solutions and procedures you have in place.



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