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STATE SUPERINTENDENT OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION

CALIFORNIA
DEPARTMENT OF
EDUCATION

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Dear County and District Superintendents and Charter School Administrators:

RESPONDING TO THE NEED FOR STUDENT SAFETY

I know you join me in offering heartfelt sympathy to our colleagues across the nation whose schools have been struck by violence. Schools must be safe havens that provide healthy, nurturing learning environments for students of all ages.

We agree that one of the ways we can respond to these recent tragedies is by considering our own school safety plans and ensuring they are comprehensive and implemented to the best of our abilities. At the California Department of Education (CDE), we are committed to helping you review and update your comprehensive safe school plans. Resources to help you update or enhance your school safety plans can be found at the end of this document.

SAFE SCHOOL PLANNING

As you and your school site administrators are aware, the California *Education Code* sections 32280–32289 require each school site to have an up-to-date and comprehensive safe school plan.

School sites must draft these safe school plans in consultation with representatives from law enforcement and emergency services personnel. School administrators must complete these updates by March 1 of each year.

The plan shall contain, but not be limited to, an assessment of current school crime; appropriate strategies and programs that maintain a high level of school safety; discrimination and harassment policies; and procedures to ensure the creation of a safe and orderly environment conducive to learning.

An integral part of each safe school plan is the crisis preparedness and response component.

IMPLEMENTING THE SAFE SCHOOL PLAN

Effective implementation requires training students and staff in the content of the plan and in their individual responsibilities in implementing the plan. This training should occur annually; with additional training sessions held whenever a large number of new staff joins a school during the year.

School communities could have frequent opportunities to practice all elements of these plans, including the response to crisis. As we have seen, familiarity with the plan will help ensure that school communities are prepared to effectively respond if an incident occurs.

As schools review and update comprehensive school safety plans, they may find it appropriate to consider including among the strategies identified by school sites and school districts the following elements the CDE has identified as best practices:

- Creation of a Crisis Response Team
 - The Crisis Response Team could assist all school staff in providing information, resources, and services to students in responding to acts of violence, death, depression, or possible suicide. The team may include school counselors, school nurses, school social workers, school psychologists, classified staff, parents, and community partners.
- Annual staff reviews
 - Choosing to review the plan annually may keep all school personnel prepared for any type of crisis, including a mental health crisis. The effectiveness of safety plans depends on all school staff responding in a timely and seamless manner.
- Safety leaders
 - Each school district may identify a lead person to oversee all the safety plans in the district so they cover all components.
- Mental health and suicide prevention strategies
 - A trained person may be designated to handle referrals related to student mental health issues. Schools can provide leadership in helping troubled students whose mental health issues could become dangerous to themselves or others by addressing depression, anxiety, stigma reduction, anger management, and other mental health concerns.

DEVELOPING PARTNERSHIPS

School violence affects the entire community. Please consider involving community members, local businesses, law enforcement, emergency services personnel, health, mental health, and social service agencies in the planning, ongoing training, and implementation of your school safety plans.

TRAININGS FOR SCHOOL STAFF

The CDE sponsors approximately 50 safety-related trainings per year throughout the state. These trainings cover crisis response, safe school planning, and bullying prevention and intervention. The training schedule is located on the CDE SCVP Training Schedule Web page at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/ss/vp/scvptraining.asp>.

In addition, the CDE has partnered with the Placer County Office of Education to offer the Training Educators through Recognition and Identification Strategies (TETRIS) workshops that provide teachers and school staff with tools to identify, recognize, support, and refer students with mental health needs in a respectful and culturally responsive manner.

These workshops will help increase awareness and knowledge of student mental health issues and thus reduce the stigma and discrimination associated with mental illness. For more information on TETRIS workshops, please visit the Placer County Office of Education Eliminating Barriers to Learning Web page at <http://sites.placercoe.k12.ca.us/EBL/>.

For more information regarding this subject, please contact Stephanie Papas, School Health Education Consultant, California Department of Education, by phone at 916-445-8441 or by e-mail at SPapas@cde.ca.gov; or Monica Nepomuceno, Education Programs Consultant, California Department of Education, by phone at 916-323-2212 or by e-mail at MNepomuceno@cde.ca.gov.

As President Obama noted in his Second Inaugural Address earlier this week, "Our journey is not complete until all our children, from the streets of Detroit to the hills of Appalachia, to the quiet lanes of Newtown, know that they are cared for and cherished and always safe from harm."

I thank you for the work you are already doing to ensure we achieve this goal for all California students through safe school plans and other strategies supporting the whole child.

Sincerely,



Tom Torlakson

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Attachment

RESOURCES

There are many resources to assist you as you review and update your school safety and crisis response plan. A complete set of planning resources, and funding to implement the plans you make, is available through the California Department of Education (CDE) Web site, including:

- Crisis Response Planning—Guidance for developing a complete Crisis Response Box may be found on the CDE Crisis Response Web page at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/ss/cp/crisisresp.asp>.
- Safe School Planning—Safe Schools: A Planning Guide for Action is guidance for developing a complete safe school plan. It may be ordered from CDE Press on the Catalog Listings of Publications Web page at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/re/pn/rc/ap/pubcat.aspx>.

As a leader in your district, you may receive requests from schools in your area seeking resources to help students, parents, and school staff cope with traumatic events.

- Coping With Tragedy— Guidance about what can be done to alleviate the effects of tragedies on students' emotional states may be found on the American Red Cross Web site at <http://www.redcross.org/disaster/masters/facingfear> and on the CDE Coping with Tragedy Web page at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/ss/cp/tragedy.asp>.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) has an excellent resource to help schools develop emergency preparedness programs at <http://store.samhsa.gov/product/Mental-Health-Response-to-Mass-Violence-and-Terrorism-A-Training-Manual/SMA04-3959>.

The CDE has a mental health listserv, which can be accessed on the CDE Mental Health Web page at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/cg/mh/>. We often send out resources and valuable information related to student mental health and other important topics. We hope you take the time to sign up and share these resources with colleagues and parents to communicate the valuable information that may help them deal with mental health issues, find community resources, and cope with school violence.