

Safety and Excellence

by John Merrow

As far as schools are concerned, there are three kinds of safety: physical, emotional, and intellectual. Excellence demands all three, while “good enough” schools are simply physically safe. Unsafe schools are bad by definition.

Because most public schools are *physically* safe places to be, I am not going to devote many paragraphs to the subject of physical safety.¹ Even with the rash of school shootings we’ve had over the past few years, the odds of being shot to death in school are one in 6 million. There were nine gun-related homicides on school grounds in 1999, and school enrollment is about 55 million. Less than one percent of the 2,500 child homicides and suicides in the last six months of 1997 took place at a school or on the way to and from school.² School crime continues to decline, even faster than the nation’s overall crime rate. By the numbers, our neighborhoods, homes, and highways are far more dangerous places for young people.³ It’s understandable, however, that school boards are concerned about security; they certainly don’t want to have another Columbine on their hands and have to try to explain away a decision not to install metal detectors, surveillance cameras, and so forth, even though many security experts say that metal detectors are less efficient than low-tech approaches. What’s more, most metal detectors are unsuitable for large schools, which have a dozen or more entries.

However, schools are thinking security: Philadelphia put metal detectors in all its high schools at a cost of \$5 million. Chicago did the same in its middle schools. Other schools have been conducting random searches, installing security cameras, and adding guards.

Is this an overreaction? Probably, because most school violence doesn’t involve guns or knives, but good old-fashioned fists. Still, teachers must be wary, because they know that lethal weapons are easily available.

Many schools and districts have adopted what’s called a “zero tolerance” policy, meaning that *one* offense leads to automatic suspension or expulsion. Some policies require calling in the police as well. Under

these codes, a gun, a box cutter, a plastic fork from a fast-food restaurant, a fistfight, and a hostile shove in the hallway are equally serious offenses. One elementary student was suspended when he waved a miniature sword, the sort that's used to hold the olive in a martini, around on the playground!

It's easy to laugh at the ridiculousness of the latter, and in the face of public scorn that suspension was withdrawn. But zero tolerance has had deadly, irreversible consequences. It's not far-fetched to say that Rob Pace, an eighteen-year-old honor student, is dead because of his school's zero tolerance policies. In April 2000 Pace went on a field trip with his fellow Riverhead High School seniors. At the entrance to the Great Adventure amusement park in New Jersey, security guards discovered marijuana in his backpack. Arrested at the gate, he was processed and released by the police, but Riverhead High officials refused to let him accompany the group back to Long Island. "He's gonna have to take a train or he's gonna have to do something," the school's associate principal told the police. Removing Pace from contact with other students was consistent with the district's zero tolerance policy: students caught with drugs must be removed from school activities.

But the policy also states that *parents* are to do the removing, implying—but not stating explicitly—that students shouldn't be left on their own. By the time a school representative reached the young man's parents, Pace, who had already been accepted into college, had set off on his own. As the *New York Times* reported: "Mr. Pace made it to Bethpage on the Long Island Railroad before deciding he could go no further. 'Please tell anyone who ever knew me that I'm sorry for letting them down!' read a note he left on his seat. Then he jumped between train cars to his death."⁴

I fear that our devotion to making schools safe from physical violence—guns—may be making schools emotionally dangerous places for young people. The intense focus on security seems to be having other, smaller, and unintended consequences. Lately I've been meeting students who've told me that they are afraid to show their own emotions because they're afraid of being labeled a potential threat. As a high school senior in Charlottesville, Virginia, told me, "There is pressure not to admit to being on edge or being unhappy, because then automatically people are going to assume, 'Oh, that's that kid who's going to fly off the handle at any moment.'"

In September 2000 the FBI issued a report with a list of more than forty "warning signs" for educators to look for in children and youth. And while Attorney General Janet Reno warned against "unfairly labeling and stigmatizing children," it seems likely that the presence of a list will contribute to the growth of a "checklist" mentality. The FBI's list

includes clearly *subjective* behaviors like “hopelessness, despair, hatred, isolation, loneliness, nihilism, and an ‘end of the world’ philosophy.” The report also refers to students who are easily angered, who’ve just broken up with a boyfriend or girlfriend, who have a superior attitude, or who are rigid or opinionated. In short, a laundry list! Despite the FBI’s warning—“At this time there is no research that has identified traits and characteristics that can reliably distinguish school shooters from other students”—it’s easy to imagine school personnel saying, “Johnny’s been very opinionated lately. Maybe he’s feeling nihilistic.”

What will they do next? Offer counseling, or put Johnny on a “watch” list? Or maybe suspend him for a few days? Given that the average counselor-to-student ratio in most schools is 1 to 500, the watch list (and maybe an entry into Johnny’s school record) seems a more likely destination.⁵ The FBI’s introductory phrase, “At this time,” indicates that the authorities remain preoccupied with student behavior and may not be looking into either *school conditions* (i.e., harassment or domination by cliques) or *social conditions* (i.e., gun availability and social acceptance of violence).⁶

Heightened school security itself creates stress. Lisa Delpit, the author of *Other People’s Children*, is worried about the effects of zero tolerance policies.⁷ “People cannot learn under stress, and I find that children are so stressed right now. Because of zero tolerance, children are worried about whether something they bring to school can be used against them. The zero tolerance policy requires that schools call the police if some fight occurs. That’s crazy. When we grew up, there were always fights, but teachers took care of things. Now, with zero tolerance, children are seeing other children get taken off by police in handcuffs.”

I asked Delpit if children should be able to speak freely about their emotions—be able to say, “I’m so mad I want to punch somebody.” She said with a laugh, “Adults do that all the time, so why can’t kids?” Then she turned serious. “The adults in the school should sit down with an angry child and work through the anger, not just let the child go away holding on to it. Adults have to recognize that anger is a normal emotion, not an occasion to call the cops.”

LuYen Chou, an educator in New York, agrees with Delpit. “We have to be careful that in the name of safety, we aren’t quelling an openness to diversity, an openness to expression of different emotions and different feelings. Kids need the safety valve, and if we shut that off, we are asking for trouble.”

To Delpit, who teaches at Florida International University, zero tolerance makes *zero* sense. “It’s scary that we have some arbitrary outside rules that require us to respond in a certain way. It means that we’re not

allowed to use our knowledge of how children function, and it tells the children that we are powerless.”

Ruth Zweifler of the Student Advocacy Center of Michigan feels even more strongly about zero tolerance as a school policy. She says that the children most affected are young adolescents (ages eleven to thirteen), children of color, and handicapped children “whose special needs have been ignored, making it a double crime.” In Zweifler’s view, parents of children who are expelled must face hostile school boards with little or no information about the law, without adequate representation, and with few avenues to appeal the dire consequences of expulsion. “The zero tolerance hysteria accepts the premise that some children don’t deserve an education,” she concludes, adding that in her state, Michigan, there’s no agency that is obligated to see that expelled students continue their education in some way.⁸

Ted Sizer, the distinguished school reformer, also believes that most schools are overreacting to gun violence. “What you should worry about are the kids who seem to take pleasure in harassing and insulting other kids, the bullies, the ones who see school as a game and are constantly pushing the limits.”

Generally it’s urban high schools with more than 1,000 students that report the most crime. That’s what the research says, anyway, although there are exceptions. The vice principal of a combined junior-senior high school in rural Indiana told me that, by its demographics, his school should be one of the safest in the nation. “Unfortunately, however, we have the KKK and all its baggage, and that creeps into the school.” Did that mean guns, I asked him? “No, but it means bullying, fistfights, and harassment.”

How can parents and others determine whether a school is physically safe? It’s always good to find out how many students were suspended at your school, and why. Ask school officials, but if they’re reluctant, search out student-advocacy groups like the Student Advocacy Center of Michigan.

Of course, a lot of trouble goes unreported—unless you know where to look and whom to ask. Talk to students. Ask them about the places in school where they feel unsafe, and check them out for yourself. Bathrooms are a good place to start, because if some kids are being bothered, there’s a good chance you’ll read about it there. Look for graffiti that singles out kids in a mean or threatening way.

And keep an eye out for stuff that smacks of sexual harassment, because schools now have a legal responsibility to protect students from sexual harassment by their peers. In 1998 a federal court ordered a Wisconsin school district to pay \$900,000 to a student for its failure to stop sexual harassment. School systems understand that sort of message.

A SAFE SCHOOL? QUESTIONS TO ASK

- How do adults in the building react when they see students being teased? Bullied?
- Do adults in the building tend to favor one group of students over others?
- Does the school maintain a rigid “zero tolerance” policy? Who established it?
- Does “zero tolerance” apply to even minor pushing and shoving or playground incidents, or do the adults in the building have some leeway?
- What are the school’s disciplinary rules and procedures, and have students played a part in establishing the rules? How often are those rules reviewed? By whom?
- Is the number of discipline referrals low? How many suspensions are there? What other alternatives besides suspension are there to teach children proper behavior?
- How is a playground fight handled? Are attacker and victim treated the same?
- How are disabled students treated when they misbehave? Is there a double standard?

That includes harassment of gay students. Their problems are often overlooked, and most teachers have not been prepared to cope with them. Ramon Gonzalez is a brilliant young teacher in a New York City middle school, a young man who’s studying to be a superintendent while he’s teaching math full-time. I asked Gonzalez about his awareness of students who might be gay. “Now I’m starting to be aware of the issue. It’s hard for me to deal with because I grew up in a very traditional environment, so I’m trying to come to terms with that for myself. I’ve asked my counselors, ‘What do I do?’ And they don’t know what to do either.”

Having lots of adults and not just security guards around is one good way to stop violence and harassment. In physically safe schools, the teachers maintain a presence in the halls. They’re around talking with students, not as police but as responsible adults. Unfortunately, some collective bargaining agreements place limits on the time teachers can be asked to spend in the halls. To my mind, this is a good example of what should not be negotiated. In excellent schools, teachers know most students by name and want to be in contact with them, not just to keep an eye on them but because they genuinely like them.

Excellent schools protect their students from strangers, and you might want to try the “back door test” as a way of determining whether a school is safe: try to get inside using entrances other than the front door. If you can get in that way, it’s probably a bad sign: that is, if you can just walk in, so can anyone else.

You should not be able to wander around aimlessly either. If no one stops you at the front door and if the adults you meet in the hallways ignore your presence, that’s trouble in the making. In physically safe schools, teachers are coached to speak to strangers and find out what they’re doing in the school.

Emotional Safety

The second aspect of school safety is what I call “emotional safety.” It’s rarer, unfortunately, and harder to spot, but excellence is impossible without it. Recall Ted Sizer’s comments about bullies. Most of the bullying in schools is verbal, the so-called “normal” teasing that kids inflict on one another.

As a reporter, I meet students all the time who talk openly about being teased. Jessica is a young white girl in a nearly all-black middle school in New York City. “I’m just sick of some people making fun of me because of the color of my skin, or because of what I wear.”

Charles, seventeen years old and about 6’2”, recalls painful years of being teased unmercifully. “Kids would make fun of my ears, because they’re big, and I just hated it.”

Carlos, a Maryland high school student, hasn’t forgotten how other students react when he tries to read aloud. “They call me stupid, stuff like that, because I get nervous and start stuttering.”

John is diagnosed with ADD and on Ritalin. “They’d go, ‘Ha-ha-ha, ADD boy, you can’t do anything right. You’re so stupid.’”

Students told their stories to me, a reporter from outside. What happens if you complain to teachers or to your parents? I often ask. Usually the kids tell me that adults say, “Get tough. That’s just normal, so get used to it.” Unfortunately, that’s the conventional reaction in “good enough” schools.

Perhaps teachers cannot *prevent* teasing, but they can intervene. Deborah Meier, the founder of the world-renowned Central Park East School, believes that most teachers, and most adults, tend to dismiss teasing as normal, something children just have to get used to. But, Meier says, “We turn our backs because we don’t know what to do about it.”

I recall when one of my children came home complaining about being teased unmercifully about something, and I was concerned enough to visit the head of the school. When I told him what my daughter said was happening, he nodded. “We’re aware of it, and we’re watching to see

how it turns out.” His detached attitude and his unwillingness to intervene infuriated me, and I told him so. “Why isn’t it your job to intervene?” I demanded to know, but he was unfazed. “This is a natural part of growing up, and kids have to get tough.” We took our child out of that “good enough” school, because that school leader believed in “going with the flow” instead of taking responsibility.

Deborah Meier, a living example of thoughtful responsibility, has her own definition of safety. “A truly safe school is willing to tackle the tough issues. Teachers are confident enough and powerful enough to say, ‘Stop everything! We’re not going to move until we have made sure this isn’t going to happen again.’”

To Meier, nonviolent teasing and other cruelties are connected to physical violence, and she insists that adults have a duty to become involved, to intervene on behalf of those being harassed. That apparently did not happen at Columbine High School, the scene of the worst school shooting in our history. There, by most reports, athletes dominated classes and hallways and terrorized those who did not fit in. Some teachers watched and laughed when jocks verbally and physically harassed smaller students (including stuffing one student in a locker and closing it). Among those who were victimized were the two young men responsible for the massacre.

Meier is not the only educator who finds fault with the adults who failed to intervene, and she’s not the only thoughtful person who believes that the subsequent shootings might have been prevented if adults had said, “Stop!” instead of saying, in effect, “Boys will be boys.”

Words sting, and it’s why excellent schools pay attention to emotional safety. That means that when children are teased, or frightened, or bothered, they feel confident taking their problems to the teachers, and the teachers won’t dismiss them. Lisa Delpit told me about a middle school teacher with his own way of handling excessive teasing. Whenever he sees a child being put down, he makes the “putter downer” stand in front of the class and do “put ups.” That means the kid has to say good things about the person until the rest of the class feels that there’ve been a sufficient number and with enough sincerity to count as a “put up.”

Ted Sizer says that in excellent high schools adults don’t try to stamp out cliques, because they’re part of everyday life. “All you have to do is go into a bar or a faculty room and see the cliques of adults. There’s nothing necessarily wrong with it. Every group of kids and adults will form cliques. The kids who like to play music together. The kids who like to fix cars. The thing is to make sure they’re benign.”

That can be done, Sizer says, by rewarding healthy, positive cliques with support and encouragement. “An excellent school has cliques of kids who say, ‘We don’t do that here,’ when something bad comes up.”

What Sizer worries about are students who seem to take pleasure in harassing and insulting other kids. "Bullies, and the kids who see school as a game and who are very clever cheaters and who push the limits of the school. Those kids need to be dealt with."

Sizer, who has served as principal of two high schools, believes that kids, not adults, actually run schools. Excellent schools recognize that and capitalize on it, Sizer argues. "We have the illusion that we run high schools, but in fact [students] outnumber us so much that unless there is an alliance of kids and adults that both groups respect, it's pretty hard to run a truly safe school."

When there is such an alliance, kids know that the school is theirs, and they take pride in it. In such a school, students will approach a teacher to express concern about another student, or will ask a teacher to intervene in support of a student who's being ostracized.

"The truly safe school really starts with this alliance, where, if there's going to be some kind of physical violence or violence to ideas, like cheating, a significant number of kids will feel their reputation will be tarnished if something happens, and they will speak out."

I asked Sizer if he thought that schools, perhaps the most autocratic of our institutions, ought to be democratically run. Should high school kids be part of the leadership? "Absolutely," he replied. "Why shouldn't kids that age be?"

He doesn't argue for formal voting but instead for a collective commitment to the school. That entails conversations with students and families, asking them, "What is school for, what's good, and what isn't, and what should be done?"

Do kids actually make the rules? I wanted to know. "I think the kids and adults have to make the rules together. Take the issue of drugs in school. Adults cannot keep drugs out of the school unless a significant percentage of kids say, 'We don't do that here.'"

"You can't have enough cops and dogs. Kids are a lot smarter than dogs. You can have searches and you can have only transparent backpacks and all that, but those are desperate steps after the situation is out of control."

Alfie Kohn, who writes often about schools, agrees: "When kids feel that they have a voice, and when they're learning the skills of democratic decision-making by participating and thinking about matters large and small, schoolwide and classwide, then they tend to authentically develop this feeling of loyalty and commitment to the place and to one another so they wouldn't want to deface the walls."⁹

Arnold Packer, an economist and the former director of the Institute for Policy Studies at Johns Hopkins, goes one step further. Involving kids makes schools safer in all ways. "People want to be part of the solution,

and if you don't give them an opportunity to be part of the solution they're going to be part of the problem."¹⁰

E. D. Hirsch, the founder of the Core Knowledge program, believes that schools are making progress in teaching and modeling tolerance. With a touch of irony, he says, "Maybe our math scores have gone down and maybe our reading scores have gone down, but in general the atmosphere emphasizing tolerance, acceptance, respect has increased. It's taught explicitly, and whenever some intolerant act occurs, it gets a lot of publicity and a lot of disapproval."

In excellent schools, the adults know the students in the building and approach them with respect. School is seen as a shared enterprise, with students as partners in that enterprise—not equal partners, of course, because roles and obligations are different, but students in excellent schools are not objects to be manipulated or watched.

Intellectual Safety

There's something else about excellent schools—they're not just emotionally safe; they're also intellectually safe. As Ted Sizer notes, "There can't be a climate where the kids laugh at the wrong answer. When that happens, a kid will immediately shut down and refuse to participate. And that's when learning stops."

Sizer warmed to the issue. "For me, the ultimate test of a school is the willingness of any student to display his or her ignorance, because the riskiest thing you can do in a school, whatever your age, is to say, 'I don't know' or 'I don't understand.'"

How common is intellectual safety? "It's not as common as it should be," according to E. D. Hirsch. "That's the kind of safety I'm most interested in, because it's the most closely connected to academic achievement, which is what I think schools should be focused on."

Think about what happens in most classrooms when a student admits to not understanding and asks for clarification. Other students snicker and begin teasing their bewildered classmate. In excellent schools, however, a display of ignorance, coupled with a desire to understand, will be applauded. That sounds like a contradiction, but as Sizer notes, "Unless a kid can say, 'I don't get it, I don't understand,' secure in the knowledge that the adults will try to fill that void, genuinely excellent education is impossible. So in a really excellent school, the kids who are struggling know that their struggle is respected as legitimate, and so they're willing to expose themselves, to be vulnerable."

Parents should take note that they can (and often do) contribute to a climate of "intellectual danger" by putting intense pressure on their children to "get it right" and earn honor grades. Pressure to achieve

those external rewards creates an atmosphere in which kids are afraid to explore, afraid to take intellectual risks, and afraid to say, "I don't know."

Frank McCourt, the author of *Angela's Ashes* and *'Tis*, taught English at one of New York City's elite public high schools for eighteen years, an experience that brought him into daily contact with parental pressure. In his entire career at Stuyvesant, he told me, only one parent asked, "Is my son enjoying school?" McCourt was shocked. "Only one. The rest would say things like 'Oh God, is he doing his work?' and 'I'm worried about his PSATs and his SATs' and 'He hasn't finished his application to Yale and Cornell.'"

McCourt says that forced him to question what he was doing with his own life. He began to doubt the direction public education was taking. "We test and test, because we want to make sure a kid fits, but we don't pursue wisdom in any Socratic way. We ought to want to have the kids think for themselves and not to be afraid to think for themselves, but they're discouraged from doing that because they're told all the time, 'The test, the test, the test.'"

Intellectual safety means more than being able to say, "I don't know." It means that students feel free to think and question and doubt. It also means being free to take unpopular positions. "Schools must encourage the idea of rational persuasion," E. D. Hirsch says. "A student might have some oddball idea like 'the Holocaust never happened.' That would then be discussible, although I would like to think that reason would prevail. It's the old Jeffersonian principle 'We tolerate any error as long as reason is free to combat it.' I would like to feel that we encourage an atmosphere in which we didn't let a false idea go without at least an attempt at rational persuasion."

An intellectually safe school values ideas and exploration. As LuYen Chou says, "It's an environment where students do not feel restricted in their ability to admit what they don't know, and the teachers feel that they can admit that as well." In that environment, Chou says, there's a communal commitment to knowledge building, instead of classrooms where teachers present a set of facts and ideas that students must learn and regurgitate.

Intellectual safety—freedom to make mistakes and to raise questions—allows real teaching and real learning to happen. As Alfie Kohn notes, "In excellent classrooms, the teacher is always listening, always watching, to see what kind of mistakes are being made and what information that provides me about how this kid's mind is working."

I asked Kohn for an example. "Let's say the answer to a math problem is 17 but a kid says 18. A lot of caring teachers in 'good enough' classrooms might try to be supportive and sympathetic and say, 'Ooh, you're close.' But that's silly and counterproductive, because the teacher doesn't know why

the kid missed. The kid might not understand the underlying principle and just by luck arrived one digit away from the correct answer.”

In Kohn’s view, the excellent teacher would push to find out how the student arrived at her answer—even when the answer is correct. “The teacher shouldn’t just say it when the kid’s wrong, because you want to know how the student is looking at this issue. What has he gotten or failed to quite grasp that has led to his answer? When a teacher creates a climate of safety where mistakes are truly welcomed, you have a classroom where teachers understand where kids are falling short and why, and so they’re in a much better position to help them.”

Kohn believes that the more schools focus on competition and rewards, the less intellectually safe they become. That is, the kids who don’t win the gold stars get the message “I’m a loser.” And Kohn believes that competition undermines a school’s sense of community. “What competition teaches, above all, is that other people are potential obstacles to my own success. And that is a poisonous message, for winner and loser alike, because now we can’t take advantage of the kind of collaboration that leads to genuine excellence for everyone.”

Intellectual competition actually is both good and natural, in my view, but if students are simply competing for places on the honor roll, it can work against excellence, as Kohn observes. Competition for grades reduces students’ interest in knowledge for its own sake, because, as Kohn says, “If the point is to get an award, or to get a sticker, or to get an A, now I’m less interested in figuring out the problem. I’m not interested in science now; I’m interested in beating someone else.”

In a highly competitive environment, Kohn maintains, students are likely to pick the easiest possible tasks, and that’s counterproductive if we want kids to pick the most interesting or most challenging. “They figure, all right, the point here is not to try something a little beyond my competence; the point here is to do what I know I can succeed at, pick the shortest book or the easiest project because the point is not understanding and excellence; the point is getting an A.”

Kohn would say that truly excellent schools minimize competition, or at least place community first. That’s an oversimplification, in my view. I believe that the marketplace of ideas is competitive; the rewards, however, must be more complex and more thoughtful than simple letter grades or other external rewards.

9-11 and Its Aftermath

The tragic events of September 11, 2001, changed our world in ways we are still discovering. Issues of safety have taken on new urgency, and it is even more important for adults in schools to create a physically, emotionally, and intellectually safe environment for all children.

While physical safety is likely to continue as society's focus, that is, in my view, a misplaced emphasis. It is more critical to address children's need for reassurance, information, and support. Educators should be working to make children of all ages feel emotionally safe at school and provide them with the opportunity to express their feelings and concerns. As parents and adults, we can help children cope with traumatic and frightening situations in several specific ways.

1. Allow children and youth to express their feelings.

Many will want to talk. Others may need to express their fears through drawing, clay, or other nonverbal media. Try not to make value judgments, tell them it will go away, or let them believe that a tragedy will never happen again. Their fears may not be realistic, but they are real. Acknowledge their concerns and let them know that grief hurts. Also, assure them that adults will take care of them.

2. At the same time, model tolerance and understanding.

America is a diverse country, and many schools enroll students who "do not look like us." Now more than ever, adults must protect those who are different. They must not turn a blind eye toward teasing and harassment of any sort, but particularly any that involve a student's faith or ethnic background. Passions run high today, but ignorance must not be allowed to rule the classroom or the playground.

3. Listen and show children you care by providing extra attention and physical contact.

Lots of touching and holding is comforting for children, particularly for the very young. If children experience much distress over this situation, now or later, seek support from appropriate counseling services.

4. Answer questions with simple, accurate information, and do not go into morbid detail.

Teachers may need to answer the same questions over and over as children seek reassurance. It is okay to say, "I don't know" and "I wonder about that, too." There are no magic "right" words, but there also should be no questions that are out of bounds.

The most difficult—and most important—question to discuss may be "Why?" That question requires schools, now more than ever, to be mindful of intellectual safety. In the weeks after the attack, one protester in Pakistan held up a sign reading, "America, do you dare to ask why the world hates you so much?" Educators, particularly those teaching the upper grades, must have the courage to accept the challenge of this

question. It is glib and shallow to respond with catch phrases like “Because they’re jealous of us.”

Perhaps the question should be rephrased: Why is the United States simultaneously admired and reviled with such passion?

Lyndon Johnson is said to have explained away the ferocity of the enemy during the Vietnam War by asserting, “They want what we have,” as if dreams of color television sets and two-car garages motivated the armies of Ho Chi Minh.

Today, while there’s no question that the actions of September 11 were monstrously evil, we must not be afraid to probe the background of Osama bin Laden and those who hate us. Classrooms must be safe places for questioning and for ambiguity.

The vast majority of our schools continue to be physically safe. Although it is highly unlikely that schools will be primary targets of terrorist attacks, every school should have a contingency plan in the event that another surprise attack brings its normal routines to a temporary halt.

One school I’m familiar with has stocked food, water, blankets, and first-aid equipment in sufficient quantity to keep students on campus for three days. Its routine includes two major disaster drills. One empties the school to a certain place for a head count; the other requires everyone to remain indoors, with doors locked and shades down.

Is this overreacting? Unfortunately no, because we are at war with a new enemy. But precautions alone would make matters worse. The first essential steps are for adults to create a world that is emotionally and intellectually safe, to be supportive and forthcoming in discussions with students, both now and in the future. It’s a tall order. I am hopeful that our schools are up to the task.

* * *

Excellent schools and excellent teachers try to put a sense of purpose first, and teach to the purpose, so that the students understand why they’re learning something in the first place. That’s a very different mentality from learning a skill or learning a piece of the curriculum in order to pass a test or receive an external reward like an A or getting into college or not making your parents angry.

Let me end with a simple, common-sense test of school safety, whether it’s physical, emotional, or intellectual: “Listen to your children.” They will tell you, perhaps not directly but by their behavior, whether they feel safe at school. They may often want to stay in bed in the morning, or they’ll have mysterious stomachaches, or they’ll have lots of unexplained absences. Those are “illnesses” that a visit to the doctor cannot cure, but a visit to the school might.

Notes

1. Good sources of data about school safety are “Indicators of School Crime and Safety,” available from the National Center for Education Statistics of the U.S. Department of Education, on the Web at <<http://nces.ed.gov pubs98/safety/index.html>>. Also, the National School Safety Center at <<http://www.nsscl.org/home.html>> and Ken Trump at National Safety and Security Services (kenrump@aol.com). Trump believes that most high-tech equipment is a waste of money if schools aren’t also managed properly.

2. “Do You Know the Good News about American Education?” Written by Jack Jennings and published by two Washington organizations, the Center on Education Policy and the American Youth Policy Forum.

3. Geoffrey Canada has written with great insight about the progression of violence. The title of his book captures what has been happening in many urban areas: *Fist Stick Knife Gun: A Personal History of Violence in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).

4. *New York Times*, “A Field Trip, A Teenager’s Death and Questions of Responsibility,” August 20, 2000, p. 33.

5. According to *Education Statistics Quarterly*, there were 95,000 school guidance counselors in 1998–99.

6. For more about school shootings, see the *Chicago Sun-Times*, October 15–16, 2000 (<<http://www.suntimes.com/output/news/shoot15.html>>).

7. The policies came about after the rash of school shootings in 1999, as parents and others demanded reassurance that their children would be protected. In that climate, it was difficult for boards to say that they trusted teachers to handle routine disturbances like playground fights, so they, in effect, went with the prevailing political wind. Teachers and kids are now paying for that lack of political courage.

8. Private communication, August 2000. The Student Advocacy Center of Michigan is located at 2301 Platt Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48104; phone, (734) 973-7860. The Web address is <<http://comnet.org/sac/>>.

9. Taken from an interview for “School Sleuth: The Case of an Excellent School,” which appeared on *The Merrow Report* on PBS in November 2000.

10. Ibid.

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