Over the last decade the overall safety of the nation’s elementary and secondary schools has improved (Irwin et al., 2022). Violent incidents, including physical fights, weapons charges, robbery, assault, and rape, have significantly decreased (NCES, 2022a, 2022b). Notwithstanding these improvements, there are areas in which America’s schools are less safe than a decade ago (Irwin et al., 2022), as casualties from school shootings, reported incidences of cyberbullying, and student acts of disrespect towards teachers have increased.

These worrying trends may help us understand the negative public perception of school safety. The extensive national media attention of violent attacks in schools may create unwarranted public fear (Glassner, 2004). In one public opinion poll, it was found that school violence is consistently in the top 10 children health concerns for adults across the U.S (C.S. Mott Children’s Hospital, 2015). In a more recent poll, 44 percent of K-12 parents feared for their child’s safety at school (Brenan, 2022).

This policy document reviews the trends taken to improve school safety. While individual measures, such as school resource officers (SROs) or controlled access to schools, inconclusively impact physical and perceptual components of school safety, research suggests a comprehensive safety plan can create safe, secure schools. It concludes with evidence-based actions that Nevada lawmakers can take to improve school safety.

**Trends in Physical Security Measures**

Over time, schools have increased the use of physical security measures including the following:

- controlled access to school buildings during school hours
- security cameras used to monitor the school
- faculty and staff requirement to wear identification badges or picture IDs
- random sweeps for contraband
- student requirement to wear uniforms
- requirement for students to wear badges or picture IDs
- random metal detector checks

Whether the increased deployment of physical security measures has made schools safer is a matter of scholarly debate. There are several recent research studies that explore the relationship between physical security measures and student, faculty, and staff perceptions of school safety.

These look at different safety measures, including cameras, monitors, locked doors, gates, police, SROs, metal detectors, locker and/or personal searches and checks, stricter disciplinary procedures, hall passes, visitor signs, changes in dress code, backpack bans, and arming school personnel, among others. Different studies report a higher perception of safety, while others report a lower perception. See Table 1 - Full Paper.

Beyond perceptions of safety, scholars have also explored whether physical safety measures reduce violent and non-violent victimization and disciplinary offenses. There is little systematic evidence that the presence of SROs reduces victimization rates within schools (Link, 2010; Swartz et al., 2015), and some evidence that their presence increases exclusionary discipline for small disciplinary offenses (Fisher & Hennessy, 2015; Theriot, 2009). Only one intervention—the provision of adult monitoring in hallways—is associated with a reduction in victimization on school campuses (Blosnich & Bossarte, 2011). See Table 2 - Full Paper.
Promoting feelings of safety (i.e., psychological safety) is also necessary for learning environments to be effective (Cornell & Huang, 2016; Lenzi et al., 2017; Nickerson et al., 2021; Osher & Kendziora, 2010). An overview of interventions designed to enhance psychological safety within schools can be found in Table 3 - Full Paper. For more than 20 years the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) framework has been utilized in schools to use data to develop and support students’ academic, social, emotional, and behavioral success. (Sugai & Horner, 2006). PBIS has decreased disciplinary issues and reduced verbal and physical assault in schools (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Bradshaw et al., 2015; Caldarella et al., 2011). In a recent report, it was found that the implementation of PBIS reduced suspension rates by 20 percent (McIntosh et al., 2018). Finally, in a systematic review, researchers found in nearly half of the studies they reviewed that PBIS implementation led to significant positive effects on disciplinary referrals and suspensions (Noltemeyer et al., 2019).

Planning for Comprehensive School Safety In Nevada

Physical security or psychological security measures by themselves are unlikely to make drastic improvements in safety of schools. In particular, the implementation of physical security measures can exacerbate students’ feelings of psychological safety and lead the criminalization of smaller disciplinary offenses. Alternatively, only addressing the psychological security of students leaves schools vulnerable to bad actors. Finally, the siloed implementation of one-off psychological security interventions or physical security measures do not leverage the mutual strengths of physical security and mental health community partners for the benefit of students.

Rather, an integrated, comprehensive approach, in which the psychological supports provided to students are integrated with the physical securing of buildings, holds promise for sustained improvements to school safety. Instead of viewing school safety as a series of individual measures that may address the prevention of school violence and the protection of students, stakeholders should incorporate a variety of safety and security measures that cohesively interact with each other (Kingston et al., 2018). For a framework of how individual physical and psychological safety measures can be part of a comprehensive school safety plan, see Figure 2 in the full policy paper.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Instead of providing separate guidance to put together individual responses to prevention, protection, and recovery, the next step may be to integrate these individual measures into a comprehensive school safety and security plan. School districts and schools can do the following:

1. Develop comprehensive, data-driven safety and security plans developed through careful collaboration of a diverse team of school officials, students, and other stakeholders.
   a) Include strategies to collect and analyze data, determine the effectiveness of measures, and revisit the plan annually.
   b) Include purposeful work to create a positive school culture and an implemented multi-tiered system of supports for physical and psychological safety.

2. State and school officials should recognize that the perceptions of school safety may differ for students, teachers, administrators, and stakeholders. It is imperative to address safety in the aggregate rather than based on one group’s perceptions.

REFERENCES

- A full list of 50+ academic references for this document can be found here.

Visit the full policy paper by Dr. Skousen here.
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