



NATIONAL
ASSOCIATION OF
SCHOOL
PSYCHOLOGISTS

NASP Recommendations for Comprehensive School Safety Policies January 2013

The United States of America has no greater responsibility than safeguarding the well-being of our children. Ensuring safe schools and communities is paramount to this responsibility.

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) has long been a leader in promoting safe, supportive learning environments that protect both the physical and psychological safety of students and staff. We applaud President Obama on committing to identifying concrete and comprehensive strategies to ensure that we meet this responsibility for every school, child, family, and community in the country. His charge to members of his cabinet and members of Congress to work with national safety experts to craft solutions will improve this process. We strongly agree that such strategies must include addressing mental health and believe they should reinforce collaborative efforts between schools, families, and communities. We also appreciate the President's acknowledgement that effective policies should be built upon known evidence-based strategies and practices.

With the President's announcement comes the urgency to not allow the light shed on this issue by the tragedy in Newtown, CT to dim without our leaders taking real, meaningful action. NASP is committed to helping guide policies that lead to increased physical and psychological safety in schools by providing the recommendations outlined below and endorsing the efforts of other allied organizations and experts, such as the *December 2012 Connecticut School Shooting Position Statement* released last month by the Interdisciplinary Group on Preventing School and Community Violence.

Our goal is to highlight common ground, of which there is a great deal among school safety experts. Further, we strive to ensure that our focus moves beyond the historical practice of primarily increasing school building safety measures (e.g., metal detectors, armed security guards, surveillance cameras) and instead focus on addressing the continuum of needs and services that lead to improved safety, well-being, and learning for children and youth. Effective school safety is a day-in, day-out commitment that infuses every aspect of school life. Our challenge is to not let increased anxiety over this horrible tragedy obscure the proven fundamentals of violence

prevention. Instead we must become more unified, vocal advocates for policies that support what schools *can* do effectively, which in turn supports our schools' primary mission of learning.

A Call to Action

NASP proposes the following policy and practice recommendations to most effectively address school safety:

- 1. Increase access to mental health services and supports in schools.** Only a fraction of students in need actually receive mental health services, and among those that do, the majority access those services in school. Nevertheless, the availability of school-based mental health professionals remains inadequate to meet the mental health needs of our children and youth. Schools should be enabled to hire more school-based mental health professionals (e.g. school counselors, school psychologists and school social workers) and funds should be allocated specifically for hiring these professionals. The recommended ratio of students to school counselor is 250:1; the recommended ratio for school psychologists is 500-700:1 (NASP Model for Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services), and the recommended ratio for school social workers is 400:1. Schools and districts should be held accountable for making an effort to meet or at least work toward these ratios each year. Increased access to mental health services and supports in schools, including the infusion of social-emotional learning in our classrooms, is vital to improving the physical and psychological safety of our students and schools, as well as academic performance and problem-solving skills. Additionally, close collaboration between school-employed (e.g., school counselors, school psychologists, and school social workers) and community-employed mental health services providers (e.g., professional counselors, clinical psychologists, and clinical social workers) is critical to meeting the range of mental health needs. School psychologists play an integral role in providing direct services to students and teachers, while coordinating with community resources to ensure that all students receive the support they need to be successful.
- 2. Develop safe and supportive schools.** Despite the horror that we all feel after the shooting in Newtown, CT, schools remain one of the safest places for children in the United States. We need to continue to focus on how we build and maintain safe school environments that promote learning, psychological health, and student success. We need to ensure that adequate learning supports and policies are present to provide a continuum of services that respond to the needs of *all* students. This requires treating learning and mental health supports as equally important as, and fully integrated with, school management and instruction. Schools should be required to include measures of school climate and availability of learning supports on par with student academic performance in accountability plans. It is critical to enhance school connectedness and trust between students and adults as well as reinforce open communication and the importance of reporting concerns about someone hurting themselves or others. School psychologists play an integral role

in working with administrators and teachers to ensure that building systems and policy are conducive to safe and supportive conditions for learning.

3. **Implement school safety initiatives that consider both psychological and physical safety.** Effective school safety efforts should utilize evidence-based practices to ensure the well-being of all students and well as their physical safety. Reasonable building security measures, such as secure doors, lighted and monitored hallways, and check in-check out systems for visitors, are important. Although there have been calls to increase the presence of armed guards at schools, the research regarding schools that utilize armed security generally demonstrate non-significant impacts on reducing violence while at the same time result in students feeling less safe. Students' perception of safety is not a trivial consideration given that simply feeling unsafe impedes learning and the ability to develop a nurturing, supportive, and welcoming school environment. An over-emphasis on extreme physical security measures alone, such as increasing armed security and/or arming school staff, will not improve school safety, and in fact may undermine the primary mission of schools to ensure learning while safeguarding our children. (See *NASP Cautions Against Increased Armed Security to Address School Safety*, www.nasponline.org/safety_armedsecurity.)
4. **Improve screening and threat assessment procedures to identify and meet the needs of individuals at risk for causing harm to themselves and others.** Schools must provide the infrastructure to develop and maintain active school safety and crisis teams that focus on efforts year-round to promote a safe, positive school culture while minimizing the impact of school crises when they occur. This entails a multitiered approach consistent with other school systems of support—which includes universal mental health screenings and interventions as well as more intensive approaches for students deemed at risk. In collaboration with school employed mental health professionals, each school should be required to develop a plan to identify those students at risk for violence to themselves others. In addition, schools should provide on-going professional development opportunities for educators about how to identify students who may be experiencing mental health difficulties, or who may be at risk for harming themselves or others. Critical to this process, is collaboration and communication with other education, health, mental health, and law enforcement agencies, and schools should have a clearly defined communication and information sharing plan.
5. **Establish trained school safety and crisis teams.** Schools and districts need trained school safety and crisis teams and plans that are consistently reviewed and practiced. Training should encompass ongoing prevention and early intervention as well as response and recovery in the event the unpreventable occurs. Plans and training should facilitate collaboration with first responders and community providers. Teams

should include key administrators, security personnel, school mental health professionals, and other relevant staff. A primary goal should be to reinforce learning as well as safety. (See NASP's PREPaRE School Crisis Prevention and Intervention Training Curriculum, www.nasponline.org/prepare.)

6. **Conduct a national campaign to reduce stigma around mental illness and to promote mental health on par with physical health.** Too much stigma about mental health exists in our country. This stigma reduces the likelihood that families and students will seek out and receive the mental health supports and services needed to learn and thrive in school and throughout life. With appropriate treatment, especially early intervention, people with mental illness can lead full and productive lives. Given the natural interaction between physical and mental health, the importance of caring for an individual's mental health needs must be on par with the importance of physical health. Schools should be encouraged to incorporate mental health education into existing health standards.

7. **Improve policies that limit exposure to media violence among children, youth, and vulnerable populations.** The negative effects of exposure to violence on children and youth are well documented and include increased risk of trauma and academic and behavior problems. While families, communities, educators, and law enforcement must continue to work together to reduce children's exposure to violence in their homes and neighborhoods, our society and the entertainment industry must also recognize and respond to the negative effects that media violence is having on individuals. To ensure the psychological safety of our children and youth, policies must regulate and limit exposure to media violence among children, youth, and other vulnerable populations.

8. **Review and revise as needed current policies and legislation addressing access to firearms by those who have the potential to cause harm to themselves or others.** We must prevent the misuse of weapons by people who are intent on causing harm to themselves or others. Experts on the research related to the prevention of violence, and specifically school violence, should be charged with offering substantive recommendations to our elected officials on how our current laws might be improved so that tragic events like the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting do not ever occur again.

Responding effectively to these priorities will also require policies that promote education, training, and research. Effective approaches will take into account the mission and purpose of schools, and how schools and communities can work together to fulfill them. We must create and pass legislation and funding to reduce and prevent violence while also promoting the learning and well-being of our children and youth.

About NASP: NASP represents more than 25,000 school psychologists in the United States and abroad. School psychologists work with families, educators, and community providers to create safe, supportive schools; promote students' academic success; and support students' healthy behavior and development. They also serve on school safety, crisis, and mental health teams and are often leaders in helping to develop comprehensive school safety plans. NASP's longstanding leadership in school safety and crisis prevention and response includes helping to build capacity at the local level through our PREPaRE School Crisis Prevention and Intervention Training Curriculum (www.nasponline.org/prepare) and providing direct support and resources for families and schools in the event of major crises through our website and our National Emergency Assistance Team (www.nasponline.org/safety_crisis). NASP also provides guidance to school leaders through various resources such as *A Framework for School-Wide Bullying Prevention and Safety*.

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