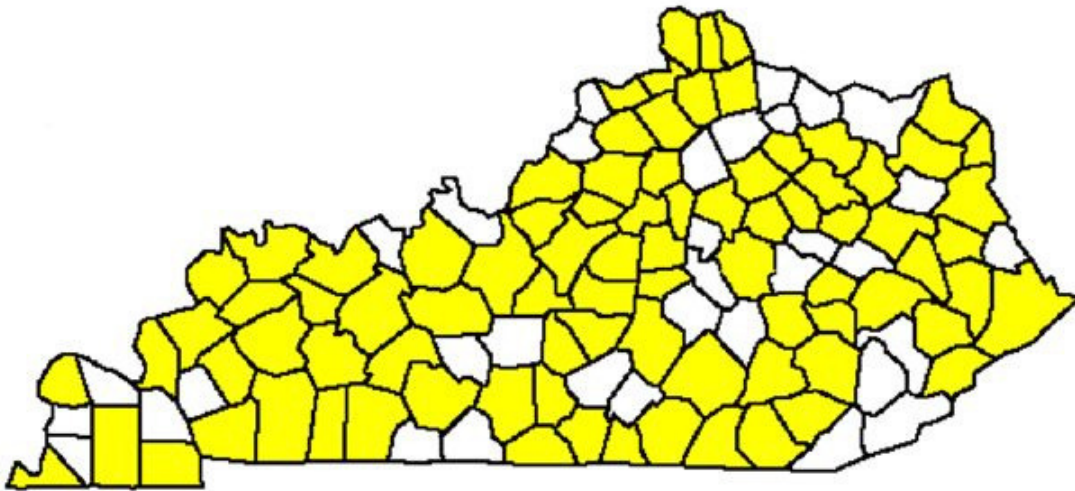


COMMON ISSUES FOUND IN SAFE SCHOOL ASSESSMENTS

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The safe school assessment, a free service offered to the schools in all 174 school districts in Kentucky, is an independent examination of a school's climate and culture as it relates to the enhancement of a safe and healthy learning environment. The Kentucky Center for School Safety has conducted this multi-faceted service in 255 schools in 109 school districts thus far (illustrated below) as the demand for assessments has accelerated significantly since the initiation of the process in 2003.



Districts Where Assessments Have Been Conducted Since 2003

This voluntary process (which, in part, involves compiling and examining the perceptions of the students, staff and parents of a school, as well as conducting a walk-through of the physical plant) often results in findings which are quite similar in many schools. Further, after the thorough analysis of the data gathered in each of these assessments, the comprehensive reports generated by the Center for the schools and their districts support the notion that there are several common themes in the issues of many schools. Moreover, based on the schools assessed so far, these issues seem to present themselves irrespective of school size, demographic makeup or geographic position in the state. In fact, a commonality of issues appears to be more consistent with grade-level configurations (e.g. elementary, middle, high) rather than other factors, although many issues are prevalent in schools housing all grade levels.

What are the most common issues typically unveiled in safe school assessments, and what strategies do we often ask staffs to consider as they address them? Interestingly, the issues are as widely varied in nature as they are in the schools that have them. Their fundamental differences lie in the fact that two are student-discipline related, one involves physical plant issues and school practices, one is relational in nature, and the others involve school staff behaviors. Each, however, greatly impacts a school's learning environment and, as we emphasize to school officials, should be considered a priority when working toward the enhancement of the school's overall climate and culture.

Is Your School Safe?

Common Concerns **PLUS** Tips to Address Them

1 Lack of Teacher/Staff Connectivity With Students – Too often, we visit schools where a significant number of students indicate having a feeling of disconnection from all of the adults in the building. As a consequence of this feeling, they tell us, there is no staff member to whom they would turn if the need arose. These students, when probed, will indicate that they feel this way, in essence, because their perception is that there is an inconsistency of actions and/or a lack of caring and trust on the part of many of the staff members in their respective schools.

Much current research on school safety confirms that the greatest enhancers of healthy, safe and constructive school climates are the relationships developed between the adults in a school and its student body. Ideally then, school staffs should continuously strive to create strategies that will make each of their students feel included, respected, protected and needed. As educators, we have long known that it is important for students to develop healthy relationships with their peers at school, but we have not been as quick to recognize that it may be just as important for students to feel a definite sense of connection to (at least some members of) the school's staff. The overarching reason for the formation of this position appears to be that healthy student-to-adult connections provide the needed stimulus to open the lines of communication; and open lines of communication between the students and adults in a school greatly enhance the school's safety. Thus, we believe that it is critical for all school staffs to work diligently toward achieving a school climate where each student perceives that he/she has at least one adult to whom they can turn when there is a need.

Finally, when we encounter this issue in a school, we recommend that the staff expand their efforts toward promoting and facilitating an open, friendly and nurturing culture; one where the students feel a real connection to the members of the school's staff. Such a school culture, we believe, will be one where students will be more than likely to "naturally" keep the adults apprised of any unusual circumstance that they suspect to exist in the school that could negatively impact and possibly threaten school safety. Indeed, it is one that allows the adults in charge to keep their fingers on the general pulse of the school's climate, while simultaneously giving its students a sense of security.

2 Inadequate Active Supervision of Students When In Transition – Most school staffs do an admirable job of supervising students while the students are in the classrooms, but they often are not as diligent with supervision when their students are in the various, but necessary, non-classroom modes during the school day. During assessments, we find frequently that there is not enough "active" supervision during routine transitioning periods, such as morning arrivals, after-school dismissals, breaks, class changes, recesses, etc. Ironically, most schools' administrators have developed detailed supervision plans for the vast majority of, if not all, non-classroom scenarios; however, many times those plans are either not enforced by the administration (which invariably leads to most staff members gradually abandoning their routine supervisory duties), or the staff members supervising are not vigilant in their roles as supervisors. Vigilant supervision is "active" supervision, which entails visibly moving among and interacting with the students being supervised.

To maximize safety in a school, the adults in charge must control it. One very strong and visible indication of an adult-controlled school is one where its adults can be observed to be actively supervising in all areas where students are located when in transition. In fact, except during real emergencies, we contend that there is no place more important for a staff member to be. As one very special mentor once told me, "In a school, there can never be too much supervision." To this end, we advise administrators to emphasize often the importance of adequately and effectively supervising students in transition by "requiring" and "assigning" staff to specific areas to supervise, rather than only encouraging them to perform this duty. This responsibility, we believe, is much too critical to the school's overall level of safety to be left to the arbitrary judgment and mood of individual faculty members.

KRS 161.180 addresses supervision of pupils' conduct in school, detailing staffs' accountability in this area. Therefore, we advise schools that the supervision of students is a legal requirement as well as a best practice, one that is fundamental and completely non-negotiable if an acceptable level of school safety is to be achieved.

3 Drug and Alcohol Abuse – Most high schools we have visited, as well as some middle schools, are being confronted with the student abuse of alcohol and/or drugs and the problems associated with them. Certainly, we do not find this fact to be surprising as generally schools reflect their communities; the drug and alcohol abuse rampant in many communities in our state is well-documented. What is sometimes surprising to us, however, is that many students we survey and/or interview during assessments will freely tell us that there are students at their schools who abuse drugs and alcohol. The drugs, reportedly, most frequently abused take several forms depending upon the regional location of the school. The principal commonality we find with this problem is usually in where (within the district) the abuse occurs. For example, students all over the state have told us that while a number of students can be found to be under the influence of marijuana at school, most use the drug off campus and come to school in that condition. On the other hand, prescription and over-the-counter drugs (mainly pills) are used widely by students while on school campuses. Many students also tell us that alcoholic beverages are used quite regularly in some schools, almost always disguised in a soft drink or water container.

Drug and alcohol abuse is a problem that schools must openly acknowledge and seek to develop ways to help any young person in their midst who may be in the process of falling prey to any one of these addictive, illegal and destructive habits. It is also a problem that, left unchecked, can seriously compromise the school climate, and therefore the safety of a school. Additionally, perhaps more than any other school problem, this is one that cannot be addressed in isolation (i.e., with only school staff members). On the contrary, we strongly advise school staffs to work with a wide range of their stakeholders in devising strategies to address drug and alcohol abuse. Community members, mental health and substance abuse counselors, law enforcement officers, parents, students and many others can offer invaluable insight into the problem for a school and also aid them in combating it. By involving a diverse group of stakeholders, the school will: 1) be in the position to tap community resources that may be able to provide professional assistance to young substance and alcohol abusers; 2) have a wider range of people from whom school officials can learn of the growing trends associated with drugs and alcohol in the community and; 3) demonstrate to students and the community that the problem is not being ignored, either clinically or legally.

Procedurally, we recommend to staffs that they examine any practices that they may have in place that could invite such abuse on campus, such as allowing students to have open containers within the school, permitting students to go off campus during lunch, or allowing students to congregate in unsupervised areas during school hours, etc. Professional development for staff which includes recognizing the signs and symptoms of alcohol and drug abuse is also frequently recommended.

4 Bullying/ Harassment – Bullying and harassment are widespread in many schools where we have conducted safe school assessments. Most schools, we have discovered, have well-defined school and district policies to address these behaviors but, nevertheless, they persist and, in some schools, seem to be growing. Exacerbating the problem in many schools now is the advancement of electronic forms of communication which are sometimes being used to bully and/or harass in an insidious and sometimes much more hurtful way than other forms. Some female students, in particular, are becoming progressively more clever and proficient with the use of electronic forms of communication to demean, ostracize or embarrass one another, and there have been several cases (discussed with the assessment teams) involving male students using technology to sexually harass female students. Therefore, school rules governing cyber-bullying are also quickly being developed in many schools.

We regularly communicate to staffs that whether bullying or harassment occurs openly in a classroom or on the playground; through text messages via a cell phone or on websites specifically designed to harass; or, at home in an Internet chat room, it is almost always extremely traumatic for the student experiencing it. Therefore, we urge school personnel to be ultra-sensitive to students who they may observe being victimized by it, or those who may come to staff seeking assistance or refuge from it. We believe that it is very important for students to recognize that each staff member considers all forms of bullying and harassment to be intolerable; that all such behaviors reported are investigated; and, that if the behavior is observed, it is immediately addressed. We recommend to schools that they strive in various ways to communicate this important anti-bullying/harassment message to students through practice and deed, as the school's overall climate can be seriously weakened if such behaviors are allowed to become widespread.

School administrators and teachers should strongly and consistently enforce all rules and policies that the school and/or district have governing bullying/harassment. School staff members should also be given the opportunity to get professional training that focuses on how to recognize the behaviors' more subtle forms. Equally important is for

schools to explore ways to educate students on the responsible use of electronic communication tools, as well as the value of wise conflict-resolution when dealing with bullying and harassment in any form.

5 Consistency in Rule Enforcement – Many students in schools tell us that their teachers, and sometimes principals, do not enforce all school rules and/or district policies consistently. “It depends upon the teacher” [or principal], we are often told. Similarly, staff members tell us frequently that many of their school colleagues do not consistently enforce rules and policies. Many times, staff members will also admit that they have “given up” trying to enforce the rules themselves since they perceive that their peers are not.

Regularly, we advise staffs to work toward the ultimate goal of getting all staff members to consistently enforce all school rules and district-level policies that are in place. Undoubtedly, when staff members and administrators send mixed messages to students regarding rules, the adverse impact on the school’s climate can be significant. We believe that the most effective method for a school to employ to achieve consistency in rule enforcement among staff members is to engage them in activities to “corporately” decide on which rules should be in effect and, therefore, enforced. (It is a given that some rules are derived from laws and School Board policies. This strategy, however, should be used to address school based rules, such as dress codes, tardiness, etc.) This is not to say that the process is an easy or quick one, but it is one that is working in many schools. Just as critical as the corporate development of the discipline code is the school administration’s assurance that each staff member is enforcing the code. (This latter step usually requires that a school administrator address any staff member individually and quickly who is being negligent in their enforcement of the code.)

The whole process becomes a more efficient and routine one when an instructional disciplinary approach is utilized by a school staff, such as the one offered by the Kentucky Center for Instructional Discipline (KyCID). Instructional disciplinary approaches afford the staff, administration and students the chance to “learn” the discipline code systematically, removing much of the opportunity for inconsistency in compliance and enforcement. Many schools have seen a significant improvement in discipline as a result of using such a program. To learn more about this program, go to www.kycid.org.

6 Building Access Control – Unfortunately, many schools in our state were constructed during a historical period when safety was not necessarily viewed as a major priority. As a result, we find that many exterior school doors are located in areas that are extremely difficult for school staff to consistently monitor. Oftentimes, the location of these doors allows visitors to walk directly into the building completely out of the front office workers’ line of sight, which allows them to avoid checking in at the main office or be taken/directed to their destination within the school.

Most schools have developed practices to address this issue... but, there are still problems. We find that most schools, in direct response to safety, are striving to keep all doors locked except those to a “celebrated” front entrance...but, still many have not trained students and staff to deny entrance to visitors who may seek to get into side or rear entrances to the school. Additionally, many schools have set up check-in policies for visitors at or near their celebrated entrance... but, still those policies are frequently not enforced. Many schools have also set up reception areas at the entrance... but, still the area is often not consistently staffed throughout the school day. Disturbingly, some schools, particularly a few located in smaller districts, seem somewhat complacent about building access issues, ostensibly believing that their county is a small one and that they are familiar with (and therefore trust) the visitors to their schools.

Clearly, no school is immune to intruders. This has been revealed as true in even the smallest of school districts located in the most remote areas. As we regularly tell school administrators, the admission of visitors and others to a school should be completely controlled. Fortunately, some schools recently built or renovated have front entrances where anyone entering the building will step over the threshold and walk directly into the front office where there is a staff member to greet and properly check them in; thereafter taking or directing them to their approved destination within the school. Others, as described above, do not, and have employed other methods to control access. However, regardless of the architectural design of a school, the key to access control is to train the entire staff and all students on the objective of ensuring that all visitors follow the school’s check-in procedure. Everyone must assume a role in this practice. That means that custodial personnel must ensure that all doors are locked during the school day and checked routinely throughout the day; staff members must make it a practice to check the doors periodically closest

to their work spaces; all personnel and students must be trained not to admit anyone from a side or rear door, but rather direct them to the front entrance; administrators must ensure that a procedure is in place at the front entrance that is consistently staffed; and administrators must also make an effort to provide outreach to parents informing them of this school routine and practice.

Frequently, we tell school administrators that convenience often must be sacrificed for safety. And, though it may take a while, parents will eventually become familiar (and even comfortable) with the process if it is effectively communicated to them and they realize that it is being done for the safety of their children.

In conclusion, many schools have common issues, but each brings a different set of characteristics to its problems, which makes each school unique. Unlike many issues in other venues, most school issues cannot be permanently resolved; instead, school personnel must try to stay ahead of the problems as there are many variables that can change them completely and quickly. What we try to do by sending experienced, successful educators and technicians into the schools to conduct safe school assessments is to examine their unique data so that we may assist them in adjusting some of the best practices (of which we are aware) to fit what is frequently a common problem in the school. Fortunately, the most schools we've assessed thus far have been most receptive to our suggestions, which we refer to as "considerations". What is most encouraging to us is that school districts are increasingly using the services we offer as they acknowledge the areas where their vulnerabilities in school safety may be, and they are taking advantage of the lessons that have already been learned in this area. This tells us that our schools are much more safety conscious today than in years past, which is a huge step forward.

