



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY

October 27, 2006

Dear Colleague:

The White House recently convened a Conference on School Safety following a series of tragic shootings that have taken place in our nation's schools. The event provided an opportunity for experts in the field to share successful strategies and to learn more about how schools and communities can prevent serious incidents of school violence.

As a mother, I know that there is nothing more important than keeping our children safe. Schools should be havens of safety and learning. Unless our students feel safe, they can't learn. Parents, educators, community members, law enforcement officials, researchers, and policymakers all share the responsibility of protecting our children. By working together, I hope we can learn from these tragedies and improve the safety of schools across our nation.

I have included a brief message with information about the conference and available resources developed by the Department of Education to help schools prevent and respond to a variety of crisis situations. I ask that you share this message with members of your organization through publications, your Web site, or member Listservs.

I look forward to working with you as we continue our efforts to protect all of our children and make our schools safer.

Sincerely,

Margaret Spellings

Enclosure

## **Making Our Schools Safer**

October 2006

The White House recently convened a Conference on School Safety following a series of tragic shootings that have taken place in our nation's schools. The conference was designed to provide an opportunity for educators, law enforcement officials, mental health providers, representatives of community-based organizations, parents, and students to come together to share successful strategies for preventing violence and learn from one another.

School violence is a complex problem requiring a comprehensive approach. As such, panelists and participants discussed a wide range of topics, including:

- Research about the nature and extent of school violence;
- Ways law enforcement, schools, and others can partner to establish safe environments and prevent school shootings;
- Emergency management planning activities that help schools prepare to respond to violent acts and other crises; and
- Strategies to help school communities heal and recover if and when a violent incident occurs.

We know that while schools are safe and shootings are rare, we can work to make them even safer. There are positive steps that schools and their communities can take to prevent school violence and respond quickly and effectively if an incident does occur. One significant tool for schools is the development of a comprehensive emergency management plan that addresses a wide range of possible crises. Plans should identify all hazards that may face a school, and address the four phases of emergency management: prevention-mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery.

Once the plan is developed, information must be disseminated to teachers, students, and parents so they know how the plan works and what to expect if there is a crisis. A crucial element of an effective plan is that it is updated regularly and practiced often. As one conference panelist said, "You don't learn to dance the night before the ball." Having a well-practiced plan in place is essential to being prepared to respond in a crisis.

Additional resources about the four phases of crisis planning, available grant opportunities, and other important topics related to school safety are available from the U.S. Department of Education.

I invite you to visit our Web site at <http://www.ed.gov/emergencyplan> to learn more about strategies that can be implemented to help schools in your community prevent violent incidents. Working together, we can protect our children and create safer schools.

Margaret Spellings