

# Review Your School's Approach to Safety and Security Risk Management



National Association  
of Independent Schools

In the wake of numerous mass shootings in recent years, including this week's tragedy in Nashville, schools across the country are evaluating, adjusting, and testing risk management, safety, communication, and security systems.

There is no one size fits all approach to risk management, and the variety of independent schools, with different resources and campuses, means that safety planning will look different for each. Risk management at individual schools also evolves over time.

Whether your school is embarking on a risk management plan, or whether you are continuing to mature your existing system, we know that safety and security remain a top priority. To support you in this ongoing, complex work, we've outlined some proactive steps for your consideration.

## **Establish a safety mindset.**

A safety mindset prioritizes the health and safety of all people in your community and seeks to minimize potential threats. While there is no way to eliminate all risk, all schools can take steps to improve safety.

School culture is an important element of safety planning too. Most educators feel that a fortress is not an ideal learning or workplace environment. A safety mindset focuses on creating a healthy education environment for students and employees. View safety and risk holistically, and consider what measures can enhance safety at the school.

Often, in the aftermath of a crisis, schools feel pressured to take immediate steps to address the situation that's just occurred with new security measures, rather than mapping out a more intentional response. Alternatively, many schools add security risk management to the "to do" list without establishing steps (or time, or people) to tackle it.

Though the impact of an active shooter event can be catastrophic, it is important to remember that mass shootings are very unlikely to happen. Risk management committees or groups should consider the types of events they are addressing and identify specific next steps for implementing a plan. Focusing on low-probability/high-impact events to the exclusion of other risks may cause the group to fail to address many more likely dangers. Successful safety programs are often identified as being an "All Hazards Approach," which is to say that they prepare for all potential hazards, not just a single potential risk.

## **Consider who is involved in assessing and managing risk.**

We want to empower everyone to be a safety ambassador; however, when everyone is "in charge of" anything, no one really is. To manage risk thoughtfully, it's helpful to identify, in advance, who is responsible for what.

Many boards of trustees have a risk management committee, tasked with identifying and assessing emerging risks to the school, including safety and security risks. While trustees are not in charge of operational oversight, they should be key partners to the head of school and

administration in identifying risks and determining what to do with them (e.g., avoid, mitigate, transfer, retain, accept). Trustees have a fiduciary responsibility to do due diligence and gather information, which can come from a variety of sources, including written research and resources, third party specialists, knowledgeable community members, etc.

The head of school is ultimately responsible for safety and security implementation and oversight. Heads should consider what key stakeholders should be involved in security development. Schools that have directors of security or facilities will clearly include those employees, but it is important to collaborate with others, such as assistant heads, or heads of different grade levels or divisions, as well as to consider input from others, such as the athletic director, counselors, and deans, to ensure the school is taking a holistic approach to safety.

Consider establishing regular meetings for risk managers. Some schools bring together the board-level risk managers with the staff-level risk managers on a regular basis, while others take a different approach. There is no one way to handle this collaboration, but it is ideal to map out a plan in advance. Consider an annual meeting to review policies and protocols. Make sure you are considering prevention work as well as mitigation and response. And remember, schools can't tackle everything at once. Focus on identifying priorities for the work.

Finally, many schools have turned to third parties to assist with assessing and mitigating security risks, as well as for implementing safety measures. Safety/security consultants can prove to be valuable resources for schools. Be mindful that these specialists should be partners with the school, to co-create culture-aligned strategies. When in the risk assessment phase, consider looping in your school's attorney to assist with the engagement and assessment.

## **Forge strong connections with local law enforcement and emergency services.**

Reach out to your local police and fire department to proactively build relationships. Consider having them walk the campus with you and observe safety drills to provide feedback.

Make sure they have accurate maps of campus so they can locate the scene of an emergency as quickly as possible. Consider noting room numbers on both the interior and exterior of each room, so that a person calling 911 can easily identify which room they are in, and the emergency personnel will be able to locate the appropriate room. Ensure that wayfinding signage clearly notes building names and that those names (and any building nicknames) are labeled on the map. Some schools have labeled their roofs as well to facilitate building identification by emergency responders in the air.

## **Assess the physical plant and its safety and security equipment and personnel.**

Establish routine safety checks to confirm that locks, cameras, fire alarms, etc., are fully functioning. Ensure that all emergency supplies are up to date and easily accessible.

Assess access to campus when evaluating security risks, particularly those related to an intruder. This includes:

- Assessing how a person would enter campus (assess access and visibility on roads, trails, and surrounding land) and its buildings (consider protocols for door locks and access, such as key card controls, as well as the penetrability of doors with glass, remembering of course that we are not able to, nor in most cases, do we want to, build a fortress) but also:
- How crisis response teams access campus. For example, does the school have ample room for ambulances or fire trucks if an event occurs during carpool time? If not, how will the school handle that?
- How community members and crisis responders exit the buildings and campus. Does the school have safe egress routes and plans?

Periodically evaluate visitor policies, including any identification required prior to entering a building. Consider how these policies apply to different populations (e.g., parents/guardians, and contractors/vendors).

Evaluate what additional security equipment is realistic for the school to use and that would reasonably aid in security (e.g., cameras, additional locks, additional personnel). Consider partnering with a third party to evaluate these options.

There has been much discussion and perseveration by risk managers about the presence of security guards, including armed security guards, at schools across the country. Schools are considering whether these measures are the best fit for their community, culture, and security needs; and, as a result, questions abound about:

- whether to work with law enforcement, off-duty police, retired police, private security;
- whether to put them in plain clothes or a uniform;
- whether and how to talk about their presence with community members;
- whether to arm them, and if so, with what type of weapon.

These are important questions, and we strongly encourage schools to research options and related information prior to making decisions (e.g., understand the efficacy of different approaches). Gather as much information as possible before moving forward and make sure that the board (and where necessary, insurance company) is aware of major shifts in policy.

Additionally, understand what your insurance policy covers. Policies may be full of either unexpected exclusions (e.g., injuries related to armed security) or unexpected benefits (e.g., several policies will cover the cost of a security consultant brought in after a crisis to partner on and help manage next steps).

## Establish a system for threat assessment.

Develop a protocol to identify students or others in the community who might be a risk to themselves or others. Consider what role mental health practitioners, religious figures, and teachers can have in this process. For example, some schools have a monthly confidential meeting where they share concerns and related information with a small group (e.g., head of school, assistant head or head of the middle/upper school, and school counselor), and determine next steps, if any. Consider talking to your school's attorney when making plans that might involve the exchange of confidential medical information.

Ensure that students and staff know how to report any concerning behavior that occurs both in-person and virtually. In [a study of targeted school violence](#), the U.S. Secret Service found that nearly all school shooters communicated about their intent in advance of the attack and nearly all exhibited concerning behavior.

Similarly, create plans and checklists to assess other threats to the school that may occur when school is in or out of session.

## Establish reunification points.

Determine how you will account for everyone on campus during an emergency. If your school uses key cards, can you quickly determine who is in a building at any time?

The majority of emergencies will not affect the ability to use the campus, but some will. Establish gathering points and make sure all faculty and staff are familiar with them. Typically, schools will have one point for initial evacuation (i.e., the school's field) and one more distant point. Many schools have established cooperative agreements with other local schools, religious institutions, or community centers to serve as a temporary safe space or reunification point in an emergency. Often, parents/guardians and caregivers race to the school in the event of an emergency, which can impede the school's response. Educate families that, in the event of a school emergency, they will be notified (and explain how) with information on how and when to reunite with their children. Some schools will not only provide this education, but also practice drills where they reunify children with their families to train teachers, staff, and even families on how the process will work. A phrase to consider in this process: "Practice makes confidence."

## Clarify roles and responsibilities in a crisis.

Identify who will be the incident commander in an emergency. Build in redundancies so that you have a second, third, and fourth backup in case the incident commander is out sick when an emergency occurs.

Discuss how and how often you will communicate with staff, students, and families during an emergency. Draft sample statements that you could modify in the midst of a crisis (i.e., please do not come to campus, we are establishing a reunification center at this address, etc.). Test your communications systems to ensure they work. Train trustees in advance about their role in crisis

communications. Explain if, when, and how trustees should communicate during and in the wake of a crisis.

If you anticipate the need to work with a third party crisis communications specialist, identify one or more options in advance. The middle of a crisis is not an ideal time to find this important partner. Many schools will identify and vet crisis resources, such as communications specialists, security consultants, and attorneys, even where they already have specialized staff. A crisis may occur when the school's communications director is out sick or engaged in other ways during a crisis. Identify in advance what additional layers of support the school might need.

## **Educate, educate, educate.**

Ensure that all community members are regularly updated and educated on the school's safety and security policies and protocols as they apply to them (this does not mean sharing full security plans with a broad audience). Write down policies (e.g., visitor policy) where it would be helpful for educating and outlining expectations (and ensuring consistency down the road).

Develop a regular set of safety drills. Drills help build confidence and muscle memory that can guide students and staff to behave safely even in a chaotic situation. Drills also help you identify any parts of your process that may need to be improved. When developing a list of drills and drill schedules, determine what is required by your state or local law (e.g., fire or active shooter emergency drills) and also what is best for your community's culture. Consider ways to make drills less frightening for members of your community. As mentioned above, also consider having a third party, such as a local police, EMS liaison, or school security specialist, observe a drill at your school and offer perspective for improvement.

## **Plan ahead for a healing response and return to campus.**

Planning for unknown risks can be daunting, and it feels particularly challenging to think in advance about the post-crisis period (of a now-hypothetical crisis). Consider talking to your counseling teams and third parties about [resources](#) that can be made available to community members on an age-appropriate basis. Think in advance about what mental health professionals or other community members may be engaged to support the community in healing post-crisis, as well as what other factors can be assessed, in advance, to support a swift and healthy return to campus following an incident. And, as with any healthy risk management system, when the time allows, reflect on what worked (and what didn't) in the school's systems, to improve risk management and crisis response for the future.

## **Take a deep breath, do your best, and support each other.**

For our school leaders and other risk managers, just remember that you are doing your best to plan and prepare, but you cannot eliminate all risks or prevent all crises. Thank you for all that you and your colleagues do to keep our school communities safe.

## Related Resources

- [Helping Your School Community Recover After Tragedies and Traumatic Events:](#) This NAIS resource includes information and links to additional resources about the following topics: Helping Your Community, Helping Children Cope with Tragedy, Responding to Tragedies of Violence, Media Consumption, and Crisis Management Resources.
- Independent School magazine: [Legal Notes: Safety and Security Systems](#)
- NAIS New View EDU podcast: [Schools for Safety and Well-Being](#)
- Independent School magazine: [In Practice: When Should a School Issue an Official Statement?](#)
- NAIS Legal Tip: [Involve the Head of School in Student Safety Issues](#)
- Independent Ideas blog post: [School Safety: Building and Maintaining a Threat-Resistant Culture](#)
- NAIS Snapshot Survey: [Security Measures](#)
- [Advancing Risk Management at Independent Schools](#)
- [Post Nashville Shooting Toolkit \(Joffe Emergency Services\)](#)
- [A Connections Assessment \(an Education Suspended podcast\)](#)

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