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**RESEARCH SUPPORTS A THOUGHTFUL APPROACH TO SAFER SCHOOLS, GUIDED BY FOUR KEY ELEMENTS: BALANCE, COMMUNICATION, CONNECTEDNESS, AND SUPPORT.**

**Balance – Communication – Connectedness – Support**

A **balanced approach** implies well-integrated programs that make sense and are effective. Although it is understandable in response to these recent incidents to gravitate towards extreme physical security measures (e.g., lockdowns or video surveillance) to increase a sense of control, research has not shown these methods to be the most effective long-term strategy. Given the physical layout of many school campuses and the amount of resources available, there are limits to what schools and communities can do when they rely primarily on physical security measures. Although it may make sense to limit exterior unlocked public entries to a school to one or two manageable points, the exclusive reliance on metal detectors, security cameras, guards, and entry checkpoints is unlikely to provide universal protection against all school shootings. Indeed, shootings have occurred in schools with strict security measures already in place. It is important to note that two of the recent school shootings involved adult outsiders coming onto school grounds, something different from other recent experiences with school shootings. When considering prevention strategies it is important not to lump all of these incidents together, nor oversimplify the issues. However, schools should regularly conduct an audit to assess physical and procedural aspects of their school from a security/safety point of view. The most effective approach to preventing violence and protecting students is a balanced one that includes a variety of efforts addressing physical safety, educational practices, and programs that support the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students. Over the past decade, research reveals that safe schools that are effective in preventing violence have a balanced and comprehensive array of appropriate programs.

**Communication** is critical. Comprehensive analyses by the U. S. Secret Service, the FBI, and numerous researchers have concluded that the most effective way to prevent targeted acts of violence at school is by maintaining close communication and trust with students and others in the community, so that threats will be reported and can be investigated by responsible authorities. In the absence of threats or behaviors in preparation for a violent act, it is difficult if not impossible to predict when and where a specific act of serious violence will occur. Attempts to detect imminently violent students based on profiles or checklists of characteristics are not effective and are most likely to result in false identification of innocent students as dangerous. Instead, school authorities should concentrate their efforts on improving communication channels and training a team of staff members to use principles of threat assessment to gauge the safety of the school.

□ First, concerned students, parents, educators, and stakeholders in the community should attend to specific verbal and physical behaviors that signal something is amiss. For example, when a person utters threats to engage in a violent act or displays a sudden and pronounced change of mood and related social behavior, markedly different from their longstanding pattern, it makes sense to communicate concerns to others close to that person. Early identification is important not only to prevent violence, but to provide individuals at risk for disruption and violence the support, treatment, and help they need.

□ Second, while in school, students need to know about and feel comfortable bringing concerns regarding safety to the attention of teachers and school administrators. Schools and communities must find effective means to overcome students' reluctance to break unwritten rules against "tattling" or "snitching" on their peers. We need to communicate to students that their lives or the lives of their friends may depend on reporting signs of danger when they become aware of such information. Clear policies and handbooks that outline indicators of concern and plans for intervention should be provided and reviewed annually with staff, students, parents, and community. Channels of efficient, user-friendly communication need to be established and maintained.

**Connectedness** refers to what binds us together as a social unit. Students need to feel that they belong at their school and that the school staff and the school community as a whole care for them. In turn, students

need to be invested in their school community. Similarly, local neighborhoods and communities are better and safer places when neighbors look out for one another, are involved in community activities, and care about the welfare of each other. Research indicates that those students most at risk for delinquency and violence are those who are most alienated from the school community. Schools need to reach out to build positive connections to marginalized students, showing concern for them, and fostering avenues of meaningful involvement.

**Support** is critical for effective prevention. Both in schools and the local community, many people experience minor and major life stresses and difficulties. Nationally, the mental health needs of youth and adults are often shortchanged or neglected. That needs to change. Depression, anxiety, bullying, incivility, and various forms of intimidation in schools need to be taken seriously. Every school should have the resources to maintain evidence-based programs designed to address bullying and other forms of student conflict. Research-based violence prevention and related comprehensive support programs should be offered, following a three-tier approach, operating at the *universal* (school-wide), *targeted* (for at-risk students), and *intensive* (for the most chronically and intensely at-risk students) levels. Finally, it is also important to acknowledge that access to guns plays an important role in many acts of serious violence in the United States. Although guns are never the simple cause of a violent act, the availability of lethal weapons to youth and to emotionally disturbed or antisocial adults poses a serious public health problem that cannot be overlooked. Our political leaders need to find a reasonable and constitutional way to limit the widespread availability of guns to persons who are unwilling or unable to use them in a responsible, lawful manner.

In summary, while keeping schools free of weapons is an important part of preventing school violence, we must also engage in comprehensive planning and coordination to prevent violence and disruption in our schools. These comprehensive programs depend on monitoring multiple facets of the school operation with ongoing data collection and analysis, coupled with coordinated use of evidence-based interventions. Local school communities are encouraged to convene stakeholder groups in discussion of these issues to help chart a safe and productive course in the near- and long-term future. The bottom line is that we must all work together, respecting each other's concerns and ideas, toward the common goal of keeping our schoolchildren safe.

### **Organizations Endorsing This Statement**

American Academy of Pediatrics  
American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (formerly, AAMR)  
American Art Therapy Association  
American Counseling Association  
American Dance Therapy Association  
American Psychiatric Association  
American Psychological Association  
Association of School Business Officials International  
Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law  
Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders  
Council for Exceptional Children  
Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health  
Hamilton Fish Institute on School and Community Violence  
Learning Disabilities Association of America  
Midwest Symposium for Leadership in Behavior Disorders  
National Association of Federally Impacted Schools  
National Association of School Psychologists  
National Association of Secondary School Principals  
National Association of Social Workers  
National Education Association  
National Mental Health Association  
National Rehabilitation Association  
School Social Work Association of America  
The Advocacy Institute