

News Release

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Recommendations seek to enhance school safety

MADISON — Every parent, every community wants students to attend schools that are safe, respectful, and conducive to learning. The Department of Public Instruction, in partnership with a broad coalition of education organizations, is announcing a framework and recommendations to address these critical needs so schools are havens of learning and academic achievement for all students.

“We know that mental health issues, bullying, substance abuse, and other risky behaviors impair schooling for too many of our kids,” said State Superintendent Tony Evers. “This work provides guidance for improving the school environment so all students can graduate college and career ready.”

Recommendations represent four areas that impact schools — mental health, climate and culture, physical environment, and policies and procedures — and acknowledge that safety plans must be tailored to meet the needs of each Wisconsin community and school. The highest priority addresses mental health issues and the lack of appropriate services for youth. An estimated one in five students is dealing with mental health issues and 80 percent of those students do not get professional help, which is considered a significant contributing factor to unsafe school environments. Recommendations call for better coordination and integration of state and federal programs as well as exploring trauma-informed care, school-based mental health services, and expansion of training programs and other treatment options.

“The biennial Youth Risk Behavior Survey tells us that feelings of sadness and hopelessness affect a quarter of our students to the point they stop doing some of their usual activities,” Evers said. “While the depressed student isn’t likely to act out violently, when tragedy strikes in our schools, we wonder what could have been done to prevent this. By working together, state, county, private, and school resources should be able to provide better treatment options that help students improve their school and life function.”

Statistically, schools are very safe places. An environment that invites inclusiveness, celebrates diversity, and promotes participation is integral to the mission of each school. While about three-quarters of students say they feel they belong at school and they have a supportive adult at school they can go to, 45 percent say bullying is a problem at their school. Wisconsin already requires schools to adopt an anti-bullying policy. Safety recommendations

(more)

call for more schools to adopt prevention-based behavior systems that help students learn from their transgressions as well as other best practices that promote a positive school climate such as character education, asset building, peer-lead efforts, and anti-bullying efforts.

The physical space of schools should be flexible, nurturing, and inspiring to create a climate where children want to be and that supports student learning. The recommendations encourage schools to consider controlled access, visitor management, and security technologies such as cameras, distress buttons, and two-way radios, balancing safety and security with the desire to provide a welcoming environment.

Wisconsin already requires each school to have a safety plan, which is reviewed every three years.

Wisconsin School Safety Summit recommendations call for

- creation of uniform templates of exemplary policies, practices, and procedures that can be adopted or adapted in schools and communities,
- exploration of a statewide school safety center,
- creation of local and statewide crisis response teams,
- creation of school safety planning teams in each school and designation of one person responsible for safety plans,
- implementation of a comprehensive safety and security assessment every three years, and
- specific training, such as the National Incident Management System training model, so school staff members know their role in an emergency and there is a common response among different jurisdictions and organizations.

“In a crisis, training takes over,” Evers said. “Our schools conduct regular fire drills so staff and students know how to evacuate the building quickly. School safety training is equally important, though paying for facility upgrades and training strains school budgets.”

The “Summary Framework and Recommendations for Action,” call for advocacy for funding or revenue limit exemptions to provide specific staff safety training, emergency management and readiness programs, and equipment. The recommendations were developed by education organizations that participated in the Wisconsin School Safety Summit last July at the Wingspread conference center near Racine.

The summit included representatives from emergency services providers and first responders as well as Native American tribes. Along with the DPI, planning committee participants were from the Wisconsin Association of School Boards, Wisconsin Association of School District Administrators, Wisconsin Council of Administrators of Special Services, Wisconsin Education Association Council, Wisconsin School Safety Coordinators Association, Wisconsin Association of School Business Officials, Wisconsin School Public Relations Association, and Association of Wisconsin School Administrators.

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NOTE: Additional information about the *Keeping Wisconsin Schools Safe: A Safe Schools Initiative* can be found on the Department of Public Instruction website at http://sspw.dpi.wi.gov/sspw_safeschool. This news release is available electronically at http://news.dpi.wi.gov/files/eis/pdf/dpinr2014_57.pdf.