Four Strategies to Address the Increase in School Violence

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The start of the 21-22 school year is one of the most violent in history.

Before the school year even started, experts warned that the isolation and hardships experienced during the pandemic could lead to increased mental health crises and school violence. It did not take long for schools to see this warning become reality.

Seven students were charged with aggravated riot after a large fight broke out at an Ohio high school. Twenty-three students at a Louisiana high school were arrested in a matter of 3 days for fighting on campus. In New York City, six school safety agents were injured while breaking up a student fight. These incidents all happened in October.

And it's not just students. Irate guardians have turned school board meetings into chaotic, violent scenes. Community members have been harassing and threatening schools more than ever before.

This white paper shares strategies for how schools can prepare for and address this increased violence and keep everyone safe.

Strategy One:
Support Mental Health Needs

Readjusting to in-person learning proved challenging to many students, staff, and guardians after months—if not years—of separation from others.

Social isolation is _one of the main risk factors_ for students who commit acts of violence in schools. Couple this isolation with the other hardships of the pandemic and the decreased access to mental health resources, and it is no surprise that people are having a difficult time coping.

In a _2021 national report_ developed by Safe and Sound Schools and Raptor Technologies, school staff and administrators listed mental health crises, such as depression, suicide, and self-harm, as their most concerning safety threat. In the same survey, **nearly 75% of students said they have experienced depression and/or anxiety from the pandemic.**

Students need mental health services more than ever before, according to Dr. Scott Poland, Professor and Co-Director of the Suicide and Violence Prevention Office. Responding to this mental health crisis requires everyone's involvement. "I believe in a partnership between schools, law enforcement, and mental health personnel," Dr. Poland shared on _School Safety Today_, a Raptor Technologies podcast.

Every student needs a go-to person at their school that they feel comfortable sharing with. Law enforcement, such as a school resource officer (SRO), can be that person. "Our job is not merely to make arrests," Chief Craig Miller, Retired Chief of Police for the Dallas ISD Police Department, stated in the podcast episode. "[Our job] is to develop relationships with the students." These relationships can help SROs recognize warning signs before they escalate into violence or suicidal acts.

Schools must also collaborate with mental health professionals. They can help students adjust to in-person learning, cope with the impacts of the pandemic, and address other concerns.

They can also assist in vetting threats. Chief Frank Kitzerow, President of the National Association of School and Campus Police Chiefs and former District Police Chief with Palm Beach County, warns that most catastrophic events start with a grievance.

While law enforcement is investigating threats and making sure the school is protected, mental health professionals begin addressing the student's grievance. "If we're successful," Chief Kitzerow said, "that catastrophic event never occurs, and we save all those lives."

Strategy Two:
Anticipate Safety Issues

It's important to be ahead of the increased violence and challenges, but to do this schools must pay attention to what is happening in their neighborhoods.

"Our schools are a microcosm of our communities, neighborhoods, and nation," Chief Kitzerow stated on a _Raptor webinar._ "If you look at all the challenges that we're having today as a society and all the impacts of the pandemic, you get a real feel for why these things may be happening [in our schools]."

He recommends schools watch the news to stay updated on what is impacting their students and staff. This can help school leaders better understand what attitudes and beliefs people may bring into school, as well as give insight into what types of school safety incidents may happen.

"You also have to get your key stakeholders around the table," he continued. "It's never 'one-size-fits-all' in school safety." These stakeholders include law enforcement, staff, students, guardians, and safety organizations. Each will bring their perspectives into the conversation, which can inform the school of issues that are occurring outside and inside school buildings.

"The more we have people [involved in school safety], the greater the opportunity we have to turn this around and really make a difference," Chief Kitzerow stated. "These children are our future, and we have an obligation to give them every avenue of success."

If there is a school shooting, schools should be on higher alert than usual. Research suggests that violent incidents _tend to lead to more violent incidents_ within a short period of time. This phenomenon is commonly referred to as "Contagion." Individuals struggling with mental health issues often take inspiration from previous violent incidents and may use the details shared through the media to develop their plans.

To help prevent incidents, schools must monitor students for red flags, such as a change in behavior or appearance. Note that _students are typically the first to notice_ when a peer's behavior has changed. This happened during the May 2021 shooting at Rigby Middle School. One student saw a drawing the attacker created that depicted a gun and a school, and some students noticed the attacker's appearance and level of social engagement changed.

Schools must have a method of gathering information about concerning student behavior, like leveraging confidential tip lines and ensuring students, staff, and the community are aware of its importance and how to use it.

Strategy Three:
Address Students Who "Act Out"

Across the country, schools are facing increased behavioral issues since students have returned to the classroom. Some simply don't know how to act, while others are consciously disobeying classroom rules.

Some students, especially those in elementary school, simply do not understand how to act their age or grade level. They do not have the same level of social skills that students their age or grade level had before the pandemic. Without these skills, they can have a difficult time resolving conflicts through problem solving and instead throw tantrums or fight others.

Some students are being defiant, as it's been almost two years since they have had to follow classroom rules. Teachers across the country have reported that students of all ages are pushing others, throwing things, jumping on furniture, and making inappropriate comments without worrying about the consequences of their actions. There is also the increasing concern of social media challenges that urge students to do inappropriate—and sometimes illegal and violent—acts.

Students are also modeling the irate behavior and attitudes they see from adults. Frank DeAngelis, principal of Columbine during the 1999 mass shooting, shared his concerns in a _Raptor webinar_. "What worries me today... the enemy (the pandemic) is dividing us."

For example, we have seen schools announce new COVID-19 protocols only to rescind them days or weeks later when health officials or other entities announced regulations. These situations typically ended with irate guardians leaving comments on social media or arguing at school board meetings. "Kids are watching" and listening, Mr. DeAngelis warned. "That's a major concern I have right now in our society and in our school communities."

Although schools should consider community feedback, it's important to ultimately make decisions based on expertise and best practices. "Today's environment is very, very difficult," Chief Kitzerow acknowledged in a webinar. There will always be community members who disagree with school decisions. While schools should address these concerns, they must also remember their end goal of school safety. "We know what our mission is, and we need to constantly drive on that mission and keep things moving forward."

Strategy Four:
Resolve Incidents Before They Escalate

Whether it's a fight, a student acting out, or an irate visitor in the front office, situations can quickly escalate if school staff cannot quickly intervene and resolve the situation.

In early October, a student shot another student during a fight in a classroom at Timberview High School in Texas. Just a week prior in a Tennessee school, one student shot another during a fight in the stairwell. In September, a student in a Virginia school fired multiple shots during a fight in a hallway. These are just *some* of the worst-case scenarios that made headlines earlier this school year.

Localized incidents and behavioral issues, such as when a teacher has lost control of the classroom, can also quickly escalate. If students continue to throw things at one another, for instance, it can end in a physical confrontation or an injury.

Schools should build a school safety ecosystem. Chief Kitzerow recommends starting with taking inventory of your current tools and plans. Consider what challenges your school faces now and the potential challenges you may experience in the future. Think about the worst-case scenario of an active shooter and make sure you have what's needed to prevent, prepare for, respond to, and recover from that event. Then, continue adding pieces to your ecosystem until you have everything needed to address all situations, even localized incidents like student fights or playground injuries.

To quickly summon help to resolve issues, all school staff should have a *mobile panic button with Team Assist.* This enables staff to initiate incidents from wherever they are located and instantly alert others—like the principal or SRO—about the type of incident and what assistance is needed. If a situation escalates, the mobile panic button should enable users to directly call or text 9-1-1 and automatically share critical details, such as caller name and precise location on campus, with dispatchers.

The most powerful panic button systems are customized to the school's emergency response protocols and allow staff, first responders, and incident commanders to communicate through group messaging and access district protocols and building floor plans. The panic button should integrate with a complete *emergency management system* that also empowers schools to practice drills, account for everyone on campus, and reunify students with approved guardians.

The ecosystem should empower you to move quickly, as Chief Kitzerow warns, "The longer it takes you to isolate, eliminate, or neutralize the threat, the bigger chance of loss of life."

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West Aurora School District 129, IL

About the Author

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