12 Crucial Keys for School Safety

Proven Ways to Create Caring, Safe Learning Climates, Reduce Bullying and Curb the Cycle of Youth Violence

By Dr. Michele Borba

Dr. Borba is an expert in bullying and youth violence, TODAY show contributor on parenting and education and author of 22 books. She has presented keynotes and workshops to over one million participants on five continents, is currently serving as Goodwill Ambassador for the One Laptop Per Child project and was hired by the Pentagon to share her bullying prevention model on 18 US Army bases in Europe and the Asian Pacific. "The 12 Crucial Keys for School Safety" are based on her publication, *Building Moral Intelligence* (Jossey-Bass) and her Proposal to End School Violence that was signed into California law SB1667. Her bullying prevention work has been featured on Dateline by Katie Couric. Dr. Borba writes a weekly blog *Dr Borba's Reality Check* on her website: www.micheleborba.com or find her on twitter @micheleborba.

Creating Safe Learning Environments

It's *not* a one-time assembly, bullet-proof vests or a two-hour staff training. Creating safe learning environments *is* about changing habits, school norms and students' lives!

In the wake of the Newtown tragedy, school districts across American are implementing an array of security measures to try and make classrooms safer including [video cameras, panic buttons, but also bulletproof whiteboards and armed vests.](#) Armor Technologies is producing bulletproof packs that weigh less than two pounds and cost around $100 per student. But let's be clear, a successful reduction in bullying and school safety is *not* a one-time student assembly, a two-hour staff development training or equipping classrooms with desks that turn into bulletproof "caves." School safety is *not* a quick-fix or about equipping students with armored vests. Curbing youth violence and peer cruelty is about changing destructive attitudes and behaviors and replacing them with healthier habits and views. It is always an ongoing and deliberate process, never one mere program or a set of worksheets.

I am not endorsing or recommending any one "program," but instead offering the best practices and elements to reduce school violence, or what I call the "12 Crucial Keys for School Safety." These practices, policies and procedures are culled from a review of hundreds of studies on bullying and violence, as well as a thirty-year career working in violence prevention. Consider these 12 keys as your road map and major decision-making rubric to help you select optimum prevention and intervention strategies to implement in your school. I encourage you to recognize which elements you already have in place, and then identify those you and your staff are missing in your school safety efforts. Ongoing commitment, continued training and sustained effort are essential to effectiveness.

3 Essential Parts to Creating School Safety

Part 1 of School Safety: Create a physically safe, weapon and drug free, adult-monitored learning environment, with a clear crisis plan in place, in which everyone is aware of and has practice for a "just in case" scenario.

Part II of School Safety: Nurture an emotionally and socially safe learning environment and create caring teacher-student and positive student-to student connections (a "Cheers" kind of environment "where everybody knows your name and everyone's glad you came") and reduce bullying.

Part III of School Safety: Identify the specific and unique emotional, social and character needs of your students and then intentionally teach specific, research-based and proven violence prevention and resilience skills to help form new habits and reduce victimization (including problem solving, conflict resolution, anger management, empathy building and restorative justice) based on the values of fairness, justice, courage, empathy and compassion (stress character-building and teach intentional moral habits).

Part I: Physically Safe Learning Environment and Adult Monitored

Create a physically safe, weapon and drug free, adult-monitored learning environment with a clear crisis plan in place in which everyone is aware of and has practice for a "just in case" scenario.

Key #1: Create Crisis Plan Based on Evidence-Based Research

United States school safety measures began after the tragic Cleveland School massacre-known as the Stockton schoolyard shooting on January 18, 1989. At noon that day, Patrick Purdy, a mentally disturbed drifter with a significant criminal history, opened-fire on the school playground with an AK-47 and shot more than 105 rounds in three minutes killing five children and wounding 30 others, including one teacher. Cleveland's school principal was instrumental in helping set school safety guidelines including a locked-down school campus, walkie-talkies and central communication system to communicate with all staff as well as the development of a clear, in-place and rehearsed crisis plan coordinated with staff and law enforcement. The Cleveland plan is the foundation for most crisis plans in the US today.

- ◎ **Collaborate and coordinate with law and local agencies and medical professions.**
- ◎ **Rehearse crisis plan** periodically—as you do with fire safety—with all staff members and students so everyone knows what to do, where to go, and how to respond in case of an emergency. Be sure to have your first drill in the first week of school.
- ◎ **Announce plan to parents and put on your website.**

Key #2: Train Staff in Violence Prevention So All on Same-Page/Common Language

- **Everyone on the same-page** and use common language so everyone is clear as to their role, what to do in an emergency and how to respond to student aggression and defuse bullying. In most school crisis scenarios a staff member(s) is the first responder. Teach crisis management skills.

- **Get educated as a staff on youth violence and bullying.** Use only the most commonly used definition: "Bullying is a pattern of repeated aggressive behavior, with negative intent, directed from one child to another where there is a power imbalance." – Dan Olweus. Consider using staff book clubs ("*Queen Bees and Wanna Bees, The Bullied, the Bully and the Bystander, Why They Kill,* etc.), set a bulletin board in faculty room to post updated news and research on bullying and youth violence or send out as email blasts to staff. Do a "Five Minute Staff Update" at each faculty meeting featuring new information on student mental health or a study about violence and bullying. Olweus, Farrington, Espelage, and Rigby's research all agree that a critical component to bullying prevention is increased awareness of what bullying is (ongoing classroom lessons, books/media/video, studies).

- **Dispel common myths about student shooters.** Misconceptions about youth offenders and school shooters are causing us to lose kids below the radar. See "Mental Health: A Report of the Surgeon General" and "Youth Violence: A Report of the Surgeon General" by the Department of Health and Human Services. The school shooter is not the bad kid in your office: 2/3 of shooters never were in trouble in school (or rarely); only 10% were expelled; some showed academic improvement, only 1/3 had received mental health evaluations, 41% were doing fine in school at the time of the attack with As and Bs, some even take advanced placement classes, were on the honor role or in Gate classes; 2/3 lived in a two-parent household, very few lived with a foster parent.

- **Designate one staff member to be your staff "expert on violence prevention and bullying,"** who keeps current on protocol on youth trends, FBI, police and Secret Service recommendations, attends trainings on bullying and youth violence and disseminates pertinent information to colleagues.

- **Consider hiring a SRO** (Student Resource Officer) as your liaison to police and staff as well as "student trust connector." Reports show the SRO is often the most trusted staff member with students and has a better pulse on the school climate than the classroom teacher. They are also the one staff member students go to and "tell" about a threat.

Key #3: Use Multi-Method Safety Assessments

- **Assess student/staff perceptions about bullying** and gain valuable information about potential threats using multiple assessments (See "Measuring Bullying Victimization, Perpetration and Bystander Experiences," free via the CDC). Teachers and parents generally are out of the loop when it comes to bullying—only students know the full extent. Mobilize them.

- **Consider conducting student focus groups as well.** Listen to students—they have the pulse on school climate: ask for their suggestions to improve school climate, hear their concerns and act on

them. Students must recognize the staff is in tune with their needs and cares enough to create solutions.

Key #4: Identify Hot Spots -- Boost Adult Visibility

- ◎ **Use the "Broken Window" theory** of law enforcement for school safety and reduce gang activity, bullying and potential for youth violence. Ongoing adult monitoring in recognized "hot spots" along with creating caring relationships and providing positive youth activities is best way to reduce violence (See report NY, Detroit and Chicago police departments).
- ◎ **Identify your school hot spots** through student focus groups or surveys. Or have students designate "hot spots" and "cool zones" on printed out school maps. Know that typical school hot spots include: bathrooms, lockers, hallways, stairwells, middle schools, playgrounds (fringes), parking lots, locker rooms, back of buses.
- ◎ **Boost adult supervision in designated hot spot areas.**
- ◎ **Boost visibility in darkened areas:** board up underneath stairwells, lock/chain vending machines to walls, cut down shrubs in parking lots and playgrounds, add lights and mirrors to key areas.
- ◎ **Periodically reassess "hot spots" and "cool zones"** via informal, anonymous student surveys: maps, index cards, focus groups. Monitor those spots with adult presence, surveillance cameras, or mirrors to reduce aggression/bullying.
- ◎ **Track your "guests"** (all parents and visitors). Sign in at the main office and ideally have a locked campus.

Part II: Create Emotionally Safe and Caring Environments

Nurture an emotionally safe learning environment and create caring teacher-student and positive student-to-student connections (a "Cheers" kind of environment where everybody knows your name and everyone's glad you came") and reduce bullying.

Key #5: Create Caring Student Connections That Reduce Cliques and Bullying and Increase Compassion

- ◎ **Strength student-staff bonds:** try school within a school, advisory groups, lunch-bunch groups, S.O.S. (Save One Student measures – each staff "adopts one student who concerns them").
- ◎ **Consider hiring a SRO (School Resource Officer)** (See #2) to establish relationships with students.
- ◎ **Listen to students—use student focus groups.** Let them know teachers care and you're hearing their concerns and acting upon them. Build trust.
- ◎ **Seek mentors/Big Brothers/coaches to form relationships with at risk students.** Look to your community.

Key #6: Implement Effective, Evidence-Based, Sustained Bullying Prevention

◎ Use only evidence-based programs (See Farrington). Efforts must by systemic and sustained. The goal is to change student attitudes and habits and create new student norms (From it's "Cool to be cruel " to it's "Great to be kind").

◎ Be on the same page as to what bullying is: "Bullying is a pattern of repeated aggressive behavior, with negative intent, directed from one child to another where there is a power imbalance." –Dan Olweus

◎ Train your staff as to what bullying is, how to respond, and how bullying is related to youth violence and school shooters.

Key #7: Identify Vulnerable Students – Do NOT Use Profiles

◎ **Beware of profiles:** Organizations such as American Psychological Association, FBI, American Academy of Pediatrics, and High Risk Youth have all created "profiles" of potential shooters—and all conflict with each other. The Secret Service advises not using profiles as criterion—since they generally will overlook the student. Looking for a type of child—a profile or checklist of warning signs—doesn't help a principal, teacher, or parent who has vague information and raises a concern. *"There is no profile of a typical 'student shooter' – they come from all incomes, races, academic background, several are gifted, most are boys, 38 percent come from rural America, and almost everyone said 'I couldn't believe he did it.'"*

◎ **Train teachers in mental health warning signs. (See psychfoundation.org)** Most shooters have considered or attempted suicide. Most engaged in some behavior prior to the incident that caused concern or indicated need for help. Most don't directly threaten target prior to attack. Many felt bullied, persecuted or injured by others. The only commonality was that each had been bullied.

◎ **Have periodic "round robin" or paired shared teacher discussions:** "Who concerns you?" Assign teachers "paired share partners."

◎ **Identify students who lay below the radar.** One in five U.S. students suffers from a mental health condition—most are undiagnosed. Who are you missing? "Which students mental health needs or behavior changes worry you?" Discuss those students! Pass on concerns to staff teams and departments. Create safety nets for students. Know how to refer students for mental health needs. Create a team on positive mental health concept: psychologist, teacher, nurse, mental health professionals...who can you mobilize to join you on your team to find healthy, successful ways to reach at-risk students?

◎ **Instruct staff that school shooters and violent offenders do not "snap"** – they plan and tell. It is a slow, gradual build-up. There is time to spot the warnings if teachers know what to look for.

◎ **Recognize "high need" students and those most likely to be victimized** (gay, Autism-spectrum, special needs, peanut allergies, special needs, etc.) and partner and find ways to reduce likelihood of being targeted (partner with "guardian angel," special staff, provide safe zones).

◎ **Watch out for vulnerable boys!** Ninety percent of student shooters are boys.

Key #8: Use Multiple Options to Report Possible Threats and Concerns

Utilize peer mentality: 75% of students before committing a homicide or suicide tell someone—usually a peer. Recognize most students do *not* tell an adult their concerns but do tell peers. Secret Service reports found that most school shooters reported their intentions prior to the day of the shooting. No one listened. Student focus groups report that "unless the staff routinely reviews the reports and takes them seriously there is no reason for students to fill them out."

- Teach students the difference between "Ratting" (to get someone in trouble) vs. "Reporting" (to keep someone *out* of trouble). Consider using law enforcement to help convey the seriousness of the message and change norms against the "It's not cool to snitch"

- Anonymous reporting options *must* be provided for students to post possible threats. To reduce "fear of retaliation" ("a bully or tormentor will see me posting the threat") change reporting criterion so students can report positive or negative concerns.

- Provide several locked reporting boxes (with lock on-top—only staff member can access reports). Consider multiple reporting options: peer mediators, designated staff/counselors, anonymous phone tips, anonymous we site options.

- Designate specific staff member(s) to review all reports *daily* and take them seriously. Track threats, report any viable threats to police, meet with students to let them know you are reviewing threats and taking their concerns seriously.

- Consider using student focus groups periodically as an additional means of hearing students concerns and getting a pulse on student safety needs. See "How to Conduct Student Focus Groups" in www.micheleborba.com

Key #9: Utilize Teen Social Media Trends

- "New normal" of teens' of suicide notes or violent threats is not a handwritten note but a post. Glendale Unified School District is hiring lawyers to track online threats and posts. Beware of school liabilities for cyberbullying, regardless of being off campus.

- Institute "Delete Day"—one school day all students choose to "delete" inappropriate comments online and clean up social networking sites.

- New research shows that teens and young adults frequently use social networking sites & mobile technology to express suicidal thoughts and intentions as well as to reach out for help. Findings suggest that suicide prevention and intervention efforts aimed at young adults should use social networking and other types of technology (Ohio State analyzed public profiles on MySpace and downloaded profile pages of a 41,000-member sample of 13- to 24-year-olds). Recommendations: "We need to find new ways to connect with them and help them with whatever they're struggling with, or, in other words, meet them where they are in ways that make sense to them." See "Suicidal Teens Reach Out Through Social Media, Not Suicide Hotlines" by Traci Pedersen *Associate News Editor.* July 27, 2013

◎ In-service parents on cyberbullying, Internet safety and encourage parents to monitor their children's online activity (at least having the password to each social networking account and "friend" their child so they can track concerns and report them).

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Part III: Teach Violence Prevention Skills, Boost Resilience and Solid Character

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Identify the specific and unique emotional, social needs of your students and then intentionally teach specific research-based and proven violence prevention and resilience skills to help form new habits and reduce victimization (including problem solving, conflict resolution, anger management, empathy building and restorative justice) based on the values of fairness, justice, courage, empathy and compassion.

Key #10: Use Restorative Justice to Curb Violence

◎ Recognize that reports on Zero Tolerance find it ineffective to reduce school violence and could contribute to escalating bully offenses.

◎ See new Chicago Public Schools approach to reducing school violence and the youth prison pipeline by implementing Restorative Justice (and how it is reducing truancy and violence in schools). http://www.nbcnews.com/video/nightly-news/52077384/#52077384 Restorative justice is a framework for juvenile justice reform that seeks to engage victims, offenders and their families, other citizens, and community groups both as clients of juvenile justice services and as resources in an effective response to youth crime.

◎ Aim for prevention and early intervention. See Arnold Goldstein findings: "Aggression can become entrenched by age 8;" Eron and Olweus: "A child who repeatedly bullies at age 8 has a one in four chances of having a criminal record by age 26."

◎ Teach "peace-making" skills, conflict resolution, peace patrol monitors.

◎ Aim for transfer: the student ideally should internalize the habit so he can use the skill in the real world without reminders, cues, or rewards.

11ᵗʰ Key: Empower Students-Teach Students Bystander Skills and Mobilize Their Support

◎ Research shows that the average bullying incident lasts 38 seconds, but if someone speaks up against bullying the average time drops to 10 seconds. Eighty-five percent of most bullying and student aggression incidents take place where there is no or limited adult supervision. Students can be taught safe ways to reduce bullying.

◎ Teach students specific bystander skills, learn to identify bullying and normal discord, and how to respond (or seek help) to bullying or aggression incidents (See "How to Teach Bystander Skills" on my website www.micheleborba or check out the *Safe School Ambassadors* program (Jossey-Bass)).

12ᵗʰ Key: Teach Character-Based Violence Prevention Skills

◎ Identify and address *your* students' needs that are unique to *your* school culture. Select them based on specific values and virtues for solid character building. Train teachers in character education that addresses teaching character virtues and moral habits that align with your school ethos and beliefs.

◎ Create a solid character-building program based on specific character needs of your students.

◎ Create student "character education" teams that mobilize student compassion and concerns so that the tasks are real and meaningful.

◎ Partner with mental health professionals, local organizations and groups such as coaches, scouting officials, Boys and Girls Clubs directors, youth ministers, law enforcement, DARE officers, counselors, etc. who can reinforce the same skills. Boost your community connections.

◎ Do surveys of students' emotional needs. Teach specific skills that will boost resilience, reduce anger management, nurture empathy, increase problem solving and curb victimization that are pertinent to your students' needs, culture, age, and gender.

◎ Increase parent-school connections: offer parent workshops, book club, webinars, newsletters, web posts, videos, make and take sessions (between students and parents) that help your parents learn the skills and incorporate them with their children.

◎ Do *not* give up. Your efforts must be sustained and your students *must* believe you care!

◎ See Character Education Partnership (CEP; character.org) for information/resources on Character Development.

Resources

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