

LFT School Safety and Violence Survey

With recommendations

Following the horrific school shootings in Newtown, Connecticut, the Louisiana Federation of Teachers launched a survey to find out what teachers thought about school safety and their school crisis management plans.

This preliminary report is based on the responses from teachers and school employees from school districts from around the state. Respondents were asked if their school had a plan as required by state law, whether it has been necessary to implement the plan, and if the teachers believe the plan is adequate to protect children and staff.

Does your school have a crisis management plan that has been explained to all faculty and staff?

81% Yes

19% No

Follow-up: For those who answered “yes,” a follow-up question asked “do you consider the plan adequate to keep students, faculty and staff safe in case of a violent incident or emergency situation? Why or why not? For instance, if a ‘lock down’ were ordered at your campus, could the campus be effectively locked down (entries, hall doors, classroom doors)?”

A large majority of those said that even though their school has a plan, it would not be adequate to stop an intruder. Many respondents reported that they have open campuses with multiple entry points, doors that do not lock from the inside, too many windows that would allow access to perpetrators, and not enough security personnel.

This is typical of the most common response:

Classroom doors cannot be locked from inside the classroom. They must be locked using a key from the outside, then pulled closed.

Some report that their administration is serious about safety, and is taking a critical look at their school’s plan:

We recently held a Lock Down drill which, not only, demonstrated that the simplicity of the plan would be effective but it also allowed us to see situations, such as substitutes without key availability, which we still need to consider.

However, a smaller, but significant number of respondents shared a different perspective as illustrated by this comment:

I called the office to request a lock down due to an irate parent who was driving on our playground. It took 10 minutes for the lock down to be called. By the time the lock down was announced, the parents drove through the fence to leave the playground. I later was told that before the lock down could be called the situation had to be confirmed.

And, of course, a repeated comment mentioned the cost of making schools safer:

All of our doors lock from the outside, but we have been told that it would cost more than \$3000 to change all of the door knobs. So, all of our outside doors stay unlocked all day.

Does your school currently have a police officer or armed security guard on campus?

39% Yes

61% No

Do you believe the presence of an armed security person is necessary on your campus?

69% Yes

31% No

Have there been incidents in which students in your school participated in violent behaviors?

62% Yes

38% No

Have there been incidents in your school in which persons from off campus participated in a violent or threatening behaviors?

43% Yes

57% No

If the answer to either of the above questions was "yes," do you believe your school's response to the violent incident was adequate?

61% Yes

39% No

Follow-up: About half of those taking the survey responded to a follow-up question asking for a description of the incident and how it was handled by the school. Again, responses were all over the map, with some saying that their school's response was adequate and appropriate, and others saying that the response was woefully inadequate.

Positive responses included these:

We had a mother who was angry about a grade and came on campus with a handgun. All doors were locked and the sheriff's office notified. The sheriff's department came and arrested the mother. She never came to the school again.

A parent was aggressive toward school staff and our deputy escorted them off the campus.

The violent behaviors have mostly been between students (fights). Students are separated and appropriate steps are taken to settle disputes, offer counseling, or punishment as called for by the incident.

A suspicious gunman was spotted on campus. There was a successful lockdown and authorities arrived swiftly.

However, respondents offered a number of disturbing reports:

We have too many fights and lots of problems. Participants are not expelled, and those who disrupt classroom environment are not punished. Teachers have been told that taking such action would count against our school performance score (already an F).

Parents have walked in and cursed as well as threatened teachers physically. One female teacher in particular had to get a peace bond put against a male parent who approached her in a threatening manner. Nothing seemed to have been done to defuse this situation.

We have had several incidents of angry individuals coming onto campus and confronting teachers in their rooms. We have had parents and students curse at staff and teachers, threaten violence, and cause general disturbances. We have fights between students and a teacher was recently pushed by a student.

To avoid negative publicity, Incidents are not always reported. Even if students are arrested, they return to school within one or two days because school board policy refuses to expel them.

Some teachers noted that violent behavior by special education students is often excused:

A special education student sprayed another student with pepper spray and after an 11 day "cool off" period she was allowed back on campus and tormented the victim with smiles and hello's on a constant basis.

Disciplinary procedures are often impeded by Special Education laws. If a student has a diagnosed impairment, even as minor as ADHD, their actions can be found "impulsive" and thus related to their exceptionality and thus cannot be removed from school. Our most threatening students, those classified as Emotionally Disturbed, know there will be no repercussion for their actions.

LFT/AFT recommendations to ensure school safety

The Louisiana Federation of Teachers and our national affiliate, the American federation of Teachers, are working on guidelines to promote safer school environments. We hope to work with school boards and legislators on improvements to existing school safety laws in the upcoming 2013 Regular Legislative Session.

Among the issues we would like to see addressed are these:

School safety programs and procedures

Louisiana already has laws on the books requiring schools to adopt crisis management plans. It is apparent that, while some do an adequate and appropriate job, others do not.

- Every school should conduct regular audits or building walkthroughs to evaluate and analyze the effectiveness of their school safety and security plans. Once upon a time, an irregularly scheduled “fire drill” sufficed. Unfortunately, such is no longer the case.
- Audits should be designed and implemented by the entire school community, including administrators, parents, students, educators, school support staff and their respective unions. These same parties also should be given the chance to offer feedback and possible remedies simultaneous to the public release of this audit.
- Audits should pay attention to possible retrofits that can make schools safer. For example, fitting school doors with locks that are operable from inside the classroom. Since such modifications can be expensive, we need to seek partnerships with appropriate state and federal agencies to fund the required modifications. If necessary, a request should be made to the congressional delegation asking for funds.
- As part of a school safety program, panic buttons or other methods of quickly contacting first responders should be available in classrooms. **No system or school policies should exist that prohibit faculty and other staff from having full access to their cell phones. Every responsible adult on every campus should be fully informed regarding emergency contact numbers.**
- Our public schools cannot and should not be armed fortresses. Efforts to arm educators and increase guns in our schools put educators and students at risk and undermine our ability to provide a safe and nurturing learning environment for students.
- Whether to bring police officers into schools should be decided on a school-by-school basis; it should be the decision of the school community and must be part of a comprehensive school safety plan. Some schools, due to their remoteness or following horrendous tragedies such as the massacre in Newtown, may decide to have police at their individual schools. If a school decides to bring police into schools, they should be part of the fabric of the school community, not simply a stationed armed guard. School resource officers and programs like D.A.R.E. (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) provide rich learning experiences and opportunities for students in addition to being part of the school safety team.

Welcoming and Supportive School Environments

- When unspeakable tragedies do occur, we must provide immediate and ongoing physical and emotional support and assistance to students, parents, educators and school employees to help them grieve, heal and feel safe once again.
- Safe and respectful environments must be created for all students in our schools. Investing in ongoing schoolwide practices to reduce bullying behavior, increasing after-school activities, and integrating community services and programs like peer counseling, wellness programs and other social supports, are just a few examples of how communities like Baltimore and Cleveland have been able to reduce school-based violence.
- Programs encouraging partnerships between schools, local law enforcement and appropriate community agencies (such as mental health) must be created to prevent and reduce school violence. The program would establish the creation of school-based safety committees composed of parents, educators, student and administrators. Law enforcement and other agencies should develop ongoing relationships with school safety committees and work jointly with them to help create safe and respectful environments, prevent and address violent

incidents in schools, and serve as a resource on all safety issues for the faculty, staff and student body.