

School Safety Preparedness: Know Your Resources

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As all of our thoughts have once again turned to the victims and families involved in a school shooting, educators and school leaders continue striving to improve prevention and response strategies to keep students safe. Educators and school leaders face a daunting task to manage the complex matrix of legal requirements and best practices to keep students safe. School districts have a duty of care to protect students from foreseeable dangers. Educators must meet this standard of care by fulfilling the requirements of regulations and statutes as mandated at the federal, state, and local level. For example, conducting required drills on schedule and as specified, and acting as a reasonable educator would act in protecting against acts of violence and responding to violent situations.

As a starting point for the identification of the requirements of this standard of care, most schools should be reviewing the recommendations of the New Jersey School Security Task Force. This report is available online through the New Jersey Department of Education website and covers issues from training of staff to hardening of schools. School leaders should also be reviewing their district's policies and procedures in various areas including limiting access to the school building. Leaders should make certain that these policies are being implemented consistently and should maintain continual vigilance to monitor compliance. School leaders may find security lapses in areas that may not seem obvious. For example, cafeteria doors left unlocked by kitchen staff to ease the morning food deliveries, which presents a security vulnerability that may require daily unannounced inspections to raise the seriousness of the issue with staff.

In this way, the human factor is both the number one strategy for preventing school violence and also the number one challenge. Reasonable school leaders will prepare staff appropriately for their role in preventing and responding to school violence. Practicing these roles and monitoring implementation are critical components for successful compliance.

Reasonable districts will also be vigilant in taking advantage of resources available through organizations that support school safety including the New Jersey Department of Education Office of School Preparedness & Emergency Planning, New Jersey State Police, New Jersey Domestic Security Preparedness Task Force, and the New Jersey Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness. Each of these organizations offers specific advice and resources that can be helpful for schools. Specifically, the Office of School Preparedness and Emergency Planning within the Department of Education will observe security drills held at a school and provide insights and guidance to school staff and law enforcement. This exercise can provide an enhanced learning opportunity for districts to discover vulnerabilities. Through these types of simulations, observations and analysis, districts have gained critical insight. Once such insight uncovered that if a district is using VOIP internet-based phone system, the building address may be reported as the central office when a 911 call is made, resulting in valuable time lost for emergency responders who may not be familiar with the school's street address. Additionally, these simulations also provide staff with the opportunity to ask questions regarding their own actions during the drill including when to open the door after a lockdown begins.

In addition to lockdown drills and other steps that school leaders must take to ensure they are in compliance, they also must review the protocols for the sharing of information with law enforcement and child protection agencies. The importance of sharing and, most importantly, acting on the information received has become crystal clear in recent weeks.

The seriousness of keeping students safe, managing compliance, and institutionalizing best practices may feel overwhelming to educators as they cope with the obligations placed on them. In addition to the resources highlighted above, school leaders can also get assistance from legal, compliance, and educational counselors to help address concerns with the preparedness of their schools.

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