1

Creating a Safe School

Caseville School has had two incidents of violence in the past year. In accordance with zero-tolerance policies, the violent acts resulted in the expulsion of three students, who were charged for assault with weapons. Guards patrol the halls, entrances have metal detectors, and all incidents of violence are reported to the police. Is this a safe school?

Jackson School has had no reported incidents of violence in the past year. Approximately 30 percent of the student population will not be returning to the school for the new school year. Almost all of the nonre-turning students enrolled in the school one year ago, following a newly developed school-of-choice program. Is this a safe school?

Lenox School is located in a peaceful rural community in the Midwest. The school has no reported acts of violence in the past year. Truancy rates are high, with up to 27 percent of the student population absent on a regular basis. Six students have committed suicide in the past year. Is this a safe school?

DEFINING A SAFE SCHOOL

Defining a safe school is difficult. Is a safe school one in which guards patrol the halls and surveillance equipment is posted at school entrances? As in the example of Caseville, the school has had few incidents of violence, yet these acts involved weapons. Zero-tolerance policies (enforced through the Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994) resulted in several students being expelled from the school.

Alternatively, is a safe school one in which violence hasn't occurred but students from outside of the school district do not feel safe or included? Retention concerns in schools-of-choice, highlighted in the Jackson case, may indicate that policies, procedures, and/or a school culture is marginalizing students. Ostracized, excluded, or targeted students may become victims or perpetrators of crimes in an unwelcoming school.

Or is a safe school one that is peaceful but has seen students engage in self-violence, such as Lenox? In this example, students are reflecting an environment with few explicit signs of violence. Rather, the high truancy rate and suicide statistics may point to implicit acts of violence in the school consistent with the rampant expression of bullying behaviors.

Can schools be identified by the mutually exclusive categories of *safe* or *unsafe*? Or are schools better positioned to be viewed using a *continuum* from safe to unsafe, given specific student and school characteristics. For instance, is the safety of a school best operationalized by the number of disciplinary offenses? Perceptions of safety on campus as reported by parents/guardians, students, faculty? Or is safety more accurately based on the academic success of its students?

Most school leaders would agree that a safe school must be more than a school without fights, knifings, and shootings. But what characteristics clearly define a safe school and, thus, differentiate it from an unsafe school?

Indicators of a Safe School

A safe school is a place where the business of education can be conducted in a welcoming environment free of intimidation, violence, and fear. Such a setting provides an educational climate that fosters a spirit of acceptance and care for every child. It is a place free of bullying where behavior expectations are clearly communicated, consistently enforced, and fairly applied.

—Ronald D. Stephens, executive director, National
School Safety Center (Mabie, 2003, "What Is a Safe School?")

Research on understanding and describing indicators of a safe school shows that safe schools possess the following characteristics:

- A team-developed **safe school plan** and implementation strategy
- A committed administration that allocates **resources** for implementing the safe school plan
- Teaching and support staff with **positive relationships** and effective methods of **communicating** with their students, adults in the building, and parents/guardians
- **Comprehensive student programming** to reduce violent and aggressive behaviors (e.g. peer mediation, problem solving)

- Programming and policies that address **implicit forms** of violence and aggression between and among students. Implicit forms include bullying and biased-based violence.
- **Clean learning environments** both inside and adjacent to the building
- Commitment to a culture of learning with **high academic standards** and civil and respectful classrooms
- **Partnerships with the community**, including the business community surrounding the school

Safe schools have s**chool safety plans** that are user-friendly and up-to-date and whose contents are communicated to and practiced by school staff through tabletop exercises. In Chapter 2, the school safety plan, safety team composition, and development of implementation strategies will be explored. School safety plans, once the sole strategy for establishing and maintaining safety priorities, are, in some districts, just dust-covered documents. On the other hand, well-planned and executed safety plans create a learning environment that is both physically and emotionally safe for students, staff, and administrators.

School leaders must allocate **resources** for prevention and intervention strategies designed to create safe schools. School leaders who allocate resources are demonstrating to faculty, students, and parents/guardians that a safe school is a priority, thus immediately impacting the school culture in a constructive manner. In addition to directing funds toward programming, administrators must find ways to motivate teachers who support safe learning environments. Professional development, public recognition, course release time, and other forms of incentives do not always require money.

Grant support through the Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities programs and Safe Schools/Healthy Students programs are only two examples of funding available for safe schools initiatives. Private, local foundations may also be interested in providing support for specific prevention and intervention strategies. In addition, many schools are reaching out to the business community for both cash donations and person power support.

Safe schools have teaching and support staff with **positive relationships** and effective methods of **communicating** with their students, adults in the building, and parents/guardians. Werner and Smith's (1989) study, covering more than 40 years, finds that, among the most frequently encountered positive role models in the lives of resilient children, outside of the family circle, were favorite teachers. Such teachers were not just instructors for academic skills but also confidants and positive models for personal identification. Furthermore, Noddings (1988) finds that a caring relationship with a teacher gives students motivation to succeed.

Comprehensive **conflict resolution education** and violence prevention programming encourages students to share responsibility for creating a

safe, secure school environment (Stomfay-Stitz, 1994). Strategies for implementing programming are located in Chapters 4 and 5 of this book. Students who are exposed to school-based social skills training programs that emphasize trust, respect, and nonviolent alternatives are less likely to engage frequently in violence and other problem behaviors. In addition to knowledge and behavioral improvements, students exposed to programming are more resilient to other school-based risk factors.

Bullying, punking, and biased-based violence and exclusion are addressed in safe schools through programming and policies and procedures. *Punking* is a practice of verbal and physical violence, humiliation, and shaming usually done in public by males to other males. Punking terminology and behaviors are usually interchangeable with bullying terminology and behaviors. Both practices are purposeful strategies used by many boys to affirm masculinity norms of toughness, strength, dominance, and control (Phillips, 2007).

Safe schools are **clean**. Students who learn in school buildings that are clean, well cared for, and supervised perceive these places as safe. Schools with clear perimeters that are supervised and controlled are more conducive to student learning than schools with ill-defined and unsupervised access points.

Schools with a commitment to a culture of learning, that possess **high academic standards**, and that demand civil and respectful classrooms are safe. Research indicates that schools that establish high expectations for all youth—and give them the support necessary to achieve them—have high rates of academic success. They also have lower rates of problem behaviors, such as dropping out, drug abuse, teen pregnancy, and delinquency, than other schools (Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, Ouston, & Smith, 1979).

The Council for Corporate & School Partnerships, established in March 2001, serves as a forum for the exchange of information, expertise, and ideas to ensure that partnerships between businesses and schools achieve their full potential for meeting key educational objectives. At the end of 2003, the Council announced the National School and Business Partnerships Award to recognize school-business partnerships that improve the academic, social, or physical well-being of students. The Council publishes *The How-To Guide for School-Business Partnerships*, a road map to help schools and businesses successfully create, implement, sustain, and evaluate school-business partnerships.

Schools must be able to depend on the surrounding **community** to assist with school safety issues, because communities benefit from safe schools and are negatively affected by unsafe schools. A healthier school can do much for creating and maintaining healthier social and economic infrastructures in the surrounding communities. Partnerships with local businesses can also be extremely important in school safety programs. Safe schools provide local businesses with well-educated customers, a well-trained potential workforce, and quality education for children of their employees. Businesses can provide schools with financial assistance in maintaining school safety

programs in addition to supplying a strong volunteer base for implementing school safety initiatives, such as patrolling school campuses before and after school and maintaining clean classroom and school environments.

Some of the most successful forms of business partnerships involve the following activities:

- Adopt-a-school program: Business owners and employees focus efforts on a particular school in the community. Activities include allowing employees time off to volunteer at the schools for mentoring, tutoring, job fair days, and other school activities.
- "Peacemaker of the Week" sponsorship: School staff select a student who demonstrates outstanding achievement in the area of school safety. The sponsoring business recognizes this student, perhaps by hanging the student's picture in the business and, if the business is a store, offering the student a gift of store merchandise.
- Job exposure and training for secondary students: Businesses offer students training in school safety-related topics, such as team building and interpersonal skills.
- Employment opportunities for students: Businesses that offer employment or internship opportunities are very beneficial to building safer schools. Students receive important work experience, and afterschool employment might help address the high rate of juvenile criminal activity that occurs between 3:00 and 4:00 PM (Snyder & Sickmund, 1999).
- Safe passages: Business owners offer students safe havens on their way to and from school in their businesses.
- Financial support: Business owners offer support in the form of equipment, supplies, facilities for events, and direct funding for school safety programs.

Content Application

This activity may be conducted for students or educators at a professional development session.

Educator application: Supply maps and sticky dots. Ask staff to place a dot were they grew up and attended school. Several dots may be provided, if the person has moved from school to school. Ask staff to reflect on a positive school experience from their childhoods. What were their fears associated with the school? How are those fears similar or dissimilar from those students are experiencing in the school today? What is their vision for a safe school, and how might one achieve it?

Student application: Ask students to think of a grade or age. Students are to reflect on one positive school experience. What were/are their fears associated with the school? What is their vision for a safe school, and how might one achieve it? Students may work in groups to draw their vision of a safe school and to brainstorm on how to achieve the goal.

DEFINING AN UNSAFE SCHOOL

A provision of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) requires states to define schools individually as "persistently dangerous." As a result of the unsafe school option legislation, states are using a variety of factors and approaches to identify unsafe, or "persistently dangerous," schools.

Persistently dangerous school indicators are provided below.

Persistently Dangerous School Indicators

Time period considered: Most states consider offenses or incidents occurring during a three-year period, while some consider a two-year period.

Threshold of offenses: Most states use a combination of a percentage of the student enrollment for some offenses and a specific number for other offenses, a specific number of offenses, or a percentage of the student population.

Offenses: Definitions of offenses/incidents vary to the extent of detail. A state using a narrowly defined list of offenses also may have a low threshold for the number of offenses, thus increasing the number of schools determined persistently unsafe. A state using a detailed offense list might have a high offense threshold resulting in a relatively low number of persistently dangerous schools.

In addition to the general indicators of persistently dangerous schools, states have created provisions such as the following:

Florida schools meeting certain criteria are required to conduct an anonymous schoolwide survey of students, parents, and personnel. If a majority (51 percent) of the survey respondents perceive the school as unsafe, the school is designated persistently dangerous.

In **Indiana**, a panel of local and state school safety experts determines if a school that has met the established criteria for the third consecutive year should be identified as persistently dangerous.

Schools identified as persistently dangerous in **Mississippi** and **North Dakota** have an opportunity, prior to final determination, to provide additional information to the state department of education or the state board of education.

South Dakota's policy considers all offenses occurring on school property, at school-sponsored events, or on buses—24 hours a day, 12 months a year—whether committed by or victimizing students, school personnel, or nonschool personnel.

In some cases, state policies involving the designation of persistently dangerous schools contain certain limits or exemptions. **Michigan** and **Tennessee,** for example, exclude alternative schools that have been created to serve suspended or expelled students.

Yet, is the NCLB provision useful in defining unsafe schools? A national survey found that only 54 schools nationwide were identified as dangerous (Robelen, 2003), and according to an August 19, 2003, article in *USA Today*, 44 states and the District of Columbia reported having no persistently dangerous schools (Toppo & Schouten, 2003). Do these statistics mean that few schools are unsafe or that the criteria for defining unsafe schools are too rigid, or might they reflect widespread underreporting by leaders fearful of the consequences of having an unsafe school classification? Indeed, further research is required in this area to determine if national, state, and local policies regarding unsafe schools should be altered.

Factors Associated With School Violence

In general, little agreement occurs in the literature as to the correlates of school violence. Research from criminal justice experts often points to changes in the juvenile justice system and accessibility to weapons as reasons for school violence, while mental health professionals point to the dissolution of the family, increases in family violence, and the growing trend toward risk-taking behaviors among youths as factors. According to Resnick et al. (1997), adolescents living in homes with easy access to guns are more likely to be involved in violent behaviors toward others. Zuckerman, Ausgustyn, Groves, and Parker (1995) note that children exposed to violence in the home may demonstrate long-term behavioral effects, including aggressive behaviors toward the self and others.The factors most often cited as possible correlates (across disciplines) include the following:

- Family factors, such as poor parenting skills as demonstrated by inadequate parental monitoring, inappropriate discipline techniques, or parental modeling of aggressive behavior
- Lack of individual social and coping skills and personality characteristics that would preclude propensity for violence
- Societal impact from the following:
  - School society: Includes peer relations and pressure, stress surrounding the need to succeed in school in the traditional capitalist/ middle-socioeconomic-status climate, and poor school security measures
  - Larger U.S. society: Includes exposure to violence in media and entertainment, an increase in accessibility and use of guns, an increase in crime in general, and a decline in the moral character of the nation
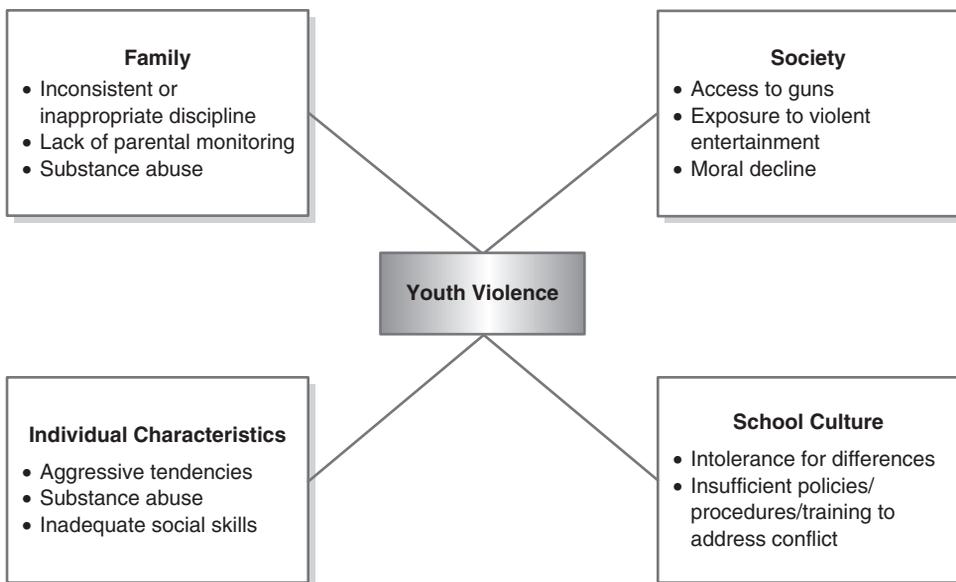
In response to larger societal issues, educational institutions now serve a different socialization role for children than they did traditionally. Increasingly, educators perceive student deficits resulting from changes in

the family and society and react by nurturing the social and physical development of students rather than merely the cognitive aspects of students. In striving to meet the needs of the "whole child" to better prepare a student academically, schools have had to increase their accountability to the three Rs plus! Now schools are seen as accountable for cognitive, social, and physical competence and are caught in the crossfire of controversy if students demonstrate a lack of skill or knowledge in any area of child development.

Most people agree that there isn't one single solution to school violence. Indeed, solutions might not be effective across students, schools, states, or the nation. Because changing the larger society or influencing family factors is perceived as more difficult and less immediate, a multilayer preventive education approach involving the school is currently the most realistic option for the problem of school violence (see Figure 1.1).

Clearly, the topic of school safety extends beyond the walls of educational institutions. Just as the underlying cause of school violence is not solely factors within a school, neither are the solutions for school safety the sole responsibility of school leaders. Instead, comprehensive school safety programs must include partnerships with the community. Representatives from juvenile justice programs, health and mental health professions, and religious organizations are only a few examples of individuals critical to the creation of safe schools.

Figure 1.1   Youth Violence as a Multilayer Problem

Family
- Inconsistent or inappropriate discipline
- Lack of parental monitoring
- Substance abuse

Society
- Access to guns
- Exposure to violent entertainment
- Moral decline

Youth Violence

Individual Characteristics
- Aggressive tendencies
- Substance abuse
- Inadequate social skills

School Culture
- Intolerance for differences
- Insufficient policies/procedures/training to address conflict

CHARACTERISTICS OF YOUTH OFFENDERS

In any school, three relatively distinct populations of students exist: (a) typically developing students, (b) those at risk for behavioral and academic problems, and (c) high-risk students who already manifest serious behavioral and academic difficulties (Sprague & Walker, 2000, 2005).

Although it is very difficult to predict whether students' behavior will lead to violence, school leaders should observe students' styles of conflict resolution, including avoidance of conflict situations. Researchers agree that most children who become violent toward themselves or others feel rejected and psychologically victimized. In most cases, children exhibit aggressive behavior early in life and, if not provided support, continue a progressive developmental pattern toward a severe aggression or violence. However, research also shows that when children have a positive, meaningful connection to an adult, whether at home, in school, or in the community, the potential for violence is reduced significantly.

School leaders should also consider the following warning signs, adapted from Dwyer, Osher, and Warger (1998):

- **Social withdrawal:** In some situations, gradual and eventually complete withdrawal from social contacts can be an important indicator of a troubled child.

- **Excessive feelings of isolation and being alone:** Research has shown that the majority of children who are isolated and appear to be friendless are not violent. However, in some cases, feelings of isolation and not having friends are associated with children who behave aggressively and violently.

- **Excessive feelings of rejection:** In the process of growing up, and in the course of adolescent development, many young people experience emotionally painful rejection. Some aggressive children seek out aggressive friends, who, in turn, reinforce their violent tendencies.

- **Being a victim of violence:** Children who have been victims of violence, including physical or sexual abuse in the community, at school, or at home, are sometimes at risk of becoming violent toward themselves or others.

- **Feelings of being picked on and/or persecuted:** The youth who feels constantly picked on, teased, bullied, singled out for ridicule, and humiliated at home or at school may initially withdraw socially. If not given adequate support in addressing these feelings, some children may vent them in inappropriate ways, possibly including aggression and violence.

- **Low school interest and poor academic performance:** Poor achievement can be the result of many factors. It is important to consider whether

there is a drastic change in performance and/or performance becomes a chronic condition that limits the child's capacity to learn. In some cases, such as when the low achiever feels frustrated, unworthy, chastised, and denigrated, acting out and aggressive behaviors may occur.

- **Expression of violence in writings and drawings:** Children and youth often express their thoughts, feelings, desires, and intentions in their drawings and in stories, poetry, and other written expressive forms. Many children produce work about violent themes that for the most part is harmless when taken in context. However, an overrepresentation of violence in writings and drawings that is directed at specific individuals (family members, peers, other adults) consistently over time may signal emotional problems and the potential for violence.

- **Patterns of impulsive hitting and chronic hitting, intimidating, and bullying behaviors:** Children often engage in acts of shoving and mild aggression. However, some mildly aggressive behaviors, such as constant hitting and bullying of others, if left unattended, may later escalate into more serious behaviors.

- **History of violent, aggressive behavior and discipline problems:** Chronic behavior and disciplinary problems both in school and at home may suggest that underlying emotional needs are not being met. These unmet needs may be manifested in acting out and aggressive behaviors. These problems may set the stage for the child to violate norms and rules, defy authority, disengage from school, and engage in aggressive behaviors with other children and adults.

- **Intolerance for differences and prejudicial attitudes:** All children have likes and dislikes. However, an intense prejudice toward others based on racial, ethnicity, religion, language, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and/or physical appearance, when coupled with other factors, may lead to assaults against those who are perceived to be different. Membership in hate groups or the willingness to victimize individuals with disabilities or health problems also should be treated as early warning signs.

- **Drug use and alcohol use:** Apart from being unhealthy behaviors, drug use and alcohol use reduce self-control and expose children and youth to violence as perpetrators, as victims, or both.

- **Affiliation with gangs:** Gangs that support antisocial values and behaviors, including extortion, intimidation, and acts of violence toward other students, cause fear and stress among other students. Youth who are influenced by these groups, including those who emulate and copy their behavior as well as those who become affiliated with them, may adopt values and act in violent or aggressive ways in certain situations. Gang-related violence and turf battles are commonly tied to the use of drugs that often result in injury and/or death.

• **Inappropriate access to, possession of, and use of firearms:** Children and youth who inappropriately possess or have access to firearms can have increased risk for violence. Research shows that such youngsters also have a higher probability of becoming victims. Families can reduce inappropriate access and use by restricting, monitoring, and supervising children's access to firearms and other weapons. Children who have a history of aggression, impulsiveness, or other emotional problems should not have access to firearms and other weapons.

• **Serious threats of violence:** Idle threats are a common response to frustration. Alternatively, one of the most reliable indicators that a youth is likely to commit a crime is their talking about it.

• **A detailed and specific threat to use violence:** Recent indicators across the country clearly indicate that threats to commit violence against oneself or others should be taken very seriously. Steps must be taken to understand the nature of these threats and to prevent them from being carried out.

Leadership Strategies for Safe Schools is intended to support school leaders in developing proactive approaches to build safe schools. These approaches are intended for all youth in the school facility; however, it is important to note that proactive approaches may differentially affect students depending on a number of characteristics, including their propensity for violence. Understanding the characteristics of youth offenders and identifying potentially at-risk students are important steps toward building a safe school environment for all students.