

Training the Support Staff to Respond Appropriately

School safety relies on training for everyone, not just the teaching staff.

By **JUDY BRUNNER AND DENNIS LEWIS**

For many secondary school administrators, providing meaningful staff development to members of the support staff can be challenging. But a safe school environment and a school administrator's professional reputation are affected not only by the faculty's actions during a crisis but also by the response of those in support roles. Regardless of the scenario, the buck will stop at the principal's desk, and when any staff member is unprepared or misinformed, the results can have tragic consequences and negatively affect how the principal is perceived by peers and the school community.

Take a moment to reflect on the daily interaction between students and support staff members at your school. Bus drivers, food service employees, custodians, and secretaries all have frequent contact with students: The school bus driver is the first and last adult that many students see each day. Students who participate in breakfast programs interact with food

service employees at the beginning of the day, and even more students have contact with these employees during lunch. Throughout the day, students walk by custodians in the hallways, classrooms, or commons areas. Students who visit or pass through the school office area interact with the secretarial staff.

Scenario

For many years, Billy has been teased and humiliated by other students. He is small, wears glasses, and dresses like a prep. This morning at the bus stop, he hears the usual comments: "Hey, four eyes" and "You look like a fag in those clothes."

Three boys grab his book bag and throw it around, playing keep-away. As the bus rolls up, one of them dumps the contents out of the bag. The bus driver notices the boys taunting Billy as he gathers his belonging and tries to find a seat on the bus.

When Billy arrives at school, he is obviously upset. He passes a custodian

and kicks a trash cart, sending it rolling away. As the custodian tries to get Billy's attention to retrieve the cart, Billy unleashes a string of profanities and kicks a nearby locker before heading down the hallway.

After Billy gets breakfast, a food service worker notices Billy eating by himself again. He appears to be red-faced and agitated; other classmates sitting nearby are paying little attention to him.

Just before the tardy bell rings, a secretary bumps into Billy in a crowded hallway. She says, "Sorry," and Billy replies, "No, you're not. No one is ever sorry. I'm sick of this place." The secretary is surprised by his demeanor and doesn't know quite how to respond, so she continues on her way.

Shortly after the first bell, you are urgently summoned to an art classroom to help with a student who is violently out of control. Upon arrival, you see the teacher and students standing in the hallway. Inside the room, Billy is sitting in a corner with a carving knife, threatening to cut his arm.

Was this crisis preventable? We believe so, and members of the support staff were key players in the tragic sequence of events. Had any one of them responded differently at any point, this story might have had a more positive ending.



Judy Brunner (judy@edu-safe.org) is the assistant director of the Greenwood Laboratory School at Missouri State University in Springfield.



Dennis Lewis (dennis@edu-safe.org) is the director of school public safety for the Springfield school district.

Brunner and Lewis are the cofounders of Edu-Safe LLC (www.edu-safe.org), a school-safety consulting firm. Creating Safe Schools and Classrooms, their DVD safety training series, is available from Edu-Safe.

Professional Development

A number of strategies are appropriate for training support staff members.

Emergency management plans.

The success of a comprehensive emergency management plan hinges on the understanding of all staff members. Some support staff members will have specific duties and responsibilities that should be outlined. During an emergency, however, assignments may be made on the basis of who is available or the closest to the scene. Support staff members may have to supervise students, answer phones, or locate and operate equipment they don't normally use; therefore, they should have a complete copy of the emergency management plan, as well as such documents as the telephone tree and guidelines for utility shutoffs, building security, and supervision.

Staff development. To the degree that scheduling will allow, support staff members should be included in schoolwide staff development for school safety. Training in such topics as first aid, evacuation, in-place sheltering, and supervision will help prepare support staff members for crises. In the scenario we described, it would have been helpful if they had been trained in de-escalating aggressive behavior and subsequent reporting procedures.

Incident debriefing. Debriefing should occur after any crisis, and support staff members should be included in the discussion. Even if they were not directly involved in the incident, they can learn from what worked and did not work, and they can suggest improvements.

Support staff handbook. Including building-level expectations for

support staff members in the staff handbook is an excellent way to provide all groups with the same information about the appropriate responses and procedures for potential events and issues. As an alternative, you may want to create a support staff handbook that includes many of the same things as the faculty handbook. Employees should sign for receipt of the book.

Support staff members should be included in schoolwide staff development for school safety. Training in such topics as first aid, evacuation, in-place sheltering, and supervision will help prepare support staff members for crises.

Extensions of the classroom.

Buses and other areas that fall under the direct control of support staff members are simply an extension of the classroom and should be treated as such. All applicable rules should be posted in the cafeteria, on buses, and in hallways and should be communicated verbally to all students and staff members. Principals should encourage lines of communication between the certificated staff members and those serving in a support role so concerns about student behavior can be shared.

Supervisory techniques and expectations. Employees should be given direction and guidelines for supervising students in their respective areas: custodians in the hallways and the student commons, food service employees in the cafeteria, secretaries in the office and the hallways, and bus drivers on school buses.

Building communication. Always include support staff members in internal communications that relate to safety and security. They should know that they are a part of the safety process. They can also be members of any building committee that supports a safe learning environment for students and staff members.

Job-related expertise. Work with districtwide department heads who manage support service functions to include site personnel in strategies that strengthen facility safety. In some cases, support staff members will be the experts on safety issues and can present the information to certificated staff members. It may not always be about teaching support staff members; rather, they may be the ones with the knowledge that can be provided to others.

Cooperation

Just like athletics, school security is a matter of teamwork, and everyone's safety is enhanced when all have been trained and had a chance to practice the play on the field. In the scenario we described, some players were missing from the game plan and as a result, the school's defense suffered. Support staff members are essential to creating a positive school climate. Make it a practice to include them whenever school safety is discussed. **PL**