

Ten Essential Actions to Improve School Safety

Quick Reference Guide

Although statistically rare, school shootings and mass casualty attacks have an enormous impact on our communities. This often leads to immense pressure on school administrators and law enforcement officials to “do something” quickly to protect our children in school. Understanding this challenge, the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Community of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office) asked its School Safety Working Group to identify from a law enforcement perspective the 10 most essential actions schools, school districts, and law enforcement agencies can take to prevent mass casualty attacks in our nation’s schools and, when prevention is not enough, to respond rapidly and effectively to end the threat as quickly as possible to save lives.

1. Comprehensive School Safety Assessments

The foundation for all school safety and security planning and operations is a comprehensive risk assessment that identifies the highest probability threats (natural and man-made), their potential consequences, and the school or school district’s vulnerabilities to those threats. To be effective, the risk assessment and development of a school safety plan must be undertaken by an interagency, multidisciplinary team with one person serving as the team leader. The risk assessment will help you prioritize safety and security enhancements.

2. School Climate

The Federal Commission on School Safety reported that fostering a culture of connectedness is an important aspect of school safety. A positive school climate promotes respectful, trusting, and caring relationships and opens lines of communication. Students feel comfortable asking for help or reporting concerns about their peers.

3. Campus, Building and Classroom Security

Planning for security upgrades begins with a comprehensive risk assessment that identifies gaps in campus, building, and classroom security. Once gaps are identified, schools and school districts should develop plans for acquiring and deploying needed technology and equipment in a manner that does not sacrifice the school’s primary educational and developmental missions. Protective measures will vary based on the site, location, resources, and personnel available.

4. Anonymous Reporting Systems

According to the U.S. Secret Service, in the vast majority of mass casualty attacks in schools at least one other person had knowledge of the attacker’s plan. Anonymous reporting systems have been shown to be effective in identifying potential targeted school violence and suicidal threats. Successful anonymous reporting systems educate all members of the school community on indicators of potential self-harm or violence and how to share this information so officials can intervene before injury or loss of life occurs.

5. Coordination with First Responders

Even in schools with a school resource officer (SRO), an active shooter or other critical incident will result in state and local law enforcement officers and firefighters/EMS responding to the scene. Advanced planning and joint training are essential to ensure the response is rapid and effective. Coordination between schools and first responders should begin with the risk assessment and flow through the development of policies and the emergency operations plan to training, ongoing drills, and periodic evaluation.

6. Behavior Threat Assessment and Management

When schools and law enforcement receive information about potential threats, they should—time permitting—thoroughly evaluate and corroborate that information and then develop a plan for managing the threat. Multidisciplinary behavior threat assessment and management teams are well-positioned to

ensure information is shared across the various components of the school community that may have had contact with the individual(s) exhibiting concerning behavior. Assessing all available information and developing a joint plan of action is essential to successfully intervening with individuals on the pathway to violence.

7. School-Based Law Enforcement

According to the Federal Commission on School Safety, the ability of specially selected and trained SROs to establish trust relationships with students has been demonstrated to prevent school shootings. There have also been numerous documented instances of SROs directly intervening to quickly mitigate active school shootings. It is essential that a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) be put in place between the school or school district and the law enforcement agency providing the SRO(s). The selection, training, and supervision of SROs should comport with standards established by the National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO).

8. Mental Health Resources

Most school attackers exhibited a history of suicide attempts or suicidal thoughts prior to the attack. More than half had a documented history of feeling extremely depressed or desperate. There is a growing consensus that to support the mental and emotional health of students and prevent violence, schools must have access to counselors, psychologists, and social workers who can identify emerging problems and intervene immediately.

9. Drills

Lockdown drills have become a routine part of schools' emergency operations plans. An options-based approach such as "Run, Hide, Fight" is increasingly being adopted to allow schools to protect their students based on the unique circumstances of an event. The Federal Commission on School Safety recommends the use of options-based approaches that are age-appropriate. To create "muscle memory" and establish clear expectations of everyone's role during an emergency, armed assailant drills should be conducted on a regular basis throughout the school year.

10. Social Media Monitoring

Adolescents and even elementary school students spend an enormous amount of time online. While the vast majority of social media posts by students and student-to-student online conversations are innocuous, some may portend harm to self or others. Defensive social media monitoring, also referred to as a social media alerting system, provides constant online scanning of messages within a geofence around a school or school district to identify threats and at-risk behavior including cyberbullying. The COPS Office School Safety Working Group concurs with the Federal Commission on School Safety's assessment that these systems, when implemented with strong protocols to safeguard privacy and free speech, can be an effective tool in a comprehensive, multi-layered school safety plan.

The following national law enforcement organizations constitute the COPS Office School Safety Working Group:

- Association of State Criminal Investigative Agencies
- International Association of Campus Law Enforcement Administrators
- International Association of Chiefs of Police
- Major Cities Chiefs Association
- Major County Sheriffs of America
- National Association of School Resource Officers
- National Police Foundation
- National Sheriffs' Association

*Ten Essential Actions to
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School Safety Working Group
Report to the Attorney General

<https://cops.usdoj.gov/RIC/ric.php?page=detail&id=COPS-W0891>