



WHITE PAPER

The Impact of Safety on the Mental Health and Well-being of Staff and Students in K12 Schools



SECTION I:

Introduction

School safety isn't just about preventing violence. It's about creating spaces for teachers and students to connect with each other and their peers. Connection and a sense of belonging go a long way in supporting mental health for teachers and students and in creating better academic outcomes. Yet, right now, K12 schools are facing a crisis on both the mental health and safety fronts.

The [CDC](#) reports that in 2021, more than 4 in 10 (42%) students felt persistently sad or hopeless and nearly one-third (29%) experienced poor mental health. A [RAND survey](#) from June 2021 found that teachers were almost three times more likely to report symptoms of depression than other adults.

Data from the [K12 School Shootings Database](#) shows that there have been more shootings with more victims in the first three months of 2023 than the same period last year. Based on trends from the past five decades, at that rate there could be as many as 400 shootings in 2023, outpacing last year's record high of 273.

In this paper, we tackle the multifaceted aspects of safety and their profound influence on mental health outcomes. As we examine various safety factors, we explore how a sense of security can foster academic achievement, emotional resilience, and positive interpersonal relationships for both students and staff.

By highlighting the critical need for holistic safety measures that not only protect physical well-being but also contribute significantly to nurturing a thriving and supportive educational community, we hope to give you the information you need to foster a sense of safety and promote better academic and behavioral outcomes.

SECTION II:

Understanding the Link between Safety and Mental Health

The [National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments](#) (NCSSLE) defines safety in the K12 context as school efforts that “promote the protection of all students from violence, exposure to weapons and threats, theft, bullying and harassment, the sale or use of illegal substances on school grounds, and other emergencies.”

Research from [The National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development](#) confirms the impact that comfort and safety at school has on students’ ability to learn. Beyond measures that specifically target physical safety, K12 leaders are also working to cultivate a school climate that contributes to positive learning outcomes for students, teacher job satisfaction and retention, and the overall “feel” of a school. A positive school climate is linked to teacher retention, graduation rates, student development, academic achievement, student health, and more.

The National Association of School Psychologists in its [Framework for Safe and Successful Schools](#) emphasizes that “Mental health is developed early in life and educators play a significant role in ensuring that students’ experiences throughout their school careers contribute to their positive mental health. Access to school-based mental health services and supports directly improves students’ physical and psychological safety, academic performance, and social-emotional learning.”



SECTION III:

The Role of Safety in Promoting Positive Learning Environments

The task of creating a physically safe school environment can seem overwhelming to K12 leadership, especially as incidents of [school violence](#), including fights among students and physical attacks on teachers, have increased. The [Government Accounting Office](#) reports that “Each year, millions of K12 students experience hostile behaviors like bullying, hate speech, hate crimes, or assault.”

The [NCSSE](#) advises that “Physical safety is related to higher academic performance, fewer risky behaviors, and lower dropout rates. Risky behaviors, such as acts of violence, imperil safety for students and staff, and undermine the teaching and learning climate. Students who feel safe are more likely to stay in school and achieve academically.”

Schools can use a variety of safety and security measures and protocols to promote the safety of students, teachers, and staff, including controlled access to buildings, security cameras, badging, random sweeps, wearable mobile panic buttons and school hardening measures like metal detectors, school resource officers, and door-locking systems.

SchoolSafety.gov provides a [Safety Readiness Tool](#) for districts and schools to use that covers the essential areas of safety readiness and response:

- Designated Staff
- School Climate
- Reporting Systems
- Threat Assessment
- Emergency Operations Plans
- Site Assessment
- Staff and Faculty Training
- Student Training
- Exercises and Drills
- Recovery Plans

An article in [DistrictAdministration.com](#) cites “research that shows that when students feel safe, they’re [more attentive and efficient](#) in the classroom and have fewer symptoms of depression. Students who are engaged and attentive more often experience long-term academic and life success.”





SECTION IV:

Safety as a Protective Factor for Mental Health

More than ever before, the teaching mission is no longer just about educating students, it's about classroom safety and management. Teachers find themselves cast as first responders to all manner of incidents that previously would have been handled primarily by counselors, nurses, and additional support staff.

Job-related stress, safety concerns, and burnout continue to wreak havoc on the education sector. Nationwide staff shortages contribute to this feeling of insecurity; when incidents arise, schools may lack sufficient personnel to support teachers. According to a 2022 survey of 1,200 schools by the [National Center for Education Statistics](#) (NCES), half of the schools surveyed said they aren't equipped to properly provide mental health services—especially for the one-on-one counseling that 84% of schools say is their most common intervention.

[Edweek surveyed teachers and principals](#) and found record highs for stress. “Nearly three-fourths of teachers and 85% of principals are experiencing frequent job-related stress, compared to just a third of working adults.” The stress levels inside our school are direct results of feeling unsafe and unsupported.

The key to enhancing feelings of security and trust among students and staff is to start with teachers. The [Hechinger Report](#) points out that “Researchers have uncovered a reciprocal relationship between student and teacher well-being: A contributing factor to teacher stress can be exposure to student hardships, which can lead to secondary trauma, or ‘compassion fatigue.’” A study by [Harding et al., 2019](#) confirmed that educator wellness is associated with child and student wellness.

Clearly, stress levels among students and educators must be lowered, and given that concerns about safety—in all its forms—are one of the primary contributors to stress, school safety must be seen as a preventive measure against mental health issues.

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SECTION V:

Addressing Mental Health Challenges to Improve Safety

In his 2023 State of the Union address, President Biden stated: “When millions of young people are struggling with bullying, violence, trauma, we owe them greater access to mental healthcare at their schools.” [Schoolsafety.gov](https://www.schoolsafety.gov) advises “Providing access to mental health services can reduce mental, emotional, and behavioral difficulties with students at risk.”

The book, [Addressing Student Mental Health](#), says “The manifestations of mental health issues in children and adolescents are often most visible when they are under stress and/or when they are engaged in social situations. That puts teachers in a unique position to observe the warning signs of emotional distress and mental health problems in students. They are often the first to recognize that something might be wrong, and as such are “first responders” in the process of early identification, response, and referral of students experiencing mental health issues.”

Teachers can build a culture of support by exploring strategies that benefit students without straying from their content areas. Phyllis Fagell, a school counselor and author of the book [Middle School Matters](#), suggests that “English teachers can have students discuss the emotions of a character in an assigned book and science teachers can discuss how to ‘activate your parasympathetic nervous system to calm your thoughts.’”

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) has proven to help [reduce violence](#) and [make schools safer](#). School SEL programs can also help reduce bullying and curb future violent behavior. These programs have come under some scrutiny due to political gamesmanship. That said, [emotional literacy](#), or the ability to understand emotions’ biological basis, to name emotions, and take others’ perspectives, is a crucial skill for students. Yet, as the [Hechinger Report](#) points out:

Too often, educators don’t receive any training regarding mental health—young people’s or their own—during college...Of course, mental health support should involve trained interventionists; we shouldn’t position teachers as such.

To support students’ mental health, many experts and school and district leaders are calling for increasing the number of school counselors and psychologists, social and emotional supports, and restorative and relationship-building practices. But not only are these supports linked to better student mental health—they are also shown to [create safer learning environments for students](#) and improve student academic outcomes.

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SECTION VI:

Collaborative Efforts and Best Practices

Partnerships with community organizations for comprehensive safety and mental health support can reap additional benefits for students and the school. Youth.gov reports that “schools that choose to collaborate with community partners have found that they can enhance the academic success of individual students. These partnerships have been found to significantly improve schoolwide truancy and discipline rates, increase the rates of high school graduation, and help create a positive school environment in which a student can learn and be successful in school and in the community.”

The U.S Department of Education’s [Guiding Principles for Creating Safe, Inclusive, Supportive, and Fair School Climates](#) provide guidance on how to maintain safe, inclusive, supportive, and fair learning environments for students and school staff and include specific recommendations for evidence-based practices to give students what they need to learn and grow.

The five guiding principles are:

1. Foster a sense of belonging through a positive, safe, welcoming, and inclusive school environment;
2. Support the social, emotional, physical, and mental health needs of all students through evidence-based strategies;
3. Adequately support high-quality teaching and learning by increasing educator capacity;
4. Recruit and retain a diverse educator workforce; and
5. Ensure the fair administration of student discipline policies in ways that treat students with dignity and respect (including through systemwide policy and staff development and monitoring strategies).

The efforts put forth by schools in fostering a safe and supportive environment can be bolstered by involving parents and guardians as partners and advocates for school safety. They can do that by:

- Building partnerships with schools and school officials
- Staying informed about school safety policies, procedures, and initiatives
- Advocating for safer school environments
- Supporting school safety programs
- Raising awareness

School safety is an ongoing process and should be regularly discussed, reviewed, and updated to reflect the changing needs of the school community.



Section VII:

Challenges and Potential Solutions

Issues as complex and widespread as school safety and mental health will never have a one-and-done solution. K12 leaders will need to overcome multiple barriers to integrating safety and mental health initiatives to generate the greatest impact for students.

According to a 2022 survey of 1,200 schools by the National Center for Education Statistics, the top limitations preventing schools from meeting kids' needs are inadequate access to mental health professionals and insufficient funding.

Luckily, the American Rescue Plan, the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act, and other federal efforts have allotted school districts an unprecedented amount of federal funding to use for supporting school safety and well-being for both students and teachers.

On the school safety front, while school-wide technologies like entry control equipment, metal detectors, and video surveillance systems are primarily focused on intruder prevention, new technologies are taking into account situations that occur daily across campuses, like medical emergencies, student altercations, and suspicious activity.

To speed response, schools in Florida and New Jersey are required by law to install silent mobile panic button systems that are directly linked to law enforcement. Technologies like these that immediately direct help where it is needed create a sense of safety among teachers and staff that contributes to their well-being.

Another aspect of teacher well-being is addressed in an [EdWeek.org article that showed](#) promising results from pilot programs addressing the mental health of teachers. “For example, districts that [paid for teachers to receive therapy](#) reported that ‘none of [the teachers] quit until they felt emotionally well. Of the teachers that provided feedback, 100% reported an improvement in personal well-being...[and] that the experience positively impacted their students’ well-being, mental health, and academic performance.’”

Another challenge is, as the Hechinger Report puts it, “an urgent need for teachers to know how best to respond to their own and others’ challenges and to model productive coping strategies that can serve students in the long term.” That need was seconded by U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy in his identification of “the urgent need to address the nation’s youth mental health crisis.”

The [Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Preparation](#) requires that teacher education programs cover diversity, equity, and inclusion—but not mental health, despite the topics’ interconnectedness. Hechinger recommends “Incorporating basic awareness into teacher training of anxiety, depression and trauma is important, as is instruction on ways of talking about mental health with young people and strategies like cognitive behavioral therapy techniques for the classroom. This will equip teachers with tools to identify and respond to students when they most need help and connect them with additional support.”

Schools will also need to address cultural and societal factors impacting mental health in schools. The [National Association of School Psychologists](#) (NASP) points out that “Cultures have different attitudes toward issues of mental health and mental illness that can affect levels of awareness among students and families, the likelihood that they will seek or even accept assistance, and the social mores that should help guide the delivery of services.”

NASP recommends “culturally competent mental health services that enable school personnel to effectively address the social, behavioral, and mental health needs of students from diverse cultures.”

Section:

Conclusion

There is universal agreement from policymakers, educators, students, and parents about the urgency to create positive, inclusive learning environments where students and staff feel safe, can forge strong relationships, and where their mental health is a priority.

We've explored some of the reasons why school safety and mental health are inextricably linked. Any efforts to implement comprehensive safety and mental health support must recognize this reciprocal relationship and that only evidence-based measures that support student mental health and well-being can create the safe environments that students need in schools.

Often conversations about school safety are limited to whether to install a metal detector or place a police officer at the door of a school building. We've shown that each school must find the right balance of physical safety measures and protocols, school climate, SEL programs, student counseling resources, and teacher training to achieve a comprehensive program of safety and mental health support.

Given the alarming data on school shootings, poor student mental health, and teacher stress, the issues of safety and mental health will continue to occupy the thoughts of K12 school leadership. As educators tackle these issues, they can turn to best practices like the Department of Education's Guiding Principles, technologies like entry control equipment and silent mobile panic button systems, and increasing the mental health support available to students and teachers to foster a sense of safety and well-being that promotes better academic and behavioral outcomes.

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