

National Center Brief

Element 1: Safe School Environment and Violence Prevention Activities

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Element 1 of the Safe Schools/Healthy Students (SS/HS) Initiative focuses on activities that foster a safe school environment, prevent violence, and work toward improving students' feelings of safety while they are in school and their local neighborhoods. When students feel safe and secure, they are more comfortable in their schools, are better able to learn and succeed, and have better opportunities to grow academically, emotionally, and socially. Therefore, a safe school environment is essential.

This brief details the importance of element 1 and provides SS/HS project directors with resources and recommendations for creating safe, nonviolent school environments.

Impact of Element 1

Data show that violence in schools leads to substantial negative school outcomes.ⁱ Unsafe schools hinder students' enthusiasm for life-long learning, and threatens their chances of developing important values, such as integrity, discipline, and civic-mindedness. Conversely, reduced school violence results in increased student attendance and lower dropout rates, which in turn leads to increases in achievement and reductions in grade repeating.^{ii, iii, iv, v}

One study in particular demonstrated that reducing school violence by about 50 percent would increase college attendance rates by around 5 percent. Likewise, research seems to support that safer, less violent neighborhoods also positively impact school performance.^{vi}

Students in safer schools and neighborhoods, where violence isn't tolerated, can flourish academically, socially, and emotionally. Teachers who are not constantly disciplining students for violence and other unsafe behaviors are better able to personalize their teaching,^{vii} which supports students' social and academic achievement.

Integration with the Other Elements

Creating safe, violence-free schools contributes to the overall goals of SS/HS. Research shows that school violence is generally a symptom of larger community problems, such as substance abuse, depression and other mental health problems, and poor academic achievement. The activities and services that promote safe, healthy schools are the same ones that can foster healthy student development. To maximize effectiveness, activities that address element 1 in schools and communities should be integrated with programs that address the other four elements.^{viii, ix, x}

For instance, research suggests a relationship between substance abuse and violent behaviors among students.^{xi} Students under the influence of a substance have impaired judgment and may be more likely to engage in unsafe or violent behaviors. Likewise, students whose life circumstances make them at risk of violent behavior, including those who experience and witness violence, may be more likely to abuse alcohol and other drugs. Both substance abuse and violent behaviors put students' ability to learn in jeopardy and force teachers to spend extra time on discipline rather than teaching. Because these behaviors are intertwined, violence and [substance abuse prevention](#) programs and activities should be coordinated as well.

Addressing Element 1

Evidence-Based Practices for Creating Safe, Nonviolent School Environments

Schools are an opportune setting for identifying and serving students who are at risk of becoming disruptive or violent, or reintegrating those who have committed offenses. These students not only have a harder time achieving academic success, but may also negatively impact their fellow students' learning and feelings of safety, and may occupy a disproportionate amount of teacher and administrator time.

In addition to identifying threats to school safety, project directors can promote student and staff behaviors that create safer environments, such as rewarding those who display acts of kindness and good citizenship. Other grantees have improved the school environment by creating or refining district policy around areas of safety and violence prevention, for example, using SS/HS as a platform to establish or strengthen the districts' anti-bullying policies.

The task of creating a safe school environment and preventing violence is two-fold:

- Identify issues, conditions, behaviors, and structures that may contribute to unsafe schools and communities and violence
- Use evidence based-practices (EBPs) and strategies to address these issues and improve safety

All students can benefit from participating in EBPs that foster safe schools and work to prevent violence. Those students at higher risk for violence or who are already demonstrating violent behaviors require different interventions. To meet the needs of all students, schools can implement a continuum of EBPs that focus on improving safety and reducing violence across the spectrum of prevention:

I. Universal Prevention—*programs that improve safety overall for all students. For example:*

- *Conducting safety audits of school buildings, and developing plans to correct deficiencies (e.g., installing safety cameras and other security measures)*
- *Creating school-wide crisis plans*

- *Implementing research-based violence prevention curricula for all students*
- *Hiring school resource officers*
- *Creating and publicizing student disciplinary policies*
- *Promoting good citizenship and character as part of a plan to improve overall school climate*

II. Selective Prevention—*programs that focus on students who are at risk for disruptive, destructive, or violent behaviors, including those with behavioral and emotional problems, and those who are victims of or witnesses to violence. For example:*

- *Conducting intensive violence prevention programs with small groups of at-risk students*
- *Teaching staff how to recognize the early warning signs of violence*
- *Creating district-wide policies for assessment and referring at-risk families to parenting programs*
- *Training staff and students on conflict resolution skills*

III. Indicative Prevention—*programs for students who exhibit disruptive, destructive, or violent behavior. For example:*

- *Providing case management and other services for students reentering school after leaving the juvenile justice system*
- *Holding student courts*
- *Creating alternative programs and schools*

Choosing which EBPs will be effective at creating safer environments and reducing violent incidents depends on the unique needs of each school and community.

Partnering to Create Safe, Nonviolent School Environments

Safe school neighborhoods are an important factor in students' feelings of safety and their overall achievement. Moreover, school staff cannot provide all the services needed to keep schools safe. Therefore, it is important for SS/HS and school staff to work with community leaders and families in a joint effort to establish safer school environments. It is also extremely important to implement

culturally competent programs and initiatives to embrace community strengths. Partners can work together to establish district-wide safety policies and practices, implement appropriate violence prevention programming, and offer wraparound services and supports.

The Core Management Team

The local law enforcement and juvenile justice members of the Core Management Team are integral for addressing element 1. Law enforcement can work to promote neighborhood safety and engage with school safety personnel. Juvenile justice can help school counselors reintegrate students involved in the justice system and participate in delinquency prevention programming.

Community Partners

Community agencies can work with schools to identify and address safety issues, implement EBPs, and tie in their services for students and their families. Culturally competent programs can impact not only the schools but also the surrounding environment in which students live.

Consider what community partners can bring to the table to contribute to the SS/HS Initiative's efforts. For instance, SS/HS staff can partner with local counseling centers to help provide services to families at risk of violence. Additional partners that are ideally suited to work with schools around safety promotion and violence prevention include emergency management services, mental health service providers, youth centers, and faith-based communities.

Parents

Involving and engaging parents in school safety and violence prevention helps to ensure that positive, safety-promoting messages are reinforced and carried through at home. Parents provide the first level of support for students to become physically, emotionally, and socially healthy. Further, parents can be invited to parenting classes to learn how to create safe, nonviolent home environments for their children.

Sustainability

As with all SS/HS work, sustainability planning should be considered as soon as project directors begin thinking of ways to enhance safety and prevent violence. Data collection, plans, and responses, such as safety audits and crisis planning, that form as a result of this work can be institutionalized in schools, and schools can continue to provide referrals to community partners after SS/HS funding has ended. For instance, working with juvenile justice to reintegrate previously incarcerated students benefits both schools and juvenile justice, so maintaining those linkages makes good sense. Staff who learn to identify students at high risk of committing violence can train other staff, paying the knowledge forward at little or no cost.

It is important when considering sustainability to engage key stakeholders in the transition period as SS/HS funding ends. Creating systems to recruit, train, and maintain linkages with community agencies helps to ensure that these agencies have the capacity to continue to provide services after funding concludes.

Additionally, engaging with local, state, and federal legislators during the entire grant period—particularly by sharing successes—primes these constituencies to advocate for funding to maintain key functions and programs after SS/HS funding ends.

Resources

- [Substance Abuse, Violence, Mental Health, and Academic Success](#)
- [Key Strategies for Violence and Substance Abuse Prevention I, II, III: Working with Children and Families](#)
- [Engaging Families in Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiatives](#)
- [Project LAUNCH \(Linking Actions for Unmet Needs in Children’s Health\)](#)
- [The National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center](#)
- [Safe and Drug-Free Schools Program, U.S. Department of Education](#)
- [Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice](#)

References

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