

New Hampshire School Boards Association
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FOCUS ON:
SCHOOL SAFETY

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This school year has brought unfortunate attention back to two vital school board functions – student safety and school violence. With the recent swell of school shootings and school violence, school boards are urged to thoroughly and attentively assess their school safety policies, procedures and practices. This effort is multi-faceted, as it encompasses student behavior, but also internal security measures, facility safeguarding, and a host of other areas of school board management.

This issue of FOCUS ON will provide school board members with policy considerations, preventative procedures, communication techniques, and other pro-active approaches to prevent violent acts in your school districts.

I. It Starts With Your Policy

School board policies addressing student safety and school violence should contain:

- A specific policy prohibiting harassment, intimidation or bullying
- A definition of harassment, intimidation or bullying
- A description of the type of behavior expected from students
- A statement of consequences and remedial action for policy violations
- A procedure for reporting acts of harassment, intimidation or bullying, including allowing anonymous reporting
- A procedure for prompt investigation of charges
- A statement about how the district will respond after confirming an act has occurred, including the consequences and remedial action it will take

NHSBA has updated many of its Sample Policies pertaining to student safety and school violence. These updated policies were sent to your respective districts as part of NHSBA's November 2006 Policy Update. They are:

- EBCC – Bomb Threats
- ECAF – Audio & Video Surveillance
- EEAED – Use of Sex Offender Registry Information
- JICF – Gang Activity
- JIHC – Use of Metal Detectors

Additionally, all other NHSBA Sample Policies relating to student safety and school violence have been reviewed and are presently satisfactory. They include policies on bullying, weapons, gun-free school zones, etc.

II. Preventative Procedures

Reporting. Staff and students should be encouraged to report any behaviors, incidents, or statements they regard as troublesome. They must know to whom they should report and when they should report. There should be a school employee designated as the “liaison” for these reports. It may make sense to have the staff or administrative person who functions as the collection point be the same person who acts as the assessor of potential for violence and/or need for referral. See NHSBA Sample Policies ADD, ECAC and JICK.

Parental Involvement. Clear guidelines about when and how to involve parents in the “threat assessment” should be established. What do they have a right to know? Which referrals/interventions require parental consent under federal/state law? What should be done when parents are hostile/non-receptive to the suggested referral? See NHSBA Sample Policies EBB and KB.

Law Enforcement in Public Schools. The presence of law enforcement officers will not guarantee safety in a school building, but officers can help to prevent tragedy and react immediately if a crisis occurs. A visible police presence may be helpful in reducing all forms of violence. This also gives students an opportunity to develop trust and talk to law enforcement officers in a neutral, non-threatening atmosphere. The most common method is partnering with law enforcement. This provides an opportunity for the school to work with other community officials. It may also build a positive relationship invaluable in crisis situations. See NHSBA Sample Policies JIHC and KLG.

III. Communications to Gather Information

Mandatory Reporting. A school’s goal must be to create a culture of mandatory reporting by all members of the school community, including students and parents. This is not a new task for educators. Violence and threats of violence have occurred throughout the history of education. But it is more important than ever that school officials take pro-active steps to report instances affecting school safety. See NHSBA Sample Policies ADD, ECAC, and JICK.

Anonymous Tip-Lines. Some private companies now offer to establish anonymous tip lines for school districts. Such a program might increase the flow of information from students to law enforcement and school officials. Check with your local police department about such programs. NHSBA does not currently have a Sample Policy on this topic.

Appropriate Investigation. If the district has its own tip line, it must have procedures in place and personnel designated to determine whether a particular piece of information warrants further investigation and how that investigation will be conducted. Because the information is anonymous, follow up investigation may be more difficult, but it is imperative that school officials independently corroborate the tip if disciplinary measures are contemplated or if searches will be conducted. If no corroboration can be obtained, school administrators must be provided with guidance on what steps should be taken next. See NHSBA Sample Policies ADD, GBAA, JBAA and JICK.

IV. Establish a School Safety Committee

This committee should be comprised of teachers, administrators, parents and students, as well as law enforcement officials, judicial officials, etc. At the first meetings, discuss immediate problems and think of short-term solutions. As the group continues to meet, solutions to long-term preventative problems will come.

In subsequent meetings, the committee should attempt to develop and implement “Action and Crisis Management Techniques.” These techniques should be tied to the school’s overall programs that address school management, curriculum, and the physical environment. Also, have the committee focus on roles, behavior, and standards for everyone involved – students, staff, parents, and other members of the community. The techniques should also address conflict resolution, diversity, drug education, anger management, peer mediation and sexual harassment. See NHSBA Sample Policies ADD and EBB.

A final charge for the committee should be to continue monitoring and assessing data. To reduce school violence the School Safety Committee should continually monitor certain kinds of activities. Collecting and analyzing data can lead the committee to address potential problems.

V. Student Disciplinary Policies

Zero-Tolerance Policies. In addition to federal and state laws that require school districts to implement zero-tolerance policies for certain offenses, schools may wish to consider zero-tolerance policies for students who make threats of violence. Such a policy might include expulsion or suspension of students who threaten to kill or who seriously assault others, and, when appropriate, provide for timely psychological evaluation or intervention for these students. A clear and consistent message that threats of violence will not be tolerated may help to reduce actual occurrence.

Alternatives to Zero-Tolerance Policies. There is much controversy over the effectiveness of school suspensions related to zero-tolerance policies, since suspension does not teach students more effective ways to handle conflict. Instead, it results in a loss of academic instructional time for a subgroup of students who need it most.

Schools may want to re-examine their own zero-tolerance policies (those that are not mandated by law) to see what effect and impact they have had on reducing school violence. If they have not been successful, schools may want to seek alternative forms of punishment and discipline. NHSBA does not currently have a Sample Policy on this topic.

Strict Dress Codes and School Uniforms. Advocates of school uniforms assert that such policies reduce school violence and improve school climate. Principals in schools with uniform policies reported strong benefits of student safety according to a 1999 survey by the National Association of Elementary School Principals. See NHSBA Sample Policy JICA.

Requiring students to wear a specific uniform may, however, be unconstitutional. There are no specific court cases on this subject. Before adopting a strict dress code or school uniform policy, schools should consider making sure the policy reasonably relates to their asserted purpose, i.e. decreasing school violence.

School Searches. School officials may conduct a search of a student or a student's belongings if they have reasonable suspicion that the student is violating the law or school rules. The search must be reasonable both at its inception and in its scope. See NHSBA Sample Policies JIH, JIHB, JIHC.

*For more information, please feel free to contact
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