

**N**o one can fully appreciate the work of school security officers because their best work doesn't show. By keeping schools orderly and calm, they provide freedom from fear so that teachers can teach and children can learn.

Invisible as it may seem, violence prevention is rigorous work that's not just for security officers and definitely not for the faint-hearted. Violence prevention facilitator Linda Vila Passione, of the United Federation of Teachers in New York City, describes what steps to take after a dangerous incident, and, more important, how to anticipate and prevent violence.

Vila Passione says that in the weeks after the shooting rampage last spring at Virginia Tech, her school-safety program dealt with a flurry of copycat threats in which middle and high school students announced on MySpace and YouTube that they planned to "V-Tech" their schools in the borough of Queens. One second-grader even relinquished a revolver to a teacher.

"When things like this happen, wherever it is—whatever borough, another state or the other side of the world—as a staff, we go into heightened awareness," she says.

So far, none of the New York incidents has erupted into violence because a joint program of the UFT and the school system practices what it preaches: constant vigilance and communication.

All schools need strict, routine procedures for visitors: "I don't care if it's your mother," she says. "Out she goes until she comes in with a photo ID."

Schools need well-rehearsed emergency plans, too. In New York City, says Vila Passione, all staff are informed via an intruder alert code. How it works: The school can use any code phrase, such as

# Safe & Secure

## Pulling out the stops to keep schools safe

"Mr. Muller has entered the building." Everyone on staff recognizes the phrase, learned in training before each school year. When the code is announced, staff check the hall, then lock their doors and keep working. Safety officers sweep the building and eventually give the all-clear: "Mr. Muller has left the building."

If an incident does occur, Vila Passione says, you should immediately seek help and notify an administrator and a union rep in your building or local. Later, ask for incident reports, consider legal action and keep all of your documentation. The UFT helps any injured members navigate the system.

### Proactive, not reactive

While the union does step forward after there's been trouble, the main focus is prevention, says Ellie Engler, the UFT's director of safety and health. Last school year, the local rolled out new materials and provided training at the schools. Knowledge is power, Engler says.

William Murphy, a safety officer with the St. Louis, Mo., public schools and a member of the AFT-affiliated St. Louis Teachers and SRP Union, agrees. His turf, Roosevelt High School, has to deal with 38 gangs in a single school. Even though his safety officers have staved off violence on school grounds, it's happening in the community, and some students don't see a line between the neighborhood and the school.

"You can't sit on it and wait for something to be done," Murphy says. "We try

to take a proactive stance. When we get word of any gang activity that's about to happen, we try to keep the peace."

### For your safety

They don't always know what's causing violence, but school safety officers do know that they have to build students' trust and set clear rules. Says Murphy: "Roosevelt is like my house. I'm not going to let anything come in and disrupt it. And these kids, they're my babies."

He ponders the fact that certain students are both childlike and dangerous. "It's getting to the point where they're assaulting staff on a regular basis," he says, attributing this violence to a lack of consequences when students behave badly. "Kids think, 'I can do whatever I want, and nothing's going to happen. I can hit a staff member and get away with it,'" he says. "And a lot of them wear that as a badge of honor."

Many school employees hesitate to report incidents, the UFT's Vila Passione acknowledges. Often, procedures for reporting incidents are unclear, or employees fear retaliation, not only from neighborhood thugs but also from school administrators.

Reporting incidents will draw attention to the need for better security, says Baltimore school police officer Major Byrd, in part because principals are evaluated on suspension and expulsion rates, which may affect school funding. "It's a numbers game," he says. "A lot of things that should be reported aren't reported."

Keep records of events such as in-school suspensions, says Vila Passione, recording when they happen and why. Use that information, she adds, to inform the community about the magnitude of school violence and to counter any false claims of a drop-off in incidents. "What money we could get if [the public] really knew the problem," she says.

### Hone your street smarts

Meanwhile, the number of violence-prone individuals is on the rise. Vila Passione urges staff to stay alert at all times (see box below). However, don't take hostile behavior personally, she explains, because it really has nothing to do with you. Just be aware of trigger words and phrases, such as "Get out of my face" or "What are you looking at?" Like Murphy, Vila Passione emphasizes that violence-prone kids don't distinguish the school from the street, and they often act on environmental triggers as varied as Halloween, spring fever or parent-teacher conferences.

"Listen to your students. Know your students. Speak to them," she says. "I want you to be safe and get home every night."

- Here are some measures your union, school and district can take to prevent and minimize emergencies:
- Address workplace safety in the union contract.
- Develop a school district safety plan that includes details as specific as which stairways to use in an evacuation.
- Create a union committee and select a point person on school violence prevention. The committee should ask questions: Is there a gate to the roof? Is it locked? Who has the key?
- Help keep the physical plant in good working order. For example, UFT violence prevention trainer Linda Vila Passione runs over to a door and shows that "it has to swing shut and stay tight."
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**"We do just about everything but teach," says Roosevelt High School safety officer William Murphy, left. "Safety has got to be a uniform effort across the school, across the community," says Linda Vila Passione, at far left, a violence prevention trainer with the United Federation of Teachers.**