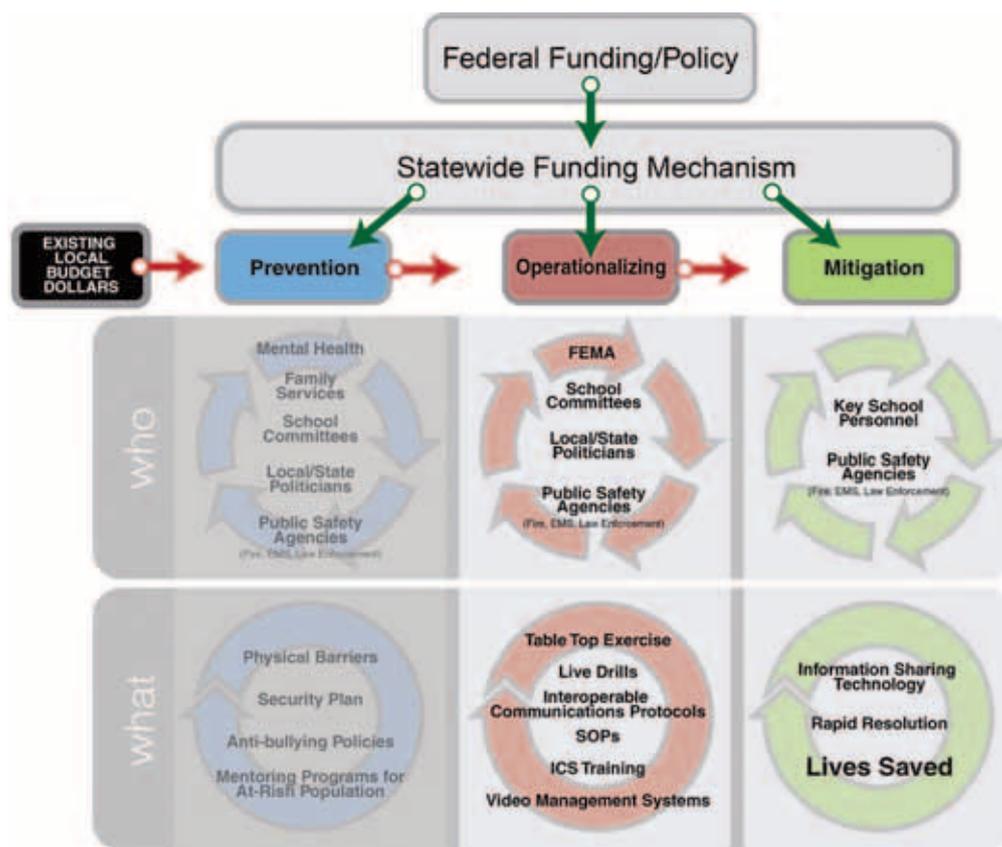


Communication and Collaboration for School Safety

Our first priority must be to ensure the security of all students, and that requires collaboration.

By William M. Toms, Ed.D.



School security requires communication and collaboration at all levels: federal, state, and local.

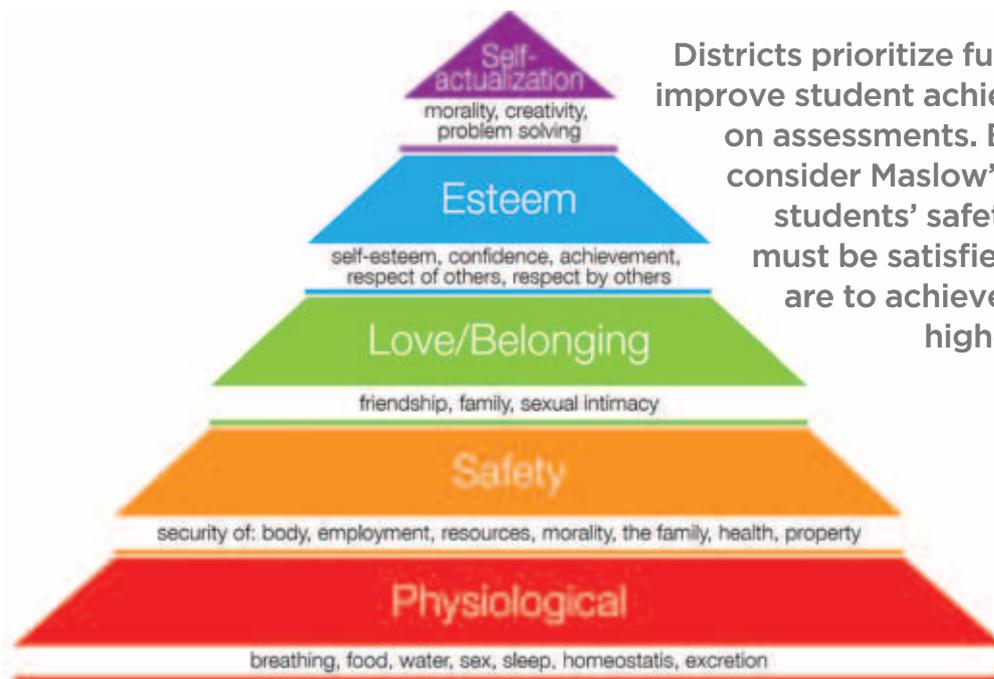
In the past several years, schools not only in the United States but around the world have been the sites of senseless, armed attacks. Immediately after such attacks, well-meaning officials and citizens leap into action to form committees and panels to review the circumstances of the event and to offer insight into what may have contributed to the violence.

Consistently, those groups come back with recommendations that are often codified in policies and regulations intended to prevent future attacks. However, implementing and funding those regulations too often falls to the local school districts.

To ensure student safety, statewide funding mechanisms need to provide not only funding but also safety and security expertise when designing school safety plans. That approach requires both a paradigm shift and a commitment to strategic collaboration.

Changing Priorities

Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (see page 19) is a theory in psychology symbolized by a five-level pyramid that represents human needs. Physiological needs are at the bottom (e.g., breathing, food, water, sleep) and self-actualization is at the top (e.g., morality, creativity,



Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.

Districts prioritize funding to improve student achievement on assessments. But if we consider Maslow's theory, students' safety needs must be satisfied if they are to achieve at their highest level.

autonomy). The other levels, moving upward, include safety and security (e.g., security of body and belongings), love and belonging (e.g., friendship, family, and intimacy), and esteem (e.g., confidence, achievement, respect of others).

In an academic environment, self-actualization includes students thinking critically and creatively and solving problems—a goal of our education system. However, as Maslow suggests, before students can maximize their potential at the top of the pyramid, they must first fulfill the lower-level needs, including the need for safety and security.

Districts prioritize funding to improve student achievement on assessments. But if we consider Maslow's theory, students' safety needs must be satisfied if they are to achieve at their highest level. In other words, students will be unable to fulfill their academic promise until they feel safe.

Therefore, the first priority of administrators must be to ensure the security of all students, and our efforts must reflect that priority.

The Need for Strategic Collaboration

Districts should address school safety through strategic collaboration, the basis of which is an intentional, collective approach to address the problem. Such an approach should incorporate the following components (Norris-Tirrell and Clay 2010):

- Building shared knowledge
- Designing innovative solutions
- Forging consequential change

In this case, the intentional, collective-approach aspect of strategic collaboration might involve the

school or district searching for and locating stakeholders with knowledge specific to school safety and working together to build their shared knowledge.

The second component focuses on designing innovative, rather than incremental, solutions. Those solutions might be creative, or they might be the synthesis of seemingly incongruent processes or technologies. However, they may not be implemented if the school district does not have the funding to do so.

The third component, forging consequential change, refers to significant, widespread change, such as a state-wide funding mechanism for school safety measures.

Strategic Collaboration and School Administrators

When administrators call on innovative community partners to create security plans that ensure quick and effective threat management, everyone feels safer.

For that collaboration to be effective, however, each organization must accept the responsibility to become fully engaged and must be committed to building and sharing its collective knowledge. Myriad resources are available from federal and state agencies, as well as private organizations, to build that knowledge.

For example, the Federal Emergency Management Agency offers web-based courses that provide general knowledge about the National Incident Management System training as well as Incident Command System (ICS) training designed specifically for schools (<https://training.fema.gov/programs/emischool/emischool.aspx>).

The ICS is a standard management tool used as a best practice for effective communications in an emergency. Designed to require a minimal investment of time, these

courses provide a common language for partners during an emergency and a foundation for collaboration in the school environment.

New York State offers an exemplary example of strategic collaboration. Its governor and its Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Services announced in November 2014 a school safety pilot program to be rolled out in 20 public schools in two counties. The state-level program, implemented locally, provides schools with a connection to first responders in times of crisis, as well as an opportunity to call on needed state or federal officials if necessary. It also affords educators the opportunity to focus on teaching and learning rather than on searching for solutions to school safety issues.

Strategic Communication for Public Safety

One of the strengths of the New York State program is the element of strategic communication. With a more complex emergency, more agencies may respond, heightening the need for an interoperable network to ensure that everyone is always aware of the situation.



Districts may need to rethink their priorities when it comes to funding allocations.

In an emergency, time becomes the most crucial element. One of the most cost-effective and easily implemented strategies that facilitates rapid response is real-time interoperable multimedia communications. Internet protocol-based, peer-to-peer technologies provide first responders with not only voice communication but also data and video intelligence.

Officers can receive a variety of communications—voice, data, and video—directly from school personnel who have knowledge of the school or from command post personnel who have access to the school’s video surveillance system. Through shared video surveillance, law enforcement command-and-control personnel can see and listen to the operation as it unfolds, using text communication, if necessary, to silently message school officials inside the building, responding law enforcement officers, and entry teams.

In cases with multiple agencies responding, all of the first responders can participate using multimedia push-to-talk applications on their mobile devices.

As an emergency develops and more agencies are called on to collaborate, this network must also grant each participant sovereign control over its own communication assets. In other words, a central server should not be controlled solely by one agency. Each school and participating agency should control when (and whether) to share its own radio, video, and data.

Setting Priorities

To succeed in school, students must feel safe. However, inadequate funding has made ensuring a safe, secure learning environment challenging for school and district administrators. It’s time for schools, community members, and safety officials to collaborate and make safe schools a priority.

Reference

Norris-Tirrell, D., and J. A. Clay. 2010. *Strategic collaboration in public and nonprofit administration: A practice-based approach to solving shared problems*. Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press.

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