



A Union of Professionals



Safe, Secure
and Welcoming
School Environments

How safe you, your students and visitors to your school feel may ultimately determine how well everyone performs and interacts with one another. Take a moment to evaluate your school's safety. How does it measure up compared with evidence-based policy and experience?

If your school or work site doesn't quite meet expectations, work with your union to strengthen the school's policies and practices.

What is a safe school environment?

A safe school environment is not always easy to describe. The ideal environment doesn't rely on federal, state and district laws, regulations and policies alone. It is dependent on how every school functions every day. It boils down to ensuring that each person who crosses the threshold of that school or boards a school bus on any given day feels safe, supported and secure. AFT members who perceive their schools this way describe it best.

"I feel safe in my classroom because I create an atmosphere where both my students and I flourish. Our school is a safe haven because of the nurturing environment presented by the staff."

— **Carla McCoy**, High School English Teacher,
Baltimore City, Md.

"I feel safe in my school bus because we have three different security cameras on every bus in our district. When an event occurs, we can review the tapes and have documentation."

— **Norma Salazar**, School Bus Driver,
San Antonio

Aspects of a safe school environment include:

- *Good anti-bullying policy that is practiced;*
- *School leadership (administrative) that supports staff, students and parent;*
- *Community/parental involvement;*
- *Culture of cooperation—social and emotional skills modeled and taught;*
- *Great school communication;*
- *A safety committee made up of key stakeholders (union, public safety officials, parents, community, students, administrators, etc.);*
- *A safety/emergency preparedness plan in place;*
- *Ongoing evaluation and practice of the plan; and*
- *Early identification and intervention for students at risk.*

How Does Your School Measure Up? Here is a quick tool for you to compare your school's safety measures against an approach that's been proven to work.

- ✓ Every school should have a comprehensive safety and emergency response plan.
 - Have you seen your school's plan?
- ✓ Plans that work best have a committee of key stakeholders who develop, implement and evaluate the plan.
 - Does your school have an active safety committee?
 - Does the committee include a representative from all staff groups—classroom, office, custodial/maintenance, food service?
 - Does it include parents as well as students when age appropriate?
 - Does your planning include emergency personnel—fire, police, medical?

Compare your plan with recommended components of a plan

Main Component	Check those in your school plan
<p>Prevention and Mitigation</p> <p>The active and ongoing assessment of all potential hazards including natural events as well as events caused by people (all hazards).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All hazards identified; • Ongoing method for teachers and staff to report potential hazards—broken classroom locks, unsafe lighting, etc.; • Sign-in procedures for building visitors; and • Security procedures and personnel.
<p>Preparedness</p> <p>The protocols for any anticipated emergency.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A clear chain of command described in plan; • Roles and responsibilities of staff clearly described; • Cooperation with public safety agencies outlined; • Communication method throughout the school and community (to parents); • Hazards identified; and • Transportation (school bus protocols during emergencies).
<p>Response</p> <p>In the event of a crisis, the plan provides for the safety of everyone in the building and community as quickly as possible.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Routine practice of protocols <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fire drills; • Evacuation; • Evacuation of students and staff with disabilities; • Lockdowns; • Active shooters; • Earthquake drills; and • Tornado drills.

Main Component	Check those in your school plan
<p>Response <i>(Continued)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training for teachers, staff and students; • Procedures for reuniting students and parents after an event, including sign-out protocol; and • Training for teachers, staff and students.
<p>Recovery</p> <p>The plan to restore school function. This phase should address all aspects of recovery.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Methods to address emotional and social health of students and staff; • Methods to address physical damage to building/grounds; and • Methods to communicate to students, staff, parents on recovery services.
<p>Other issues commonly overlooked in safety plans</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does your safety plan include multiple-language formats? Printed and electronic copies? TTY-TTD? Braille? • Are there backup plans for every key person responsible for a major component of the safety plan? • Are accommodations made for students and staff with special needs? Experts recommend that a student's IEP address any special requirements for evacuation and lockdown procedures, communication with parents/guardians, and special medical needs. • The timing of an emergency can never be planned. Bus drivers often have routes that take them to many schools at different times of the day. These transportation schedules must be taken into account.

Buildings change, communities change and the world changes. Safety plans should be reviewed and updated regularly. The safety plans developed even three years ago may no longer be relevant. And one developed a decade ago couldn't take into account the number of students who carry cellphones and texting devices.

If you feel your plan falls short, talk to your building or union representative about ways to communicate your concerns to the school administration.

Other elements, which our leaders and members (as well as experts at the U.S. Department of Education) say should be in place to ensure that schools are both safe and welcoming for students, staff and visitors. Check those that are in place in your school.

- Focus on academic achievement.
- Involve families in meaningful ways.
- Develop links to the community.
- Emphasize positive relationships among students and staff.
- Treat students and staff with equal respect.
- Create ways for students and staff to share their concerns.
- Help children feel safe expressing their feelings.
- Have a system for referring children who are suspected of being abused or neglected.
- Offer extended-day programs for children.
- Promote good citizenship and character.
- Support students in making the transition to adult life and the workplace.

If you believe that your school or work site needs some help, visit the AFT website (www.aft.org), and also discuss your concerns with your union leadership. Safe, secure and welcoming schools can be a reality for every child, teacher and school employee. We know so because many AFT members already teach and work in safe schools.

“I feel that my school is safe because there are clear lines of communication between the deans, school safety agents and school counselors who are proactive in preventing any incidents from escalating.”

— **Rebecca Morales**, Paraprofessional,
Staten Island, N.Y.

“I feel safe in my school because I can communicate with administration by telephone or by two-way radio in an emergency. We have a small enough staff that, pretty much, everybody knows each other; and we have wonderful people on staff who are student-oriented, very caring and proactive in meeting student needs.”

- **Cathy Sanchez**, Middle School Health Assistant,
Albuquerque

"I feel very safe when I arrive at my school every day. There is plenty of security lighting, and we are very aware of our surroundings. We make sure all our doors are locked, and we practice safety drills regularly at our school. Our principal is very aware of what's going on and makes sure to keep us informed."

— **Mary Lou Vigil**, Elementary School Nutrition Service Manager, Denver

Every school is unique and needs its own emergency plan. "You can't just give a school a plan and say, 'Let's go.' You can't even give a school a lockdown plan," says AFT member Susan Graves from Lincoln County, Ore. "It should be customized."



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