

Stopping Violence in Schools: Effort to Create National Guidelines Underway

By Denisa R. Superville on January 24, 2020 1:15 PM

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Every time there's a shooting in a school, many principals and district leaders feel the responsibility—and pressure—to take action to ensure that gun violence doesn't happen in their schools.

But it's not always easy to find proven, research-based safety practices that work. It can be difficult to tap into experts who can help them make sense of state mandates and make good decisions about purchasing products that claim to keep schools safe. And it's not a given that they can connect with principals and district leaders who have developed successful local practices.

It's not there isn't research-backed and tested practices that are known to prevent and reduce violence. Too often, though, they are often inaccessible to principals—not in one place and in multi-page documents that busy school and district leaders don't have time to read and absorb, much less take the steps to put the proven strategies into place. And many of those strategies don't take into account the resources—in money and staff—to make those things work.

"The issue that we face is not necessarily a shortage of answers or ideas, it's the lack of dissemination of evidence-based practices," said Danny Carlson, the director of policy and advocacy at the National Association of Elementary School Principals. "There is work to be done to ensure that district leaders and folks on the ground are making decisions about these programs that are actually evidence based."

Frustrated by that gap, the National Association of School Resource Officers is leading a new effort to create the first-ever national set of best practices for preventing school violence. The goal is to create an accessible and easy-to-use guide and curriculum for districts, and training for district and school leaders to put those practices into place locally. The organization recently got a \$500,000 grant from the U.S. Justice Department to develop the violence-prevention protocol for K-12 schools.

The Alabama-based NASRO is partnering with the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence at the University of Colorado, Boulder; the National Police Foundation; Safe and Sound Schools; and the "I Love U Guys" Foundation. It is forming an advisory group that will include teachers, principals, and school mental health professionals.

"If we can create more consistency in how schools and districts prepare for and try to prevent violence from occurring, I think that's a pretty big accomplishment," said Mo Canady, NASRO's executive director.

Looking Beyond Building Security

It's early in the process of what's likely to be a two-year project, but Canady said the core group will take a comprehensive approach to school safety—beyond hardening buildings. It will include creating positive school climate, bystander response and threat reporting, information sharing, and threat assessments. It will provide best-practices for conducting lockdown drills in ways that do not traumatize students and adults, Canady said.

"We're also looking at not just physical structure security, which is incredibly important," Canady said. "Not just proper law enforcement presence, which is incredibly important, but that whole culture of school safety. That goes so deep, and, quite frankly, it's everybody's business."

We believe that having this structure of a protocol under this larger umbrella will appeal to folks to take a hard look at what they are doing and implement additional strategies."

Carlson, from the NAESP, was circumspect about the NASRO-led protocol because so few details are known.

But he said NAESP is also working with a group of researchers and universities to produce user-friendly guides pulled from research-based practices for principals and other school leaders to use on a daily basis to create safe school environments. Those guides will address mental health resources, school safety assessments, coordination with first responders, drills, building and classroom security, the use of school resource officers, and overall school climate, he said.

"We know what works from a policy standpoint—the research is clear on the effective strategies, including a heavy focus on prevention, which is done through sufficient in-school mental health services, appropriate staffing ratios, and then strategic programs done at the schoolwide level to head off and pre-empt some of these things," Carlson said. "We know those things work. But that alone is insufficient to be able to make inroads on this challenge. What you need is the kind of political will as well as the appropriate resources and funding from the federal, state and local levels, so that principals and other school leaders can take these ideas and actually put them into action."

Bob Farrace, a spokesman for the National Association of Secondary School Principals, said he was heartened to see that the proposed protocol will emphasize the importance of building culture.

"I anticipate it will reinforce the importance of relationships, making sure that each student is known and feels valued in the school, creating the kind of student ownership of the school that empowers each kid to say something if they see something," he said.

He also struck a note of caution about what the final product might focus on.

"We are hoping that it won't overemphasize issues of physical plant safety," Farrace said. "There certainly is a place for devices, for metal detectors, for cameras, technology for secure entry—all of that is important. But safety is really a people-intensive process."

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The protocol will address some of the challenges Carlson highlighted. There will also be training for teams of educators and law enforcement representatives from local districts on how to implement these strategies in ways that make sense for their communities, said Beverly Kingston, the director and senior research associate at the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence. In larger districts, the district safety teams that will receive the training will include other key people, like the school psychologist, she said.

Kingston said many of the safety reviews conducted after violent incidents make similar recommendations.

"We see similar recommendations in these reports over and over again, but there's not always clear next steps of what schools should do with these recommendations," Kingston said. "We are really trying to make this as practical as we can. We're not going to have the answers to everything in this [protocol], but some of the things that have been the recommendations over and over again, we're going to try to define what those are, and then [provide] really practical recommendations that schools can [take] and individualize them to their schools."

A Focus on Preventing Violence

A myriad of reasons—from 50 different states with their own laws and policies, to local control that gives districts, and in some cases, principals, autonomy to pick and choose what they'll implement, to a lack of resources—help explain why there hasn't been a one-stop shop of best practices for districts and why there isn't a national standardized protocol on school violence prevention, Kingston said.

"From our center's perspective in studying this for so many years, we really do know what it takes to prevent violence, and our goals are to prevent the violence from occurring in the first place," Kingston said. "So, preventing someone from having the motivation to want to carry out a violent act, really addressing it much more upstream."

The core group will comb through research for effective strategies. They'll be looking at state, local, and districts policies as well as scientifically-backed approaches. The Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, for example, has a list of programs with evidence behind them, including LifeSkills Training program, a violence and substance abuse prevention program aimed at middle school students. Colorado's Safe2Tell program, a tip line which grew out of recommendations from the Columbine High School shooting, allows students and others to anonymously report concerns about safety is a prevention program that works, she said.

"...Kids are often the ones who see things first..., and if you have a positive school climate and a system to report safety concerns, then kids will report those concerns," Kingston said.

But it's not just reporting, it's also training the adults on what to do with that information and ensuring that the information is shared with those who need to know.

The key is to combine the science with local wisdom, along with making sure that there's a team on the ground to ensure that the practices stick, Kingston said.

NASRO expects the toolkit to be completed by this fall, which will be followed by a pilot program in some districts early next year. Feedback from those pilot districts will be used to fine-tune the protocol before it's released publicly to all districts. That pilot will also help NASRO and its partners determine what kind of technical assistance districts may need to implement the practices. The group is also planning to hold regional training programs to cut down on the cost for districts.

The Justice Department grant will likely only cover the development of the protocol. Canady said they will seek additional funding to train the district representatives.

"It's very, very important that this is feasible and that it makes sense to the people on the ground who will be implementing this," Kingston said.

Kingston estimated that violence could be reduced by 20 to 30 percent if practices that are know to work are implemented.

"We do know so much about what works, and so if we can get these things standardized and put into place, we can really be doing a better job," Kingston said. "And it's time that we do that job."

Photo: A community safety officer keeps watch over students at Ashland Elementary School in Manassas, Va., in 2018. -- Education Week/file

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