

# KEEPING YOURSELF AND YOUR CLASSROOMS SAFE



**a Resource for Faculty**

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# Keeping Yourself Safe

Working on a campus should raise emotions of happiness and anticipation, not fear and anxiety. The increase in school violence, both in K-12 school systems and in higher education, has probably forced you to question your own safety on campus. You may have thought, “What if something happened in my classroom or office?”

Faculty members create student learning environments based on principles of challenge and support, relationship building and open door policies. How can you maintain the underlying principles at the heart of your work while making every effort to keep yourself, and your campus community, as safe as possible?

➤ **Observe and Alert** - In many instances of violence, there are warning signs well in advance. Take note of unusual or troubling student or colleague behavior and alert the proper authorities to these concerns.

➤ **Lock It Up** - How many times have you gone somewhere without locking your office door? When working in your office late at night or early in the morning, lock your door.

➤ **Model Emergency Behavior** - Tragedy provides an unfortunate reminder of the value in being prepared for any crisis to occur. Model the way by demonstrating the

importance of cooperating with emergency preparedness drills. Run through emergency evacuation procedures at the start of each semester or quarter. It will take some valuable time, but could make a world of difference in the event of an emergency.

➤ **The Buddy System** - The “buddy system” isn’t just for students. When you walk to your car at night, or to a late meeting across campus, walk with someone or request a campus escort. Try to host evening and early morning office hours at the same time as a colleague, so you aren’t ever alone in your department.

➤ **Never Make a Promise You Can’t Keep** - It’s common for students to go to faculty seeking a listening ear, experienced wisdom and advice. Sometimes, during these exchanges, they may ask you to promise not to disclose something they have shared. Protect yourself - and potentially others - and *never* make that promise prior to hearing what they have to share. You are obligated to take information that leads you to believe individuals may pose a threat to themselves or to others to the appropriate people. Plus, it’s often the best way to get students the help they may need.

## Keeping Yourself Safe

- **Stay Connected** - Stay up to date on your institution's emergency plans and policies. Routinely ask if any changes have been made that you or your colleagues should know.
- **Save Written Correspondence** - Keep a record of all written exchanges you have with colleagues and students. Should a problem present itself, you may need the files to establish a pattern of behavior.
- **Open Your Door** - Keep your office or classroom door open/cracked when meeting with individuals. You may also want to design your office so that your desk is closest to the door. You'll be less likely to be accused of something "behind closed doors," you'll have an accessible exit if threatened, and your voice will carry more effectively, if necessary.

## RESOURCES USE YOUR RESOURCES USE YOUR RESOURCES

There are many resources right on your own campus that are available should you encounter difficult student or colleague behavior. Many campus professionals have received extensive training on how to deal with difficult students, emergencies and workplace violence. Consider contacting any of the following resources for assistance:

- **Public Safety** will quickly respond to your call for help and will also provide the most up to date information on emergency protocols and safety tips.
- **Student Life** has numerous resources to assist you in dealing with difficult student behavior.
- **Residence Life** can be a valuable resource if the student you are concerned about lives on campus.
- **Counseling professionals** can provide you with resources to address your concerns or can assist you in referring a student for counseling.
- **Judicial officers** can assist you in addressing misbehavior and ensuring that the incident is recorded.
- **Human Resources** can provide helpful information on conflict management, safety tips and grievance procedures.

# Emergency Preparedness Plans

## Being Prepared to Manage Emergencies

Cover your bases. According to the Canada Safety Council, the four pillars of emergency management are:

- **Prevention and Mitigation** - measures to reduce or eliminate the effects of a crisis
- **Preparedness** - measures in place to ensure an effective response to an emergency
- **Response** - actions to respond to the event
- **Recovery** - actions to recover from the effects of the incident

Do you feel prepared and confident in all of these areas? Read through emergency safety manuals provided to you on your campus. If something doesn't make sense or seems to be missing, let someone know immediately. Your concerns as a faculty member are important, since you know classrooms best.

To be effective, an emergency plan must be rehearsed regularly - and not always for the same type of event. Involve all necessary staff and students in these rehearsals. You may also want to keep a copy of campus emergency procedures with you in the classrooms in which you teach, your car and maybe even in your briefcase/bag so you have them on hand should the need arise.



## The Impact of Emergency Preparedness Measures on You

Many campuses are instituting broad safety measures. You may view these measures as an invasion of your privacy or an inconvenience. Unfortunately, no campus – no matter how small or quaint – is immune from human-made or natural disasters in today's world. Take requests to cooperate with these policies and procedures seriously. Widespread conversations on school safety have resulted in numerous "best practices" that many campuses are choosing to employ. Whether it's instituting a mass text messaging notification system that requires the sharing of your personal cell phone number or a video surveillance camera in your classroom building, these measures are all designed with your safety in mind.

## Putting Plans into Action

### What If?

Think about a number of potentially threatening and emergency scenarios. In conjunction with your departmental and institutional procedures, what would you do if:

- you received a worrisome or threatening email, text message or instant message?
- an argument broke out in your classroom or office building and escalated into a physical altercation?
- a student had an emotional breakdown in the middle of class?
- a colleague confided in you about her fears regarding a potential workplace violence situation?
- you noticed bizarre, questionable or troubling behavior in a student or colleague?
- a natural disaster struck the campus?
- someone pulled out a gun in your classroom?
- you felt threatened when a student came to visit you during office hours?
- you were approached in a parking lot by a distraught student?
- you felt threatened or bullied by a colleague?

By considering appropriate responses now, you'll be better prepared in the event of a real-life situation.

### Using Your Cell Phone as an Emergency Tool

Putting "ICE" or "In Case of Emergency" contact numbers in your cell phone is a simple emergency preparedness strategy. Experts suggest programming the acronym "ICE" followed by the name and number of a family member or friend who EMTs, the police or hospital staff can contact if you are ill or unable to respond. These ICE individuals should be available much of the time and know of your important medical conditions. Take a few moments to input this important information into your phone today.

### Where Do I Start?

You are concerned about a disruptive student or colleague, but you don't know where to go. You aren't sure if it is extensive enough to report to public safety, you aren't sure the student needs counseling and you don't want to make the situation worse. If you don't know where to start, just don't stop! Go to your supervisor or department chair and share your concerns. He/she will be able to help you determine what the situation calls for and how to best proceed. The important thing is that you act on your instincts instead of pushing concerns aside.



# Behavioral Warning Signs

There are no clear-cut answers for those asking how to predict an unleashing of violence. It's very difficult to identify those who will be pushed over the line. However, according to the *American Psychological Association*, violence is a serious possibility if a number of the following warning signs are witnessed:

- Repeated loss of temper
- Frequent physical fighting
- Vandalism or property damage
- Increased use of drugs and alcohol
- Increased demonstration of risk-taking behavior
- Announcing plans or threats to commit acts of violence or hurt others
- Enjoyment in hurting animals
- Carrying, access to or fascination with weapons, especially guns
- Withdrawal from friends and usual activities
- Feelings of rejection and marginalization
- Being a victim of bullying
- Poor school performance
- History of discipline problems or frequent run-ins with authority
- Failing to acknowledge the feelings or rights of others

If you suspect that a student or colleague could be a danger to themselves or to others, report your observations and concerns to the appropriate people on campus. Chances are that if you are noticing worrisome or potentially threatening behaviors, others are too. Your tip may be one of many that helps piece together a pattern of behavior. It is always better to be safe than sorry.

## The Impact of Bullying Behaviors on Today's World

As you are well aware, bullying behaviors are prevalent in today's society. While not a new tactic, the nature of our modern world makes it easier for people to use technology and other weapons to carry out fantasies of "seeking revenge." In many incidents of school violence, researchers have found that the perpetrator was bullied by peers or family members prior to the attack. Keep a close eye out for students or colleagues being bullied by others.

# A Resource for Faculty

## TOO YOU CAN BE BULLIED, TOO YOU CAN

You may feel like you are in a position of power and influence and that, as a result, others would never attempt to bully you. Unfortunately, this power and influence could actually make you a target for this type of behavior.

If you receive a threatening email, text message or instant message, or experience potential stalking behavior, *save it and let your department chair and public safety officials know immediately*. It's not an overreaction – these types of threats are serious. Don't wait until you receive several threats. Trust your instincts. If something doesn't feel right, it probably isn't.

## Talking with Students about Safety Concerns

Today's students have, unfortunately, grown up in a world where school violence is a real concern. Images of Columbine, Virginia Tech and other violent incidents have permeated the media. Therefore, students may feel some anxiety about their level of safety on campus.

Consider talking with students about their safety concerns. *Although you may feel it isn't your place to do so, it is.* Let students know how they can protect themselves and others, while also sharing what's being done on campus to keep them safe. These types of caring, proactive conversations show students that campus faculty and administrators are taking their well-being - and their fears - seriously.

### What's on Students' Minds?

Consider posing the following questions to students:

- What can I do to help alleviate your fears about school violence while in this classroom? Is there something we can do as a department?
- What specific concerns do you have about our campus related to personal safety issues?
- What could we do on our campus to make you feel safer?
- What can you and your peers do to ensure our community's safety?
- What would you do if you were concerned about or felt threatened by an individual on campus?

# The Realities of School Violence

Campus officials are often the “first line of defense” against school violence because they are responsible for recognizing and referring troubled students. Understanding potential myths, along with stark realities, may be helpful as you work day-to-day to “decode” the meanings behind student behavior. Just be careful that your focus on unusual or worrisome behaviors doesn’t result in making assumptions about what “types” of students or persons commit violent acts.

### Debunking the Myths

1. There are no demographic or socioeconomic commonalities that would allow authorities to develop a “profile” for identifying students who engage in targeted school violence.
2. Attackers rarely “snap” or “lose it.” Most attackers demonstrate warning signs before a major incident.
3. In most cases, other people know about the attacker’s idea and/or plan to attack.
4. There are no guarantees that those who threaten to attack others will carry through on that promise. There are also no guarantees that those who do not threaten to attack others will not.
5. Most attackers are not loners; in fact, in many cases they’re involved in activities and peer groups.
6. Most attackers do not seek psychological help before an attack. However, many do have difficulty coping with significant losses or personal

failures and have considered or attempted suicide.

7. Many school shooting incidents have been stopped by other means than law enforcement intervention.
8. Most attackers have access to or utilize weapons before attacking.
9. Most attackers feel bullied, persecuted or injured by others prior to attacking. Of those who seek help, many feel ignored.
10. From 12 to 20 homicides occur each year on the 4,000 campuses in the U.S.

Sources: Results from a *Safe School Initiative* study conducted by the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Secret Service.

## Additional Resources on School Violence

### ➤ Campus Safety Executive Newswire & Student Affairs Newswire:

These weekly newswires includes top stories on prevention and education efforts, as well as trends in higher education. To subscribe, please send an email to [customerservice@paper-clip.com](mailto:customerservice@paper-clip.com)

### ➤ U.S. Department of Justice Community Oriented Policing Services: At

[www.cops.usdoj.gov/default.asp?Item=34](http://www.cops.usdoj.gov/default.asp?Item=34)

### ➤ U.S. Department of Education Emergency Planning Tools: At

[www.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/emergencyplan/index.html](http://www.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/emergencyplan/index.html)