



Old or New Schools—Which are the Safest?



New car, old car? An antique Mustang or a brand new Camaro? Which is the safest? My husband and I had a '67 Mustang; it was a great little car. Most of us would admit, however, that the new Camaro—with the latest in airbags, backup cameras, anti-lock brakes and stabilization, blind spot alerts, and many more bells and whistles—is the safest. The same can be said of new school buildings. Newer schools are perceived to be the safest. Nearly all newer schools have systems that assist in controlling access to the building and grounds during school hours, have the most up-to-date camera systems to monitor inside and out of the facility, have the latest HVAC systems that control indoor air quality, have no contaminants in the building materials, have the latest in fire and smoke safety, have the latest in technology for alert systems, are totally handicap accessible, and have “Columbine” locks that permit teachers to secure their rooms from inside the classroom. We could go on and on.

The most disheartening in all of this: all of our children cannot go to school in new buildings. Not all can go to schools that have been remodeled or retrofitted. What can be done to make your older school safe with little or no expense? Please note, this list is not all-inclusive, but all schools can have:

- Involvement of everyone in the safety planning processes: school board, employees, students, parents, media, service groups and community organizations, law enforcement, and business leaders
- Disaster, lock-down, and evacuation plans—and practice them
- Signage that is easily seen and understood
- A school safety advisory group
- Safety workshops that are a part of professional development activities
- Conflict resolution procedure and mediation plans
- A school beautification plan and other activities that build a sense of pride
- All exterior doors locked and someone greeting at the main entrance with a sign-in/sign-out procedure and I.D. badges
- A parent visitation pick-up procedure to include early dismissals
- A way to notify parents of student absences
- De-cluttered classrooms and hallways

- Risk management and safety assessments that are conducted regularly
- A system, working with law enforcement, to fingerprint all young children
- Provisions to work with local media to share safety information and to provide correct and helpful information during crisis
- Access to free safety, health, and disaster information on the state and federal websites
- A systemic, mandatory, district-wide incident reporting system

As you read, you most likely are thinking of a half-dozen more ideas, which I have not listed. The idea is, however, a school or a local school agency (LEA) does not need to use the excuse of “no money” to make the places where our children learn more safe. In addition, schools with adequate funding need to make sure they pay attention to some of these suggestions. School disasters, safety problems, unhealthy schools are not simply relegated to poorer LEAs.

In summary, schools become safer when we “think safety” all of the time and not get upset when we have to get a badge in the school office to visit our child’s classroom or when we are asked to park in a particular area to provide safe ingress and egress of the school site. School safety is not just the job of the administration and teachers; it is the community’s job. There are many things we all can do that cost little or nothing to make the places where children learn safe.

Watch the blog site in a few weeks. The topic will be safety by design: new construction, retrofits, and remodeling. Remember the first part of our blog—new car, old car? Do we buy a new Camaro, or retrofit and remodel the antique Mustang to improve its safety?

References and resources:

<http://rems.ed.gov/>
<http://www.dhs.gov/school-safety>
<http://www.districtadministration.com/article/designing-safe-facilities>
<http://www.dropoutprevention.org/effective-strategies/safe-learning-environments>
<http://www.efc.gwu.edu/>
<http://www.epa.gov/epahome/school.htm>
http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety/index.aspx
http://www.ncpc.org/cms-upload/ncpc/File/BSSToolkit_Complete.pdf
<http://www.pta.org/safetytoolkit>
<http://www.schoolsafety.us/>
<http://www.stopbullying.gov/prevention/at-school/build-safe-environment/>
<http://www.wikihow.com/Provide-a-Safe-Environment-at-Preschool>
<http://www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/handbook.pdf>

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