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N. An Overview of Project SAVE

Safe Schools Against Violence in Education

The New York State Guidance Document for School Safety Plans

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Introduction

Highly publicized tragedies in our schools have had a significant impact on the manner in which educators and communities respond to crises and disaster. Although school violence, especially among adolescents, has shown decreasing trends over the last few years, such evidence has been obscured by recent school shootings and threats of violence. Such events have brought considerable amounts of media attention. However, because of media exposure to such events, there has also been an increasing recognition of the role that school districts play in their response to violence, traumatic events and disaster. Such events include, but are certainly not limited to, acts of threats or intimidation, fighting, assaults, bullying, carrying of weapons and disruptive behavior. Through primary prevention strategies such as education of communities, staff and students about violence and crisis management, there appears to be a growing trend toward making schools safer environments and more conducive to education.

In April of 2001, the New York State Education Department published a document entitled *Project SAVE [Safe Schools Against Violence in Education]: Guidance Document for School Safety Plans*. This handbook was developed collaboratively between the New York State Education Department, New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services, the New York State Police and related state agencies. The *Project SAVE* document compliments a law entitled the *Safe Schools Against Violence in Education Act (SAVE)* which addresses issues of school safety and violence prevention. This was passed by the New York State Legislature and made a law by Governor George E. Pataki on July 24, 2000. *Project SAVE* was developed by New York State for those involved in the educational process from the elementary through secondary levels, across all communities. This legislation made it law for school districts to develop and/or maintain a school safety plan at the district and building levels. Although no one safety management plan will address all needs of all individuals in all school districts, the information provided may serve as a foundation and useful model for other school systems.

The Need for School Safety/Crisis Plans

Efficient crisis plans start with an assessment of the needs of those who will need service. This is where data collected by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDCP) has been most useful. The 1999 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) which is conducted by the CDCP and is cited in the New York State *Project SAVE* plan, represents the responses of students in New York State high schools. Among the findings is that approximately 18% of all students and specifically, 27% of male students, report that they have carried a weapon including a gun, knife or club, one or more times within 30 days prior to the survey. Eight percent of students indicated that they have carried a weapon on school property. Moreover, 9% of students said that they were threatened or injured with a weapon on school property within the prior year. Almost 8% of all students reported that they avoided going to school one or more times within 30 days prior to the survey because they felt “unsafe” on their way to or from school and within their school. Within New York, over 500 threats including bomb, arson and anthrax threats, were reported during the 1999-2000 school year.

Setting up the Plan

The State of New York makes it very clear that a pro-active approach to school safety is a priority. It is recommended that there are District-wide School Safety Plans and Building-level Emergency Response Plans developed. Members for the teams should include, but are not limited to, representatives of the School Board, student, teacher, administrator, parent organization member, school safety personnel, other school personnel, community members, local law enforcement officials, local ambulance or other emergency response agencies and any other members the District deems appropriate.

Citing the New York State Center for School Safety (NYSCSS), an outline is recommended to guide schools as they develop and refine their safety plan. The components include:

- **Data Collection** - Assess the information the school already maintains regarding school safety.
- **Data Analysis** - How does the school use this information to identify and prioritize its needs?
- **Problem-Solving** - Attempt to identify what needs to be done.
- **Implementation** - Assess strategies available that could be useful to the school community.
- **Evaluation** - Assess whether or not strategies have been useful.

Some guiding principles are also indicated by the *Project SAVE* and include the following:

- Schools should use existing plans as a foundation for developing a new safety plan.
- Plans should be developed with input from a variety of sources including students, parents, teachers, school leaders, public safety agencies and other key partners.
- Planning should be “comprehensive” and include information ranging from early or primary prevention through crisis response and follow-up.
- Plans should be clear, precise and understandable.
- Plans should define roles and responsibilities of those involved in safety/crisis management while minimizing ambiguity.
- Coordination between public and nonpublic schools should occur as well as recognition of the needs of special school populations, students and staff with disabilities, and limited English-speaking students.
- Plans should be regularly reviewed and updated.

An Example Outline for School Safety Plan

The underlying rationale behind *Project SAVE* is that pro-active, pre-planned responses are more expeditious and useful than “after-the-fact,” reactive plans when school districts respond to emergencies and violent incidents. *Project SAVE* suggests the following components for a school safety plan and emphasizes the need for district-specific refinement.

I. Risk Reduction/Prevention and Intervention

As part of a comprehensive safety plan, *Project SAVE* suggests:

- development of crisis/violence prevention/intervention strategies specific to the district.
- addressing communication among students and between students and staff.
- assessing the manner in which potentially violent events are reported.
- establishing conflict resolution training programs, peer mediation programs, youth-run programs, forums for students and school community regarding bullying or violence, and establishes anonymous reporting methods for school violence.
- providing training, drills, and exercises to test components of the emergency response plan.
- providing a description of policies and procedures related to school building security including security guards, hall monitors, visitor/staff badges, sign-in procedure, video surveillance, metal detectors, search dog, and random search.
- describing how the district maintains vital information on each school building, floor plans, school population, number of staff, transportation needs, and phone numbers and other contact information for key school officials.
- providing a policy for primary prevention techniques including how to detect potentially violent or self-destructive behavior for staff, administrators, students, and families.
- identifying sites of potential hazard or emergency including school buildings, playgrounds, athletic fields, off-site field trips and others.

II. Response

In an effort to respond efficiently to an emergency, *Project SAVE* suggests:

- describing policies and procedures for contacting appropriate law enforcement officials in the event of a violent incident.
- developing a system to inform all educational agencies of a disaster or crisis situation including telephone, fax, e-mail, intercom, district radio system and others as appropriate.
- describing the policies and procedures to contact parents, guardians or persons in parental relation to students in the event of early dismissal or violent event.
- describing the district's multi-hazard response plans for responding to threats of violence, intruder, explosive/bomb threat, hostage/kidnaping, hazardous material, natural/weather-related, school bus accident, gas leak, civil disturbance, biological, radiological, epidemic or other critical incidents.
- with regard to *Acts of Violence including Implied or Direct Threat*, districts should use staff trained in de-escalation or other strategies to diffuse the situation, inform Building Principal of implied or direct threat, determine the level of threat (with Superintendent), contact appropriate law enforcement agency (if necessary), isolate the immediate area and evacuate (if necessary), initiate look-down procedure (if necessary), assess need for early dismissal, sheltering or evacuation procedures, and monitor the situation. The building/district should determine the need for the school-based Crisis/Emergency Response Team.
- identification of protocols for appropriate response to emergencies and include determining decision makers, plans to safeguard students and staff, transportation procedures, procedures to notify parents and media and debriefing procedures.

III. Recovery or Postvention

In order to effectively move past a violent or emergency event and restore the district to pre-crisis functioning, *Project SAVE* suggests:

- describing how school district will support Emergency Response Teams or post-incident response teams after the event in the affected school.
- coordinating follow-up and intervention with local community mental health resources.
- processing the response and recovery and re-evaluating current violence prevention and school safety protocols to determine how to refine or improve it.

Conclusion

Although, statistically, school violence and tragedy appears to have declined, the need for a comprehensive school safety plan for school districts nationwide has become paramount. New York State, through *Project SAVE*, mandates a plan for school districts throughout the state at all levels. This safety plan attempts to pre-empt a crisis through primary prevention strategies, develop a plan for when a crisis occurs, and assist a district in its recovery from a crisis situation. As indicated earlier, although no one safety management plan can address all of the needs of all individuals in all school districts, the information provided here may serve as a foundation and useful model for other school systems.

Bibliography

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