

Getting a Fresh Perspective on School Safety Audits

By Kenneth H. Folks, Ph.D., and Marilyn A. Hirth, Ed.D.



For most of us, a safety audit entails the completion of a long list of very routine, relatively mundane tasks because someone, somewhere, thought it was important. We usually comply grudgingly because it is yet another duty that has been added to our already full plate. We likely have no real ownership in the process, and we often question the effect it actually has on the safety of our schools.

Safety audits are usually required by our insurance companies or some other agency that is removed from the education environment. Do not get us wrong; all educators agree that conducting school safety audits is important. But have you ever stopped to consider the real effect of those universal lists on creating and fostering a safe environment?

Some states require safety audits. For example, Florida, Illinois, New York, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Texas, and Virginia have legislated the use of school safety audits. However, many of those audits, although thorough, are rather lengthy and may be considered a chore rather than the proactive safety initiative for which they were designed. In addition, evidence supporting the effectiveness of safety audits—whether conducted internally or conducted externally by an “expert”—is noticeably missing from the research literature.

In the absence of studies on the effectiveness of school safety audits, Folks (2008) researched school principals’ perceptions of being required to complete a school safety checklist. The principals interviewed in that study reported that conducting an audit by checking off items

Figure 1. School Safety Checklist for Allen County Schools

School _____ Completed by _____

Date _____ (to be completed once per semester)

Section 1. Action Items to Be Completed in August and January

- _____ 1. The school's information in the County Pierce Responder System was reviewed in August and January.
- _____ 2. School emergency procedures (including extracurricular activities) were reviewed with staff in August and January.
- _____ 3. School facilities (including playgrounds, athletic facilities, etc.) were reviewed by walking the exterior of the building in August and January. Door numbers were in good repair and easy to read. Other apparent safety concerns were addressed.

Section 2. Action Items to Be Completed Annually or Each Semester

- _____ 1. A lockdown drill has been scheduled with staff and students each semester.
Dates of drills _____.
- _____ 2. Crisis teams meet at least once a year.
Date scheduled _____.

Section 3. Training Requirements to Be Completed at the Start of Each School Year

- _____ 1. Staff members are trained to greet, challenge, and/or report strangers in the building.
- _____ 2. Students are trained to not open doors for strangers and to report strangers they see to school personnel.
- _____ 3. A staff member has been assigned to check daily to ensure that doors that should be locked are locked.
- _____ 4. Staff members have been trained on when and how to call 911 from their classroom phone.
- _____ 5. All staff members have been informed of the location of the automated external defibrillator.
- _____ 6. At least one school safety-related in-service session/staff meeting is scheduled for staff members during the school year.

Section 4. Ongoing Action Items

- _____ 1. The school has established drug, alcohol, and violence prevention and intervention programs.
- _____ 2. Adult supervision is evident when students are in the hallways, cafeteria (commons), bus pickup zone, or any other area where students gather in the building.
- _____ 3. The school has established and maintains communication equipment and procedures between the school office and classrooms. Two-way radios are provided for communication with the school office to staff who supervise students outdoors during the school day (physical education classes, recesses, etc.).
- _____ 4. Security features are planned in building and remodeling projects.
- _____ 5. Emergency response kits are maintained. One kit should be kept in the office area and another should be kept in a secure location in a separate area of the building, in case one of the areas is inaccessible during an emergency situation.
- _____ 6. Emergency responders have been invited into the building at every opportunity to familiarize them with the facility as well as with the staff members.
- _____ 7. Background checks have been performed.
- _____ 8. The number of unlocked doors during the school day is limited to the minimum required.
- _____ 9. A procedure for visitor sign-in and identification badges, including signs directing visitors to the school office, has been implemented and maintained.
- _____ 10. A school crisis team has been organized, trained, and maintained.

Submit to District School Safety Specialist by September 30 and January 31.

Source: Ken Trump, National School Safety and Security Services, White House Conference on School Safety, October 10, 2006. Commission adoption May 16, 2007.

forces them to focus on school safety because the process is intentional. The more educators are aware of school safety issues, the more proactive they can be in providing a safe, secure environment for students and staff.

Why Conduct Safety Audits?

When students feel safe in their learning environment, it seems logical that their test scores will improve. This premise is a major component in the teachings of psychologist Abraham Maslow, who professed that basic needs must be met before higher-order processes such as learning can occur.

Research on the link between a safe school environment and student achievement is sparse.

Although Maslow's theory makes sense to most educators, research on the link between a safe school environment and student achievement is sparse. A study by Gronna and Chin-Chance (1999) provided empirical evidence that there was indeed a link between the two. In their study of 46 middle schools, those researchers found a statistically significant effect between school safety and eighth-grade reading and mathematics scores as measured using the Stanford Achievement Test. The study showed that students who attended schools with fewer reported disciplinary offenses, and fewer reports of crimes, had higher test scores than students who attended schools with higher crime rates and more numerous reports of disciplinary offenses.

Although safety is on the minds of principals, it is not usually given the daily attention necessary. Only when an incident occurs does it reappear on the radar screen and receive attention to ensure that the school is safe and secure.

A Model to Consider

In 1999, the Indiana Legislature enacted IC 85-2-10.1-9, which, among other things, established county school safety commissions in every Indiana county. The Allen County School Safety Committee (ACSSC) continues to be one of the most active and respected county school safety commissions in the state.

In May 2007, after a rash of high-profile school shootings across the country the previous year, the ACSSC adopted a one-page checklist based on school safety best practices. These best practices were cited at a national safety conference convened by President Bush in October 2006 and included (a) establishing a school safety plan, (b) exercising the plan on a regular basis, (c) establishing

prevention and recognition programs for students, and (d) conducting tabletop exercises.

Each school principal in Allen County completes the checklist adopted by the ACSSC twice each school year, during August and January. The short, concise list includes practical, basic strategies that focus on quality versus quantity (see Figure 1).

Step by Step

Awareness is the first step in adopting new practices. Many states require safety audits, but even if audits are not a state requirement, school administrators should realize their value and importance. The ACSSC checklist is short and easy to complete. However, for it to be an effective tool, district leaders must provide the impetus and emphasize the importance of completing the checklist at the required intervals.

References

- Folks, K. H. 2008. School-safety preparedness: A qualitative study of principals' perceptions of using a school-safety checklist. Ph.D. diss., Purdue University.
- Gronna, S. S., and S. A. Chin-Chance. 1999. Effects of school safety and school characteristics on grade 8 achievement: A multi-level analysis. ERIC Report No. ED430292, Education Resources Information Center, www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/custom/portlets/recordDetails/detailmini.jsp?_nfpb=true&_&ERICExtSearch_SearchValue_0=ED430292&ERICExtSearch_SearchType_0=no&accno=ED430292.

Kenneth H. Folks, Ph.D., is principal of Carroll High School Freshman Campus, Ft. Wayne, Indiana, and is a certified Indiana school safety specialist. Email: Ken.Folks@nacs.k12.in.us

Marilyn A. Hirth, Ed.D., is associate professor of educational studies at Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana, and a member of the ASBO Editorial Advisory Committee. Email: mahirth@purdue.edu

Index of Advertisers

CPI Qualified Plan Consultants, Inc. inside front cover
INGback cover
Kronos, Inc.pages 13, 15
MetLife Resourcespage 11
Milk PEP inside back cover
My Budget File, Inc.page 5
PaySchoolspage 1
Sungard page 3
Tyler Technologiespage 17