

School Safety Monthly

April 2017

School Safety Fidelity

Putting your School to the Test

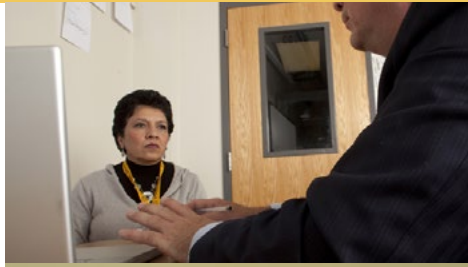


Photos: Rachel Wilson



School Safety Fidelity

by Michael Dorn



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School officials should take great care to find and correct situations where there are gaps between what they think they have in place and actual practice. Scenario testing is one of the best ways to identify these types of gaps so they can be corrected before a safety incident occurs

A federal civil action is not the ideal time to learn that an important aspect of your school safety program has serious flaws. Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for safety incidents which result in litigation to occur because a school safety program lacks fidelity. In this context, fidelity means the lack of distance between what is intended by policies, plans, training and other safety measures and the reality of how things are actually done. For example, it is not uncommon for our analysts to observe significant differences between a school's written bullying policies and the manner in which bullying situations are actually handled. This can not only result in highly negative outcomes for students who are bullied, but can also result in significant challenges should litigation follow a bullying-related safety incident. Just as importantly, this type of dissonance can

also result in problems when false allegations of bullying-related safety incidents are made during litigation.

One of the most important aspects of a school safety, security, climate, culture and emergency preparedness assessment process is to identify these types of gaps so they can be corrected. With properly conducted school safety assessments, it is very common for evaluators to identify substantive problems with fidelity in school safety efforts. We have found this to be true for excellent public as well as non-public schools we have assessed.

In one typical example, a public school system we assessed told us they had an exceptional student threat evaluation and management process. The district had extremely detailed written

guidelines and had spent considerable time, energy and money having a consultant who had developed the guidelines provide training for a number of staff. When our analysts evaluated the written process, they found it to be overly burdensome, resource and time intensive given the district's extremely limited mental health staffing levels. When our analysts began to ask threat assessment team personnel how effective the process was, they began referring us to other threat assessment team members, stating that they had not actually had an occasion to use the process. After this scenario repeated itself with every person we interviewed, we began to suspect that no one in the district had actually ever used the paper process.

When we asked the client to provide us with several actual completed student threat evaluations with all identifying information redacted, the district was unable to produce a single example of completed or even partially completed forms. Given the size of the district and the length of time the process had been in place, it would be extraordinary for the district not to have had any situations where a student threat evaluation would be appropriate. Upon further inquiry, we learned that a number of the district's administrators were either skeptical of the process or felt that it was too time consuming. Should a civil action involving a shooting or other act of violence where a threat of some form had

been communicated prior to the attack, plaintiff's counsel would likely request and the district ordered by the court to provide examples of redacted threat evaluation documents. A revelation that the district's formal and established process was not actually in use could prove to be devastating during litigation.

As with prevention strategies, there are reasonably effective ways to evaluate emergency preparedness concepts. One way to do this is to measure how well individual staff can respond to a variety of school crisis scenarios. This can be done by using role play, written, audio or video scenarios. The difference between how effectively school officials expect their employees to respond to scenarios and the way they will respond to them can be dramatic. For example, we have repeatedly had school employees who have been trained with the Run, Hide, Fight model respond to weapons scenarios by attacking individuals when it would increase the chances of death for them to do so. We have had numerous school employees respond to scenarios showing hostage situations, armed aggressors depicted as seventy-five yards from a school and students who threaten to commit suicide with a cocked handgun pressed to their temple with their finger on the trigger by attacking or throwing books at or attacking the subjects. These simulations clearly reveal a considerable distance between how trainees perform and the intended purpose of the training. These results are



most noticeable with options-based active shooter training programs and oversimplified school emergency plans.

How can schools test for fidelity in safety strategies?

There are a variety of ways that school officials can evaluate their safety approaches for fidelity. Here are a few approaches that have been utilized to evaluate school safety strategies for clients:

1. Mock discovery process and evaluation

This approach involves having district officials locate the types of documents that would likely be required under the discovery phase of litigation. As with the example of student threat evaluation and assessment above, this technique can be extremely revealing though time intensive.

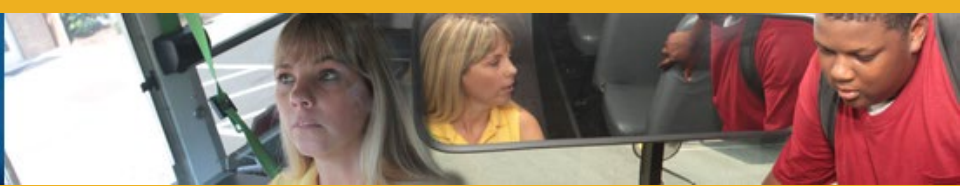
2. Scenario testing

The use of scripted, audio and video scenarios has been

one of the most productive techniques our analysts have utilized. If staff cannot properly employ the correct emergency procedures under the relatively mild stress of simulations, things will not get better under the extreme stress of a life-threatening emergency. We have found that a number of popular approaches test very poorly as with the example of the Run, Hide, Fight approach described above.

3. Use outside evaluators

Schools should periodically utilize properly qualified external evaluators to provide a comprehensive and independent assessment of school safety, security, climate, culture and emergency preparedness approaches. Outside evaluators can often spot gaps that internal personnel miss. Using assessors who can help internalize this type of expertise can be especially valuable.



School Safety Fidelity (Continued)

4. Premortem exercises

The premortem exercise is an inexpensive and effective approach to vet school safety approaches. For this type of activity, an internal team is asked to assume that one or more primary prevention approaches have failed and that emergency preparedness measures have also failed badly. Using this as an inflexible baseline, the team is asked to determine how this type of outcome could occur. When a team is willing to take a deep look in the mirror, they can often find gaps in fidelity that might be missed by even the most experienced external team. This is because internal personnel typically know about realities that might not be readily apparent to outside experts.

5. Finding and fixing fidelity gaps

For those who would prefer to find and fix gaps in safety approaches rather than to have them exposed during litigation and national media reporting, a deep and honest look in the mirror using the concepts described above can be well worth the time, energy and resources expended. Those who are afraid to undergo this self-inflicted scrutiny are more likely to experience being referred to as "defendant" when having the gaps that might have otherwise been found and corrected are being thoroughly exposed by other forms of deep and uncomfortable external evaluation.

Common areas where schools often lack fidelity:

- Bullying and suicide prevention programs that are not evidence based
- Student supervision practices
- Inadequate Lockdown protocols
- Adopting options-based active shooter training programs
- Inadequate access control and visitor management procedures
- Reporting of sexual abuse and mandatory reporter follow-through
- Crime reporting



Photo: Rachel Wilson



The author of 27 books on school safety, Michael is a passionate advocate for safer schools. Michael welcomes reader feedback and stands ready to help others in their efforts to become more effective campus safety experts. Michael can be reached via e-mail at mike@weakfish.org.

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