

Sustainable, Accessible, Feasible, Effective (SAFE) School Safety Planning: Educator Perceptions of Crisis Frequency and Preparedness in Suspecting and Responding to School Safety

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Educators are underprepared to respond to crises related to school safety. This lack of preparation leaves school leaders, teachers, and students vulnerable to harm. Importantly, the recent global health pandemic increased the utilization of on-line and hybrid learning modes increasing the need for school safety planning specific to these online settings. The methodology utilized survey data from participants (n=93) in an online statewide school to provide perceptions of crisis frequency and preparedness to suspect and respond to these events as well as

to better understand if these educators received training. Findings noted that in the different areas of crises, the number of educators who felt ‘very prepared’ to suspect and respond to crises needed improvement. Additionally, a number of participants could not confirm that their schools had a specified school safety plan or that these plans were accessible and being implemented with fidelity. These implications for practice suggest a need for school safety planning for online settings that are sustainable, accessible, feasible, and effective (SAFE) to ensure school safety via researched-based practices. Recommendations for future research include gathering data on a wider scope from education professionals nationwide by continuing the current research in online settings.

INTRODUCTION

To date, only minimal research has emerged that is specific to school safety planning in an online setting (McBrayer et al., 2020; Tysinger et al., 2016). However, multiple studies of school safety planning in physical brick-and-mortar school settings have shown school safety measures to be useful both in preventing and addressing relevant emergency situations (Dickson & Vargo, 2017; Schildkraut & Nickerson, 2020; U.S. Government Accountability Office [GAO], 2022). Thus, the researchers posit that this should be the case for online settings and that the exploration of school safety measures in the virtual arena is vital. Although K–12 online learning modes may be protected from certain school safety concerns, physical distance does not offer protection from all potential crises that impact students in the online school setting (McBrayer et al., 2020; Tysinger et al., 2016). Additionally, because most students spend the bulk of their childhood in educational settings (online or in-person), they are markedly vulnerable to the impacts of crisis events in school settings, such as difficulties with mood, social interactions, and academic achievement (Kruger et al., 2018; Polanin et al., 2021).

Varied research has given rise to thoughtful consideration of what safety measures may be most suitable for the online setting (Emezue et al., 2021; McBrayer et al., 2020; Tysinger et al., 2016). In the United States (U.S.), 32 states currently mandate emergency exercises for their districts (U.S. GAO, 2016). However, although most states expect their individual districts and schools to establish safety plans, less than half require such safety plans to be reviewed or regularly revised by school district or state authorities (U.S. GAO, 2016), and the need for greater consideration of school safety planning continues to grow (Bradshaw et al., 2022; Vilorio & Ramirez, 2021). Consequently, the desired functional output of this study will be a call for a

thorough and comprehensive school safety planning initiative focused on a formalized “threat assessment” for online schools for the purposes of school and community safety planning (Alathari et al., 2018, p. 1). These threat assessments should aim to address both the vulnerable to high-risk behaviors of students that may result in crisis events and to identify research-based practices to assist in school safety planning. Furthermore, prevention will be addressed via evidence-based practices focused on SAFE (Sustainable, Accessible, Feasible, Effective) school and community safety planning.

Critical considerations for future crisis preparedness measures include preventing undue escalation within emergencies, reducing the frequency of emergencies, advancing the safety procedures necessary to prevent such situations, and addressing the aftermath of potential negative mental health consequences (Riehm et al., 2021). According to the U.S. GAO (2016), communication between various stakeholders (e.g., Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, and Homeland Security) regarding the formation and implementation of safety planning, while important, is often fragmented. Thus, there is a need to further research how prepared online schools are to suspect and respond to crisis events, as, unfortunately, empirical data is currently scarce. To support this research, this study aimed to address school and community safety planning and the training (i.e., professional development) that educators need to combat and predict school crises to keep all students safe. Students have the right to be ensured beyond a doubt that safety is their school district’s number one concern in meeting their educational needs.

The following three research questions guided this study: 1. What are online educators’ perceptions of crisis frequency (times per year suspected) in an online K-12 setting?; 2. Have online educators been provided training in suspecting and responding to crises in an online K-12 setting?; and 3. How prepared are online educators to respond to school crises based on the accessibility and fidelity of their school safety plans?

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Theoretical Framework

Transformational leadership served as the theoretical framework for this study, as transformational leaders change and transform organizations naturally by challenging ineffective and inefficient processes (Northouse, 2019). Presently, far too many schools report that staff are struggling to meet the mental health needs of students, and one of these needs is keeping kids safe (Grissom & Condon, 2021). Thus, utilizing empirical research to aid in creating new processes to ensure students’ physical safety and emotional

well-being is critical. Fruetel et al. (2022) revealed a lack of uniformity in safety scenarios meant to improve crisis response by challenging established views and beliefs regarding school safety and preparedness, revealing a need for educators to look to formalized school safety planning. Examining perceptions of crisis events, including those that may stem from mental health issues, will encourage direction for providing professional development to ensure staff and students' emotional and physical safety (Weiner et al., 2021).

School leadership during times of crisis requires balancing relational skills with effective transformational leadership competencies (Farahnak et al., 2020). As the likelihood of schools facing crisis events continues to grow, school leaders increasingly see their role as being one focusing heavily on safety and security, supporting student and teacher well-being, and connecting with parents and the broader community to attain a positive school climate (Reid, 2021). Taking on the challenge of creating comprehensive safety plans that include responses to students' mental health crises will allow the transformational leader to collaborate with staff to turn data collected from research into action.

School Safety Planning in an Online Setting

Research suggests that 93% of educators working in traditional school environments have been required to respond to a crisis event, and prior research proposes that this is also high in an online setting (McBrayer et al., 2020; Tysinger et al., 2016). In recent years, due to the global health pandemic, most schools had to shut down their campuses physically, and serve their students fully online, and eventually either remained online or transitioned to a hybrid modality. However, by the 2019-2020 school year, only 52% of schools had a safety plan for pandemic disease-related scenarios (Irwin et al., 2021). The increasing demand for online and hybrid schooling options requires a focus on training that maintains the safety of students in online learning environments (Pulham et al., 2018).

Developing competencies and valid measurement processes could facilitate professional development focused on identifying gaps in educator skills and personalizing instruction to meet needs around community and school safety planning (Pulham et al., 2018). Educator preparation programs endeavoring to improve outcomes for online or hybrid teaching need to examine competencies for the contexts in which they are appropriate and, in the case of this study, community and school safety planning in an online setting. There is a need to include more online and hybrid competencies in educator preparation programs to make school safety detection and prevention become mainstream in training aspiring and current school leaders and preservice teachers (McBrayer et al., 2020; Tysinger et al., 2016).

Increasing educator preparedness for an online setting and their surrounding communities is vital as parents are concerned for the digital safety of their children (Martin et al., 2021). Additionally, these researchers noted that although many resources are available to brick-and-mortar school systems for safety planning, it is unclear whether this information could be generalized to online platforms. In a survey of 51 state educational agencies, 32 states reported that they required districts to have emergency operation plans, and 34 reported they required schools to have safety plans (U.S. GAO, 2016). Almost all states reported providing training, technical assistance, or guidance to support districts in developing or implementing school safety plans. The survey also found that 32 states required districts to conduct emergency exercises, such as drills, and 40 states required individual schools to do so (U.S. GAO, 2016). Accountability concerns are noted as many states reported expecting school districts to implement safety plans, but fewer than half reported that they ‘required’ states to review district or school plans, and no federal laws require school districts to have an emergency management plan in place (U.S. GAO, 2016). However, these states reported having their own laws or policies that made safety plans a requirement.

The U.S. Department of Education and the Federal Emergency Management Agency provided guidelines that support the implementation of emergency management procedures, and districts are recommended to collaborate and participate in emergency management drills with local enforcement agencies (e.g., police, fire stations, clinical counselors) annually (Perkins, 2018). Additionally, these drills allow school districts to examine their capacity to respond to an emergency and allow rescue personnel to become familiar with the school system and its personnel. Schools should also be required to conduct regular safety drills and simulations, incorporating virtual scenarios to ensure that all stakeholders are adequately prepared for potential crises.

Schools may perceive themselves as being prepared for a crisis, but their plans may lack specificity to their school (Steeves et al., 2017). Another discrepancy seen between the states is:

[many] states have legally mandated armed assailant drills without providing much guidance, which has contributed to confusion about the differences between lockdown, options-based training, and full-scale simulation drills, as well as growing concern over the unintended harm caused by conducting drills inappropriately. (National Association of School Resource Officers [NASRO], 2021, p. 1)

However, research denotes that when school personnel participate in school safety planning and training, such as drills, their perceived preparedness and execution of the proper steps taken to suspect and respond to a crisis improves (Dickson & Vargo, 2017; Schildkraut & Nickerson, 2020). Although their studies were conducted in the traditional in-person school setting, the same concept could potentially be generalized to the online school setting. An example of current training is Everytown for Gun Safety's active shooter plan (2022), which keeps prevention as the focal point to intervene as soon as possible by identifying students at risk for crisis. Furthermore, schools should couple drills with trauma-informed approaches to address students' well-being both during the drills and over a sustained period (Riehm et al., 2021). Specifically, although active shooter drills in schools are beneficial, they are also associated with increases in depression, stress and anxiety, and physiological health problems. Moreover, concerns over death increased by 22%, with words like blood, pain, clinics, and pills becoming a consistent feature of social media posts in school communities in the 90 days after a school drill (Riehm et al., 2021).

These findings unveil even more reason to pause before rushing toward active shooter drills as a potential solution to school violence, as evidence suggests that active shooter drills are causing lasting emotional and physical harm to students, teachers, and the larger community (ElSherief et al., 2021). This is further compounded when the drill involves a simulation and/or is employed with no advanced warning to students (Huskey & Connell, 2021). In the absence of any conclusive evidence on drills' effectiveness at ensuring safety during actual active shooter incidents, there is pressure for school decision-makers to assess whether the potential but unproven benefits of these drills outweigh their known collateral consequences, and thus further research is warranted (Huskey & Connell, 2021).

According to the National Association of School Psychologists (2015), crises that occur outside of a student's school, such as an event that took place on the global, national, or local scale, can still affect a student to the point that they need intervention. They also recommend updating schools' safety plans regularly to keep current with existing district and surrounding community needs. Although various agencies support school safety in preparing for emergencies with support resources, including training, technical assistance, and funding, often their efforts are not strategically coordinated (U.S. GAO, 2016). Since the U. S. Department of Education issued a guide for developing high-quality school emergency operations plans in 2013, individual agencies have worked on various emergency preparedness initiatives. However, with unclear strategic coordination of agency efforts specific to communities and schools, school districts and federal agencies have taken a piecemeal approach to their efforts (U.S. GAO, 2016).

Additionally, gaps were found in coordination that suggested recent efforts are insufficient and that not all relevant agencies and officials are included in collaborative efforts or are aware of related efforts and resources. Furthermore, agencies often offer different interpretations of the same federal guidance, which risks wasting limited federal resources on duplicative, overlapping, or fragmented efforts.

Policymakers must prioritize the development and implementation of standardized safety protocols that are specifically designed for online learning environments. These protocols need to address the unique needs of students in online school settings, such as cyberbullying and suicidal ideation. These protocols should require mandatory reviews and maintenance to ensure relevance and effectiveness. Although agencies discussed the need to continue coordinating their efforts, current policy does not designate a lead agency going forward, nor give any agency direct authority or require agency participation. Leading practices on federal interagency collaboration include identifying leadership, partnering with relevant participants and resources, and agreeing on outcomes is vital (McBrayer et al., 2020; Tysinger et al., 2016; Tysinger et al., 2015).

State education agencies are typically responsible for coordinating school safety training and making resources available to their faculty and staff (U.S. Department of Education et al., 2013). Their goal is to maintain or create an environment that is not only perceived as safe but also takes precautions and has a plan in case of a crisis, often including collaboration with school personnel and law enforcement. When determining how a school safety team plans for such unavoidable crises, those within an online setting must also be considered. If a well-coordinated effort is absent, agencies will continue to determine their priorities individually, which may negatively impact community and school safety, jeopardizing these collaborative efforts.

Comprehensive school crisis plans are essential and should include provisions for intervention in the face of a crisis (Steeves et al., 2017). The reality is clear in that human-caused crises will continue to occur (National Education Association, 2018). As these occur, lessons learned and other insights can be garnered to further the actions and investments in school safety initiatives. Additionally, there is a need to focus on community and school safety to prevent incidents, as a significant part of prevention is recognizing and addressing the mental health needs of students and staff (Alathari et al., 2018). Teachers have concerns about their students when in an online setting, especially given the conditions from the pandemic, regarding factors such as their physical, emotional, and mental well-being, and these after-effects will inevitably remain (Alathari et al., 2018; National Association of School Psychologists, 2015; National Education Association, 2018).

While there is a need to strengthen response and recovery capabilities, we also need to strengthen our capacity to identify and address mental health issues and create a positive and healthy learning and working environment for the entire school and surrounding community. The key to preventing crises is addressing emotional issues and managing behaviors before they escalate. However, once a crisis occurs, schools must be prepared to address school safety implications to reduce further distress or secondary crises.

Professional Learning for School Safety in an Online Setting

To better address the potential of online and hybrid learning, teacher professional development strategies on how to teach in an online or blended learning environment are key (Philipsen et al., 2019a). Identified professional development should be focused on crisis detection, response, and prevention in these online settings. Most of the current resources and training do not address the needs of students outside of academics, such as considering mental health during a crisis. The importance of this issue has been previously studied by McBrayer et al. (2020) and Tysinger et al. (2016, 2015) to highlight the need for both community and school safety training for educators employed in an online setting and the need for more intensive training in suspecting and responding to a broad spectrum of crises.

School safety professional development opportunities available for districts are typically tailored to the in-person setting of a brick-and-mortar school (U.S. GAO, 2022). Though such learning is helpful for educators within a traditional in-person setting, they are not always as easily applicable to online settings. There is a need to provide continuous support to educators through professional learning (Philipsen, 2019; Philipsen et al., 2019a; Philipsen et al., 2019b). Even with a drastic increase in online school enrollment, there is limited school safety training specifically designed to fit their needs (McBrayer et al., 2020; Tysinger et al., 2016). Educators must be equipped with the requisite skills to recognize early warning signs and be provided the tools to intervene in an online setting before further escalation occurs. Bragg et al. (2021) found that professional development opportunities that are evidence-based and offered online can promote perceived self-efficacy, increase content knowledge, and broaden teaching practices, all needed to improve preparedness for crisis-related events. However, like most sources, the researchers highlighted the fact that little is mentioned about how educators are trained to respond to crises or school safety as online educators.

One unique strength of online professional development is that online communities can be formed, allowing educators to share resources and improve their self-efficacy, which may be key in community and school safety planning initiatives (Ekici, 2018). Additionally, professional learning

opportunities have the untapped potential to deliver high-quality school safety training and resources for educators in strictly online settings, and the researchers posit that they need evidence-based practices that are Sustainable, Accessible, Feasible, and Effective (SAFE).

Educator training must include more online and hybrid competencies to make school safety prevention, preparation, and intervention standard practice involving community and school safety. Professional development opportunities around school safety are typically developed for brick-and-mortar school settings with minimal specific training in an online/hybrid setting. Crises occur across school settings and negatively impact students emotionally and academically in an online setting. To expand upon prior research, this study will assess online educators' training background and their preparedness to suspect and respond to varied crisis events, as well as the accessibility and fidelity of their school's current safety plan.

There is a substantial gap in the accessibility and familiarity of school safety plans among educators, warranting further research. Schools need to ensure that safety plans are readily accessible across multiple platforms, including online portals and printed handbooks. Regular training sessions should be conducted to ensure that staff are not only aware of these plans but also fully understand how to implement them during a crisis. Policy-makers should establish specific guidelines for crisis management in online schools. This should include policies mandating regular updates to safety plans, accountability measures to ensure compliance, and support for schools in developing comprehensive threat assessments.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This quantitative study utilized survey methods and descriptive statistics to ascertain educators' perceptions of crisis frequency in terms of preparedness to suspect and respond to these events in an online K-12 school with a statewide attendance zone to guide school safety planning. Great Charter Academy (GCA), pseudonym, is in the southeastern region of the United States. GCA serves a statewide (urban, suburban, rural) attendance zone, and GCA offers the benefits of a traditional brick-and-mortar school without the building. Students access lessons and live classes via an online learning management system, and students are partnered with certified teachers who instruct and guide student progress and achievement.

Instrument

A previous study employed an initial version of the Crisis Event Perception Survey (CEPS) to determine how prepared educators were to suspect and respond to crises that included: neglect, abuse, suicidal ideation, homicidal ideation, unexpected death of a student, unexpected death of a teacher, natural disasters, and terrorist threats (Tysinger et al., 2016). The current study utilizes an updated and expanded version of the CEPS to consider additional crises, including bullying (verbal, relational, cyber, physical), assault (physical assault, sexual assault/intimate partner violence), gang violence, gun violence (school shootings), self-injury, suicide attempt, global health pandemic, substance-misuse, and drug overdose.

The researchers ensured the content validity of the CEPS in a two-stage process (Tysinger et al., 2016). The first stage of content validity analysis included a review by two experts, and based on their feedback, additional items were created to address the educators' perceived preparedness for responding to the various crisis events based on their school's current policy. Administrative and counseling staff members conducted the second stage of the review. After their review, questions were removed to ensure participant confidentiality. The CEPS was adapted and expanded in this new study to include the additional components identified for crisis events beyond the original CEPS in the newly titled survey: "Sustainable, Accessible, Feasible, and Effective (SAFE) Crisis Event Perceptions Survey: CEPS Version 2.0" referred to as CEPS 2.0. This second version included 109 items, with seven of them being demographics, and adhered to the same needed content validity and reliability of original survey research.

The second version of the survey (CEPS 2.0) contained a total of 109 questions and asked 1) how many times per year the specified crisis area was suspected (never, 1-2, 3-4, 5-6, and greater than 6 times), 2) if they received their varied levels of training (no training, university-based teacher education program, local/district in-service or professional development, teacher professional organization conference, online webinar or training, and other), 3) how well prepared they felt to respond to the suspected area of crisis (very prepared [4], somewhat prepared [3], somewhat unprepared [2], and very unprepared [1]), and 4) examined the accessibility and fidelity of their schools' safety plans. The survey also included two open-ended questions: 1) What do you find beneficial about your school safety plan? and 2) How do you think your school safety plan could be improved? Responses were coded to determine trends and patterns based on the lens of school safety planning that was sustainable, accessible, feasible, and effective.

Data Collection

The CEPS 2.0 instrument was delivered electronically via Qualtrics™, an online survey platform, in the spring of 2024. Prior to contacting potential participants and administering the survey, we received permission from their Institutional Review Board school (IRB) and the school district Superintendent to give the survey to GCA school leaders, teachers, and support personnel. Contact with potential participants occurred through email as the survey was distributed electronically and on a one-time basis. Creswell and Creswell (2018) suggested a four-part survey request to include an advance notice alerting potential participants of the survey, a notice requesting participation in the survey, a follow-up notice, and personalized contact to all non-respondents. Considering these recommendations and to obtain a high response rate, we followed a four-part invitation to the survey over four weeks. First, we sent a recruitment and advance information email to all potential participants explaining the details of the study and confirming the correct contact information. Second, and one week following the recruitment and advance information email, we sent an invitation to survey email to all participants requesting their participation in the survey. The invitation to survey email indicated the purpose and significance of the research, anonymity assurance, implied consent, and a link to the survey. The invitation to survey email clearly addressed that the survey was anonymous, of a voluntary nature, and that no participant would be identified. In addition, the invitation to survey email outlined the rights of the participant, including the right to opt out of the survey after having started their responses and the right to skip over questions during the survey. As a third contact and one week following the invitation to the survey email, we sent a reminder and follow-up email to potential participants of the survey. The researchers made a fourth contact one week later as a final reminder. The survey closed one week following the final reminder email. The typical completion time for the CEPS 2.0 was noted to be about 10-15 minutes.

Data Analysis

The analysis of data was broken down across the 15 areas of crisis presented in this study. Descriptive statistics were utilized to measure the frequency with which the participants had suspected these forms of crisis while working in an online educational setting, the types of training received to prepare for these crises, and how prepared these educators felt in handling these situations based on their prior training opportunities as well as if they were provided training. All data were imported into an Excel spreadsheet and color-coded for trends and patterns to include both the numerical and open-ended responses.

Table 1
Frequency of Suspected Crises in an Online School Setting

	Times Per Year	0	1-2	3-4	5-6	6+
		%	%	%	%	%
Neglect		32.2	39.7	18.5	2.7	2.7
Abuse		40.6	40.6	12	3	3.8
Suicidal Thoughts		45.2	37.9	9.7	0.8	6.5
Homicidal Thoughts		77	18	0.9	2.5	1.6
Natural Disaster		29.7	53.2	10.8	3.6	2.7
Terrorist Threat		84.3	13.9	0.9	0	0.9
Verbal Bullying		24.5	32.1	23.6	12.3	7.5
Relational Bullying		40	36.2	13.3	2.9	7.6
Cyberbullying		48.1	28.8	9.6	3.8	9.6
Physical Bullying		76.5	19.6	2.9	0	1
Sexual Harassment		77.5	20.6	0	1	1
Physical Assault		84	14	1	1	0
Sexual Assault		85.9	14.1	0	0	0
Intimate Partner Violence		92.9	6.1	1	0	0
Gang Violence		91.7	8.3	0	0	0
Gun Violence		91.8	7.2	1	0	0
Self-Injury		68.4	25.5	5.1	1	0
Suicide Attempt		77.3	20.6	1	0	1
Health Pandemic		26.8	35.1	13.4	7.2	17.5
Substance Abuse/Misuse		76.3	17.5	5.2	0	1
Overdose		92.7	4.2	3.1	0	0
Unexpected Death of a Teacher		73.1	25.2	1	0	0
Unexpected Death of a Student		14.7	85.4	0	0	0

Table 2
Participant Training and Feelings of Preparedness

	Training		Feelings of Preparedness			
	No	Yes	Very Prepared	Somewhat Prepared	Somewhat Unprepared	Very Unprepared
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Neglect	18.2	81.8	39.1	50.4	9	1.5
Abuse	20.1	79.9	39.2	52	5.6	3.2
Suicidal Thoughts	12.1	87.9	36.9	53.3	7.4	2.5
Homicidal Thoughts	49.2	50.8	18.6	39.8	28.8	12.7
Natural Disaster	66.7	33.3	17.4	43.1	30.3	9.2
Terrorist Threat	77.1	22.9	8.5	26.4	41.5	23.6
Verbal Bullying	20.8	79.2	49.5	36.2	12.4	1.9
Relational Bullying	41.9	58.1	29.8	42.3	21.2	6.7
Cyberbullying	29.8	70.2	34	39.8	20.4	5.8
Physical Bullying	48	52	25.5	45.1	19.6	9.8
Sexual Harassment	40.2	59.8	30	35	23	12
Physical Assault	52	48	21.2	43.4	20.2	15.2
Sexual Assault	49.5	50.5	22.2	34.3	19.2	24.2
Intimate Partner Violence	73.7	26.3	13.4	28.9	26.8	30.9
Gang Violence	72.2	27.8	9.3	22.7	33	35.1
Gun Violence	70.1	29.9	12.2	22.4	32.7	12.2
Self-Injury	52	48	18.6	41.2	24.7	15.5
Suicide Attempt	50.5	49.5	11.3	39.2	32	17.5
Health Pandemic	60.8	39.2	21.6	39.2	29.9	9.3
Substance Abuse/ Misuse	59.8	40.2	14.6	31.3	36.5	17.7
Overdose	71.9	28.1	10.5	29.5	40	20
Unexpected Death of a Student	65.5	34.5	14.7	31.9	35.3	18.1
Unexpected Death of a Teacher	69.8	30.2	15.3	37.8	33.3	13.5

FINDINGS

Overall, 92 participants completed the survey. Respondents included 14 school administrators, 58 teachers, and 20 support personnel. The frequency with which the participants had suspected varied forms of crisis (times per year) while working in an online educational setting can be reviewed in Table 1. Table 2 denotes if specified safety training was provided and educators' levels of preparedness. See Tables 1 and 2.

The survey also included questions about the accessibility and fidelity of their school's safety plan. When participants were asked if their school had a safety plan, 91.6% reported yes, 1.1% reported no, and 7.4% reported I don't know. When asked if their safety plan at the school was sustainable across time to use during crisis events, 17.2% strongly agreed, 63.4% agreed, 4.3% strongly disagreed, and 15.1% disagreed. When asked if their safety plan was accessible during crisis events, 15.1% strongly agreed, 59.1% agreed, 4.3% strongly disagreed, and 21.5% disagreed. When asked where they access their safety plans, 69.6% reported in an online system such as a website, 4.3% reported in a printed handbook, 23.9% reported that they did not know where to access their safety plans, and 2.2% reported that they did not have a safety plan. When asked if their safety plan was feasible to use during crisis events, 14.1% strongly agreed, 65.2% agreed, 2.2% strongly disagreed, and 18.5% disagreed. When asked if the safety plan at their school was effective in increasing safety during crisis events, 19.8% strongly agreed, 64.8% agreed, 13.2% disagreed, and 2.2% strongly disagreed.

Responses to the first open-ended question: "*What do you find beneficial about your school safety plan?*" were coded for themes of *safety*, *accessibility*, *feasibility*, and *effectiveness*. Participants noted that they felt their plans promoted safety. Most of these responses noted the presence of a safety plan and its safety-specific features. Some responses around *safety* included: "clearly defined procedures for public, face to face events," "it puts safety first," and "the plan helps the school stay prepared in case of an emergency." In terms of *accessibility*, participants mentioned that their safety plans were very accessible, with responses such as "Because it is online, you can quickly search for the topic you need," "It is accessible no matter where you are," "We have a crisis zoom room that is open at all times in case of emergency," and "I find that it is fairly easy to access when needed." Participants felt that their plans were *feasible* and demonstrated this through responses like "It is easy to follow and understand," "tips on how to handle different situations," "clearly outlined instructions, and reaction plans," and "we know what to do when we're at in-person events to keep the students and staff safe." Participants indicated that their plans were *effective* through statements such as "There are networks in place to respond to crisis situations," "Well thought out," "clearly outlined instructions and reaction plans," and "It has clear directions on how to respond to crisis events."

Responses to the second open-ended question: “*How do you think your school safety plan could be improved?*” were coded for the themes of *safety*, *accessibility*, *feasibility*, and *effectiveness*, as well as the need for *greater communication and training*. Participants felt that their school safety plans could be safer, and one respondent noted that there were “lots of security things we had no control over.” Participants felt that *accessibility* was a problem, as indicated by responses such as “Locating it could be better,” “Maybe all of it housed in one place in Staff Portal,” “It can be improved by sharing it more digitally,” “I need to know where to locate and access it,” and “I think everyone should be given a copy to have in their office area so we know what to do without looking it up.” Specificity of location or site was also important to respondents. One respondent noted that “when we are in person we are in different locations, so each plan should take the location into consideration.” Participants thought that the *feasibility* of their school safety plan was lacking and demonstrated this through responses like “Simplify it for teachers... who to call if...rather than just going to AP or counselor” and “Relating to the what if’s outside of being virtual. I feel like I need more awareness to pick up signs if my student is not on camera or if they are not talking and I cannot get a hold of them because you can never assume anything.” Of the participants who felt that their safety plan had challenges in terms of *effectiveness*, two noted in particular that the issues on the survey needed to be addressed in their plan, and one mentioned that “This is an online school environment, so there are limitations on how much we are aware of what happens with our students in their homes, unless we recognize it and/or they inform us. More can be done to reach those families that are nonresponsive and unengaged.”

In terms of more specific ways to improve school safety plans, several respondents noted that there was a need for *greater communication* between several parties. Two respondents indicated a need for greater communication between those responsible for creating school safety plans and those implementing them, one suggested a “monthly broadcast on where to find it, and when changes are made to it,” and the other suggested that the “plan should be part of the provided documents prior to presence at the site.” Additionally, one respondent noted a need for more communication between parents and students and how this might affect teachers. They said, “There needs to be more parental accountability in the virtual education environment. *The training* was also identified several times by respondents, and responses specific to training included; “It would be beneficial to have safety plan experts on each team and have more frequent trainings,” “More training on cyber bullying and what can be done to prevent it,” “Add in trainings about student self care,” “we need to increase training opportunities and proficiency with how to use and access the plan,” and a suggestion for a “yearly drill.” Several respondents noted a need for their safety plan to have more specificity

to suspect and address different threats to student safety in a more detailed and crisis-specific manner. Another stated, "I feel like our school safety plan could include more virtual-relevant content." Several respondents felt that there was a significant need for updates to their school safety plan either currently, or on an ongoing basis. Respondents stated, "With time, as new situations evolve...adapt it to changing circumstances," "The plan can be updated as new challenges arise," and, "I think it could be improved by having us review it every year during the annual trainings."

DISCUSSION

Overall, the findings of this study suggest that even though online school settings create natural barriers from some student safety threats, education-related professionals still suspected a wide range of various threats to student safety. Given the increasing number of situations that threaten student safety, as well as the increased enrollment in online school settings (Pulham et al., 2018), school safety planning in the online setting is imperative to keeping kids safe. Further insight gained through evidence-based practices and strategic protocols, is needed to ensure preparedness to these myriad threats to student safety. However, the extent to which these educators had been provided training in suspecting and responding to crises in an online K-12 setting was in question, given that only 17.2% strongly agreed that their safety plan is sustainable and only 15.1% strongly agreed that their plan was accessible during a crisis event. Although nearly three-quarters of the participants knew where their school safety plan was located, roughly one-quarter did not know where to find their plan and/or had some doubts about the existence of such a plan. Furthermore, only 14.1% of those surveyed reported strongly agreed that their school safety plan was feasible during crisis situations.

Respondents felt that their school safety plans needed improvements to be more sustainable, accessible, feasible, and effective. This may be, perhaps, because nearly a quarter of those surveyed did not know where to locate their safety plan, and even those who did know where to locate it may or may not have had any familiarity with it. Accessibility and familiarity with one's school safety plan did emerge as a common theme amongst participant responses, with some expressing outright that such plans ought to be placed in a clear and visible location within staff portals or online educational platforms.

Based on the results of this study, we propose that these levels of preparedness are unacceptable and insufficient to safeguard the well-being of students, families, and the larger communities that they form. This conviction is supported by the finding that a high number of educators do not respond consistently and confidently to varied questions of preparedness for

threats to student safety across all categories and that such differences may be influenced by a lack of adequate training. Undoubtedly, there is a need for both community and school safety training for educators employed in an online setting (McBrayer et al., 2020; Tysinger et al., 2015; Tysinger et al., 2016). For example, 35% of respondents felt very unprepared to handle gang violence, with 72% reporting not receiving training on the topic. Almost a quarter (24%) of respondents felt very unprepared to handle sexual assault, with roughly half having reported receiving training on the topic and half not. Of additional concern, more than half (53.4%) of the respondents felt unprepared or very unprepared to handle an unexpected death of a student, with 69.8% of respondents not receiving training on the topic, although 85.4% of respondents reported suspecting this 1-2 times in a year. Given the increased prevalence of these safety concerns over time, this research clearly highlights a need for improvement across training for several areas of crises, as well as a generalized need for improvement of the delivery of such training to education-related professionals through professional development to include greater communication among all school and community constituents.

LIMITATIONS

We acknowledge the limitations of our study, both those intrinsic to this type of research and those that may be improved in future efforts. Being that the measures in this study were derived through self-report surveys, it is possible that the results are skewed due to sample size limitations, and as our intention was to ascertain if educators are well prepared for varied school crises (they are not), we chose to conduct descriptive statistics to begin the conversations regarding needed and required school safety planning in the online setting that is sustainable, accessible, feasible, and effective. Although the sample in this study was appropriately sized to derive statistically significant results, a larger sample may have led to more stability in statistical analysis and results. Additionally, the sample was collected from one district population, which limits the generalizability and representativeness of the findings to other samples within the same population. Within the sample itself, the statistically significant findings were also presented irrespective of the role of the individual, even though one's role in the educational setting does influence their perceptions. Lastly, due to the cross-sectional and non-experimental nature of this study, we acknowledge that no causal claims can be inferred from our findings.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The findings of this study clearly indicate that there is a need for more effective school safety planning in online learning environments. The number of educators who felt “very prepared” to suspect and respond to crises shows a clear area for improvement in the realm of crisis preparedness for online school settings. Alarming, for all crisis events identified in this study, less than half of the respondents reported feeling “very prepared.” Some crises are even more well addressed and prevented over online mediums than others, and creative options for attending to these should be further explored.

One obstacle to progressive procedures, however, is the fragmented nature of communication between district and state authorities regarding accountability for school safety. Given the limited oversight regarding the creation, implementation, and revision of school safety plans, there is every need for public action to improve upon current efforts. All parties involved in student safety and well-being should be organized to prevent and address crises through accurate and formalized “threat assessments” (Alathari et al., 2018) and SAFE, Sustainable, Accessible, Feasible, Effective school and community safety plans. These threat assessments must be evidence-based and tailored to address the specific needs and vulnerabilities of online learners. However, such plans will be limited in their utility if they are not conveyed properly through professional development and training as well as greater communication among school and community stakeholders. Policymakers should promote the creation of collaborative networks that enable the sharing of resources, best practices, and coordinated crisis responses. Effective school safety planning in online settings necessitates enhanced communication and collaboration among all stakeholders, including educators, administrators, parents, and external agencies like law enforcement and mental health services. Therefore, policies should prioritize the importance of mental health support in online education settings. Schools should be required to integrate mental health resources into their safety plans and offer training to educators on supporting students who may be experiencing psychological distress. Preventative measures, such as regular student check-ins and fostering a positive online school climate, should be prioritized.

This study also revealed that professional learning for school safety in online settings is also lacking. The clearest indication of this troubling reality is that a number of participants surveyed could not confirm that their schools had specific safety plans, whether these plans were being implemented with fidelity, or even that they were accessible. Many individuals cited the actual location and accessibility of their school safety plan as something that was either confusing or unclear. Research-based practices such as rigorous program evaluation should be implemented alongside professional learning efforts to assess whether current training protocols are preparing education-related professionals for crisis situations or not, and the first matter of concern should be whether these professionals are ready and able to access school safety plans if they are merited.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Recommendations for future research efforts are numerous, as literature regarding several of the factors under study in this project is still limited. Of the utmost importance is the notion of expanding the survey research employed for this sample to the larger population of online school settings nationwide and including statistical analyses that allow for comparisons among different groups. Given the increasing quantity and quality of situations that threaten student safety, as well as the increased enrollment in online school settings (Pulham et al., 2018), a SAFE prevention and intervention system must be put into place to better safeguard the well-being of students nationwide.

Ongoing research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of safety protocols implemented in online schools. Policymakers should endorse studies that assess the impact of these measures on student safety and well-being. Continuous evaluation will help ensure that policies remain adaptable to the evolving nature of online education and the challenges it presents. Future research efforts to expand the use of the CEPS 2.0 can serve a dual function to both to clearly illuminate the need for SAFE school safety plans and to practically inform their construction on a district-to-district or even school-to-school basis since different geographic regions may be affected by some crisis threats more than others. One unique attribute of this online school under study was that participants' geographic location varied across urban, suburban, and rural settings because it had a statewide attendance zone. Future research efforts should be dedicated to examining the unique characteristics of each of these settings in terms of safety concerns and options for school safety planning. Additionally, a strong need exists to examine marginalized populations in greater detail as it is often the unique attributes of individual students (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, disability, religion, and sexual orientation) that make them vulnerable to in-group/out-group perceptions and subsequent victimization (Atay et al., 2022). Future work should more closely inspect the situations that marginalized student groups encounter with peer oppression. This may help to illuminate both the overarching social and interpersonal mechanisms that give rise to such behavior, as well as specific pathways toward restorative justice for marginalized student populations.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study align with nationwide patterns, highlighting an imperative need for crisis training and management planning tailored to educators involved in school settings, particularly in online environments. More specifically, there exists a pressing necessity to address a broader

spectrum of threats to student safety. The current study aimed to investigate how online educators perceived the frequency of crises and their preparedness to address them through training and the accessibility and fidelity of their school's safety plans. These findings indicated a limited level of preparedness, signaling the necessity for reform educational crisis assessment, prevention, and intervention, as well as training to foster a secure school environment. These study findings should be utilized to shape federal and state laws and policies, ensuring comprehensive crisis preparedness across school districts. Undoubtedly, there is a need for ongoing nationwide research to address the imperative nature of ensuring school safety. The study's findings underscore the urgency to prioritize crisis preparedness, making it a standard practice for all educators and educational leaders in every situation.

DECLARATIONS

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

The authors declare no funding associated with this study.

The authors declare that permission to collect data for this study was granted by the ethics board of Georgia Southern University.

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