Developing a Comprehensive Approach to School Safety

Address the safety of school buildings by incorporating the principles of crime prevention through environmental design.

By G. Victor Hellman Jr., Ed.D.

An effective learning environment is one in which students and staff feel safe and secure. Unsafe or unhealthy facilities can contribute to increased absenteeism among students and staff (Simons et al. 2010), affect learning outcomes, and lead to potential legal actions against the school division. Research indicates a correlation between students' negative perceptions of safety and negative academic performance (Milam, Furr-Holden, and Leaf 2010). In other words, students do not perform as well in facilities in which they do not feel safe. Other studies link students' perceptions of safety to inappropriate behavior (Kelling and Wilson 2012). It is reasonable to assume that these correlations extend to perceptions of facility conditions, as students may be more likely to exhibit behavioral issues in facilities that are unkempt.

America's education facilities are in need of improvement. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, the average school facility is over 40 years old (Alexander and Lewis 2014). Although not true in all cases, aging facilities may be inadequate to serve our nation's student population.

For example, research indicates that students who attend school in older buildings that are not well-maintained score 5–11 percentile points lower on standardized achievement tests than students in modern buildings (CGCS 2014). Furthermore, students don't perform as well in facilities in which they do not feel safe (Milam, Furr-Holden, and Leaf 2010).

Principles of CPTED

One way modern facilities address the safety of school buildings is by incorporating the principles of crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED). The CPTED approach has three major components: natural surveillance, access control, and territoriality.

Natural surveillance. Individuals are less likely to commit a crime or violent act when they believe they are being observed or recorded. Natural surveillance incorporates an open-concept facility design in which individuals can be viewed from different vantage points. Its practices extend to the exterior of the facility as well.

For example, school personnel can ensure that landscaping does not obstruct views, and they can locate visitor parking and bicycle racks in areas of plain view. Optimizing a

facility's natural surveillance is crucial to preventing or responding to crime and violence.

Access control. Access control involves applying restrictions and limitations on facility and site entrances. Such control allows for better screening and identification of individuals seeking entry into the school.

Examples of access control features include perimeter fencing of the site to deter trespassers, placement of dumpsters and other large objects away from the facility, a double-entry system or vestibule at the main entrance, magnetic lock systems, and a visitor ID management program. Intruders may pose threats to education facilities; therefore, the principle of access control is beneficial in protecting schools from trespassers and criminal activity.

Territoriality. The principle of territoriality addresses the use of clearly designated spaces. When people clearly understand the purpose of a particular space, they gain a sense of ownership. When participants know the intended use of spaces such as gymnasiums, hallways, and cafeterias, they are better able to recognize when something is amiss or someone is out of place. The delineation of spaces creates an environment where intruders are more likely to stand out.

To use the principle of territoriality, school personnel should consider providing clear, generic, and concise signage at all major hallway entrances and directional signage to major areas of the facility, such as the gym, auditorium, and cafeteria.

Incorporating CPTED features alone is not enough to ensure safety and security; operational procedures must also be in place to respond to threats and hazards.

Developing a Plan

When considering the overall safety and security of education facilities, operational procedures such as those included in an emergency management plan are important. You've likely heard the phrase "failing to plan is planning to fail." Districts cannot wait for an incident to occur and *then* plan how to resolve it.

Failing to have a planned response to emergencies leaves school officials without clear direction when an incident occurs. It is imperative, and legally mandated in many states, that school districts have an emergency operations plan (EOP). In developing a school EOP, the overarching tenant is that safety is everyone's responsibility.

The *Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans*, released by the White House in June 2013, is the first joint product of the U.S. Departments of Education, Justice, Health and Human Services, and Homeland Security, along with the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The guide details a process to develop EOPs—actions that school and district personnel should take before, during, and after a threat or hazard occurs (U.S. Department of Education 2013).

According to the EOP framework, school officials should bring together a collaborative team of stakeholders to develop and implement the EOP. The next step is to perform a risk assessment. This process involves identifying all possible threats and hazards associated with the facility. All facilities are subject to universal threats and hazards, such as the threat of an intruder; however, certain threats and hazards are particular to certain geographic regions, such as proximity to a fault line or siting in a flood-prone area.

As threats and hazards are identified, the team assesses and prioritizes the likelihood and potential magnitude of the events. Threats and hazards with a higher potential of occurrence and greater potential magnitude are given priority. This assessment enables school districts to determine what risks they can live with, what risks can be mitigated, and what risks should be avoided or prevented.

The EOP process is a community endeavor. A community's building officials should play an important role in assessing threats and hazards, as they are familiar with building codes, which are established to help mitigate risks for a specific location. For example, local building codes set standards for facility criteria, such as maximum wind ratings for roof systems and floor elevation for flood-prone areas. Upon completion of the risk assessment, the collaborative planning team determines goals and objectives, identifies courses of action, reviews the EOP plan, seeks approval of the plan, and takes steps toward its implementation.

The EOP process is depicted in Figure 1. For a more detailed explanation of the process, please refer to the *Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans*.

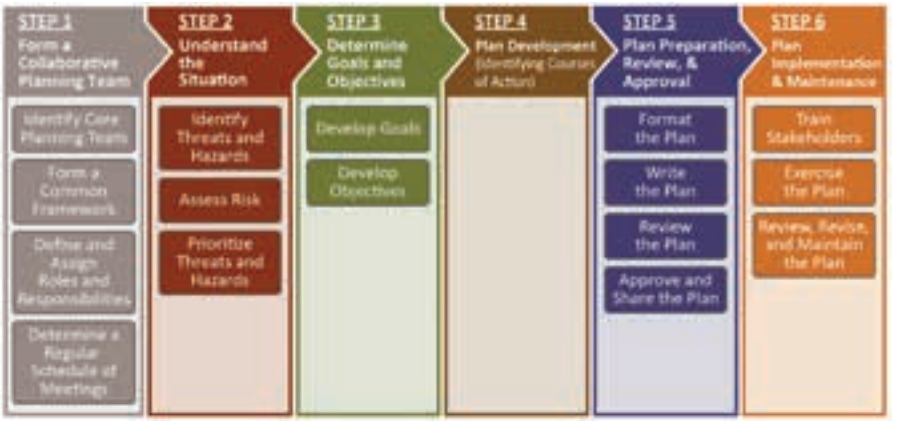

Figure 1. The EOP Six-Step Process

After an EOP has been developed and approved, it must become a living document. The plan must not be placed on a shelf and used only in emergencies. Instead, the EOP should be dynamic and its importance reinforced throughout the district. The EOP should be reviewed and updated annually, so that it is as current as possible. Situations change; so should a district's EOP.

Each school district knows best how to keep its students and staff safe. The *Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans* is just one of many resources provided by the federal government to help districts deal with threats and hazards. A comprehensive list of resources regarding school safety can be accessed at the Education Facilities Clearinghouse Website (www.efc.gwu.edu/safetycenter). The Education Facilities Clearinghouse is a program of the Graduate School of Education and Human Development of the George Washington University and is fully funded by the U.S. Department of Education.

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