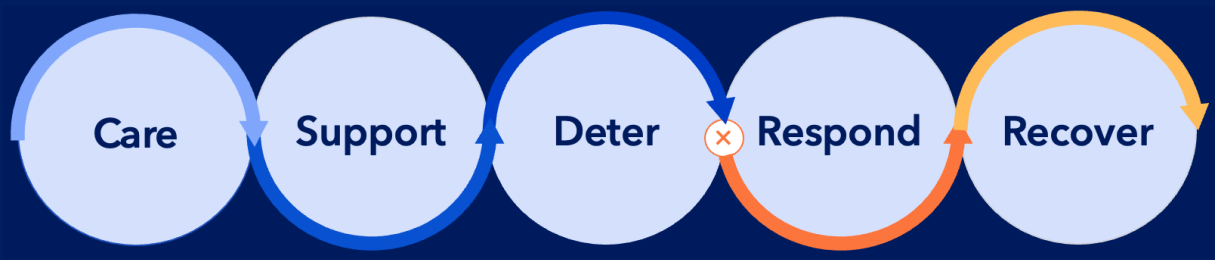
// thru.co

School Safety and the Superintendent

Paper: Moving from Chance to Strategy



October 2024

thru

Contents

Acknowledgements

This report would not have been possible without the insights from superintendents, safety and security experts, and others in the field of public safety.

To the superintendents and others who gave of their precious time to speak with us and provide input into this report, we cannot thank you enough. To the school safety and security experts we spoke with, both in districts and in the industry, we are sincerely grateful for your insights and expertise memorialized in this report.

Due to the sensitive nature of the information discussed, many of our interviews with district leaders were conducted anonymously, and so, we are not able to cite many of the individuals by name in the report. However, we hope that all these insights combined in one place will be helpful to superintendents and their boards as they plan and assess the district's school safety capabilities.

To the individuals and organizations that provided inputs to this report, either directly or indirectly through their work, we recognize, appreciate and thank you, sincerely. These organizations include: the School Superintendent's Association (AASA), the U.S. FBI, Ohio School Safety Center, the U.S. Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center, the Center on PBIS, the New Jersey School Boards Association, schoolsafety.gov, U.S. DOE, Pew, Florida DOE Office of Safe Schools, the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), Idaho DOE, The74, the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority, the School Shooting Safety Compendium, the U.S. CDC, the Hunt Institute, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, RAND, Gale, EdWeek, the NASP Principal Recovery Network, Matthew Thompson, Frank Kitzerow, Adam Saenz, Mike Matranga, Pinellas County Schools, the National Conference of State Legislatures, Sandy Hook Promise, I Love You Guys, and ZeroNow.

From our advisors, contributors, and editors, we hope superintendents and their staff find this paper insightful and helpful as they plan and lead their school safety efforts.

"Nobody cares how much you know
until they know how much you care."

- *Theodore Roosevelt*

Introduction

Superintendents know they are the individuals ultimately responsible for the safety of their schools. And they understand that school safety is not a single person or program or technology, but a complex set of interconnected initiatives and skillsets.

While school safety as an umbrella term also applies to other incidents, such as natural disasters or a pandemic, this white paper focuses on the category of school violence, specifically school shootings.

The purpose of this paper is to share a research-based view, a continuum, of school safety we've developed for the PreK-12 district superintendent.

The full scope of school safety is immensely broad. There is a plethora of research, resources, and advice available for security staff, school administrators and principals -- but these resources usually keep to a particular aspect of the space, such as physical barriers or reporting systems.

"There is no playbook for a tragedy of this magnitude anywhere," said Superintendent Robert Runcie in an interview following the tragic events in Parkland, Florida.

School safety in a PreK-12 district is often comprised of programs, communications, partnerships, and risk reduction efforts that serve to improve students' well-being and help them succeed within a safe environment.

School safety has grown into a multi-billion dollar industry supported by new federal and state investments, such as the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act. Meanwhile, surveys find that school safety is one of voters' top issues, and legislators in nearly every state propose new laws each year aimed at addressing that priority.

School safety doesn't happen in the Legislature, though. It happens within school communities. And although school safety requires a team of school and community leaders working in concert with each other, one person is ultimately responsible for the children and adults on our PK-12 campuses - the district superintendent. Superintendents receive surprisingly little guidance to navigate the school safety space, however, and their level of preparedness is often a product of chance.

90+

Sources reviewed

40+

Experts and superintendents interviewed

Our research questions:

Who do superintendents believe is ultimately responsible for school safety?

Do they believe there is a commonly accepted framework or playbook to guide them?

We set out to gather qualitative data, like existing materials on the role of the Superintendent in school safety. To start, we reviewed over 80 research studies, books, podcasts, videos, toolkits, online resources, and other reports to gather insights into district-wide school safety practices. Themes began to emerge, and we then identified and interviewed over 40 superintendents, district chiefs of school safety, mental health professionals, and law enforcement experts. This report reflects the results of our research.

Our team approached this research understanding that superintendents have limited time and resources, and that are constantly navigating competing priorities. **So, Superintendents, if you only have time to read this first page, here's the key takeaway:**

Focus on the quality and character of school life. Give it at least as much attention and resources as the physical hardening of schools.

A Super[intendent]-Sized Gap

The PreK-12 superintendents we spoke with unanimously agreed that they are the individuals ultimately accountable for the safety of their schools. The mental health professionals, law enforcement experts, and superintendents we spoke with also unanimously agreed that there is no common playbook or framework written specifically for the PK-12 Superintendent, integrating the practices that school safety encompasses.

"We have no national guidance and no common playbook for how a school official should react to the threat of a school shooting. It's on people to essentially make it up when they're in these circumstances," says David Riedman, founder of the School Shooting Database.

A superintendent in New York confessed to us that although they told families school safety was their highest priority - in terms of action, it just wasn't true. They wanted to do everything they could to keep their students and staff safe, but they lacked both the know-how and the resources to do so.

We suspected they weren't alone. After all, superintendents have traditionally been seasoned educators, rising through the ranks of teacher and school administrator before moving to the district office and eventually leading it. They do not become superintendents because they are safety experts, and few receive formal training related to school safety beyond a few hours here and there. Moreover, school safety has become yet another critical responsibility superintendents must attend to on a growing list.

We began asking superintendents how they felt about their ability to lead on school safety. Those conversations produced both good and bad news. The good news was that many we spoke to felt relatively confident in their level of preparedness and could point to specific measures they have in place, as well as how they work with law enforcement.

The bad news was that every one of the superintendents who said they felt prepared also shared that they became so through happenstance or intuition. Rather than receiving comprehensive training or having clear guidelines they could refer to, they lucked into a community where there was already a solid strategy they could build on or a strong partner in law enforcement whose lead they could follow. They often lead by reaching out to others, and/or by chance.

// thru.co

"Information reaches me as Superintendent in different ways. But there **wasn't an official onboarding** related to school safety."

- *Superintendent of a district in California*

thru

Those superintendents were also quick to acknowledge that their peers are not always so lucky. They pointed to nearby districts or others where they've worked, sharing stories of campus layouts physically impossible to secure, local infighting that led law enforcement to cut communication with the district's security team, and investments in physical security measures that offered more show than substance while budget cuts brought an end to mental health initiatives.

Equally concerning, these stories came from a pool of experienced superintendents who have worked in multiple districts. In contrast, newer superintendents tend to have fewer experiences to draw from and even less time to dedicate to school safety as they learn all the other aspects of the job.

There is an incredible amount of research and literature on the various topics of school safety. The invaluable work of organizations like Sandy Hook Promise have led to the development of research and programs aimed at violence prevention. There are frameworks from government agencies and nonprofits, peer-reviewed research on the impact of specific strategies like metal detectors and school resources officers, marketing materials of innovative technology products, and a wide array of data and analytics on everything from instances of school violence to the number of states mandating panic buttons to how safe students and teachers feel at school.

> "There are no hard guidelines for what a district needs to do. We lobbied Tallahassee regarding what we need to follow as a district. We want a manual, but we've just been told 'the state is working on it.'"
>
> - *Superintendent of a district in Florida*

Our research turned up surprisingly little on how superintendents approach school safety and their specific role in it as the leader of the district. We searched academic articles, government websites, reports from think tanks and advocacy organizations, as well as news stories. That process turned up just a handful of sources, and those sources tended to focus on specific topics.

A great resource for superintendents is the *School Safety and Crisis Planning* Toolkit produced by the School Superintendent's Association (AASA). The toolkit provides a checklist of procedures before, during and after a crisis, i.e., "What I need to know and do as the district's superintendent…"

Otherwise, we were so surprised by the lack of guidance for superintendents on school safety that we contacted some of the leading thought experts and practitioners to make sure we weren't missing anything and to learn from them directly. We weren't. We found that superintendents – already pressed for time and tasked with an ever-growing list of responsibilities – do not have access to any sort of playbook or at least something that encompasses the full set of complexities and how to prioritize them. In fact, we essentially found a lack of resources tailored to their specific needs. Though, we found no shortage of companies targeting superintendents to sell a variety of products in the public safety industry.

Filling the Gap

thru set out to begin filling the gap we found. We interviewed superintendents across the country, conducted desk research, and spoke with leaders of national organizations representing school security officers and other advocacy groups.

We also tested our hypotheses with each of those individuals and groups in addition to attendees at the country's largest school safety conferences.

That work led us to three conclusions:

- School safety has two primary goals. The first is to reduce the risk of an event from happening, while the second is to respond effectively if it does.
- Consequently, school safety is not a single "thing," but rather a continuum of activities in relation to an event
- A comprehensive school safety strategy for a district must include activities across the continuum

A School Safety Continuum

Figure 1: School Safety Continuum

To aid superintendents in their school safety efforts, we developed a framework for school safety in PK-12 districts, visualized in a continuum. We believe the processes involved with school safety continues out in both directions on the incident timeline. As a result, a district's safety protocols and capabilities also need to fall across a continuum.

The 'X' in the continuum represents an incident. The stages furthest to the left are preventive. They aim to create the conditions that reduce the likelihood that someone in a school community would harm others. They included fostering a positive school climate and providing targeted supports for students who require additional help developing healthy strategies.

On the left side of the continuum is the work a district can do before an event, and on the right side of the continuum is what the district should plan for following an event. All five areas are not mutually exclusive.

The superintendents and school safety experts with whom we spoke validated this as a helpful mental model for the district's various initiatives.

We began to look along the path of a student moving towards an incident, focusing on the superintendent's responsibilities, and by association the work of the district. What many existing frameworks and toolkits cover are the areas of physically deterring and responding to the incident – essentially just before and after the event.

But all superintendents we spoke with agreed it was more than that. It starts with caring about the student. And precisely where the responsibilities end is hard to pin down.

Many schools and districts have long invested in many of the activities on the left side of the continuum, though they do not always register as part of "school safety." When implemented well, however, they represent long-term investments with proven benefits that include and extend beyond school safety. As preventive measures, these stages represent long-term investments. They also have proven benefits that extend beyond school safety.

"Sixty years of data are clear. Building strong relationships and teaching children how to identify, process, and address their emotions in healthy ways reduces aggression, increases pro-social interaction, and improves academic outcomes."

- *Adam Saenz, CEO The Applied EQ Group and Psychologist, The Oakwood Collective*

In contrast, the stages further to the right recognize that early-stage work may not prevent every event, and so they aim to deter a would-be assailant and prepare the school community to respond effectively if an event does take place. Activities aimed at deterrence might include erecting physical barriers – such as fences, metal detectors, badge systems, and armed officers.

Much of the response work involves planning and training activities. Districts also need to plan for the recovery phase after an event is over, including how to support student and adult mental health and "get back to normal."

Fortunately, an incident will never strike most schools. But if one does, a district will need to react by putting its plans into action alongside its partners. A comprehensive school safety strategy should include activities across a continuum. Developing a strategy with all five of these stages in mind is critical because each addresses a different opportunity to avoid the worst-case scenario, and any of those opportunities could present itself at a given time.

The following includes a brief introduction to these five stages to orient district leaders. The topics include an increasing body of research and literature, the following of which can only skim the surface.

Care

Creating the conditions that reduce the risk of school violence

In our interviews with superintendents and our review of the research and literature, the idea of the school's climate as a factor in the context of school violence came up again and again. Superintendents agreed that a model on minimizing school violence must start with relationships and connections.

Trusting and supportive relationships amongst students and the school community affect and contribute to all other dimensions of the climate. School climate refers to the quality and character of school life, according to the National School Climate Center. "School climate is based on patterns of students', parents' and school personnel's experience of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures."

School climate, among other things, is a major component of the caring stage in our continuum. It is important to note that students' perceptions of school climate can vary in time based on race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and grade level.

The aspect of caring in our continuum is primarily about fostering connections and relationships with students. "Our students do not have any reason to listen to us, follow our directions, or answer our questions other than that is what most of their parents and society expect them to do. However, once we establish a personal connection and bond with our students, indicate that we are interested in them as individuals and prove that we care about them, their work, and their future, there is much more motivation for them to contribute to the relationship in the form of instructional engagement and work," wrote Matthew D. Thompson, superintendent of Montgomery County Public Schools.

According to many superintendents, districts should provide comprehensive services that extend beyond the school day and outward into the whole community. Superintendents can work to build partnerships with local youth programs, mental health services, mentoring programs, and the like. Superintendents play a pivotal role in strengthening school-youth program partnerships by acting as connectors and facilitators between schools and community organizations. By fostering relationships with local programs, such as 4-H programs and school-based health centers, superintendents can create a network of support that enhances the capacity of schools to address a wide range of student needs.

"It is universally good to build in systems and structures that ensure kids feel connected and engaged. And it is the job of school to instill a sense of belonging in all kids."

- *Licensed social worker in the Northeast U.S.*

Superintendents often have the influence and credibility needed to bring diverse stakeholders together, facilitating collaboration and communication among schools, families, and community organizations. They can advocate for resources and policies that support the sustainability of school/ community programs.

Superintendents' Takeaway | **Care**

- Look for opportunities for the district to build upon the quality and character of school life (school climate)
- Identify and facilitate strategic partnerships with community-based youth programs

Support

Providing targeted supports for students identified as a higher risk

The challenges of our world increasingly impact students' learning and well-being in complex ways. Not least of which was the challenge of a global pandemic that impacted students in academic and emotional ways.

Supporting students and teachers is of utmost importance everywhere. This has been widely recognized by policymakers and educators in the years since the COVID-19 pandemic, through such federal programs as the National Partnership for Student Success and the *Bipartisan Safer Communities Act*.

One of the myths of school shootings is the instant reaction by the public or the media that the shooter "just snapped." This fits a comfortable narrative for most, but research shows it is simply not true in most cases. Most shooters travel a *pathway to violence*, as it's known in behavioral threat management, openly demonstrating certain behaviors to teachers and classmates, often on social media. Ideally, the behavior can be identified and the path diverted through student supports that address the student's needs. These might be mental health supports, but they also might include support like mentorship, apprenticeship, financial assistance, or academic support.

In our continuum, we are not necessarily introducing something new, as much as weaving and integrating key functions that typically exist in a district right now. In the area of support, traditional capabilities of a district include facilitating counseling, social services, and Multi-tiered System of Support (MTSS). Other functions that might be considered support functions in the school safety space include those that aim to identify threats and mitigate them by effectively supporting the student.

62%

of districts with a threat-reporting system

NCES data shows sixty-two percent (62%) of districts in SY 2021-22 had deployed a structured, anonymous threat-reporting system, such as an online submission form, telephone hotline or written submission form via drop box. This number is sure to have increased since. Threat reporting systems should also be part of a broader and more comprehensive approach to building trust in the school and community, (see previous section on 'Care').

Web monitoring tools like Gaggle and GoGuardian can scan students' emails, chat messages and other materials for specific words and phrases that may indicate harm. Moderators evaluate and flag content for references to self-harm, depression, drug use and violent threats. There are proponents and opponents to this segment of the technology market.

The practices around behavioral threat management belong in this category of support, as well. Behavioral threat management is a systematic process to gather information and manage potentially dangerous or violent situations. School psychologists and teachers play a critical role on a threat assessment team in gathering data and identifying supports for the student. Behavioral threat management teams also often gather data around absenteeism, academics, MTSS, and discipline data.

Mark Follman describes in his book a case from Salem, Oregon, "There had been some vague signals from the unhappy teen that he might want to harm himself or others, and the Salem-Keizer team had intervened to make him feel more included in his school; a couple of academic adjustments, a closer connection with a teacher, a recommendation for extracurricular programming. The kid ended up doing well, went off to college, and was now an upstanding young man in the community."

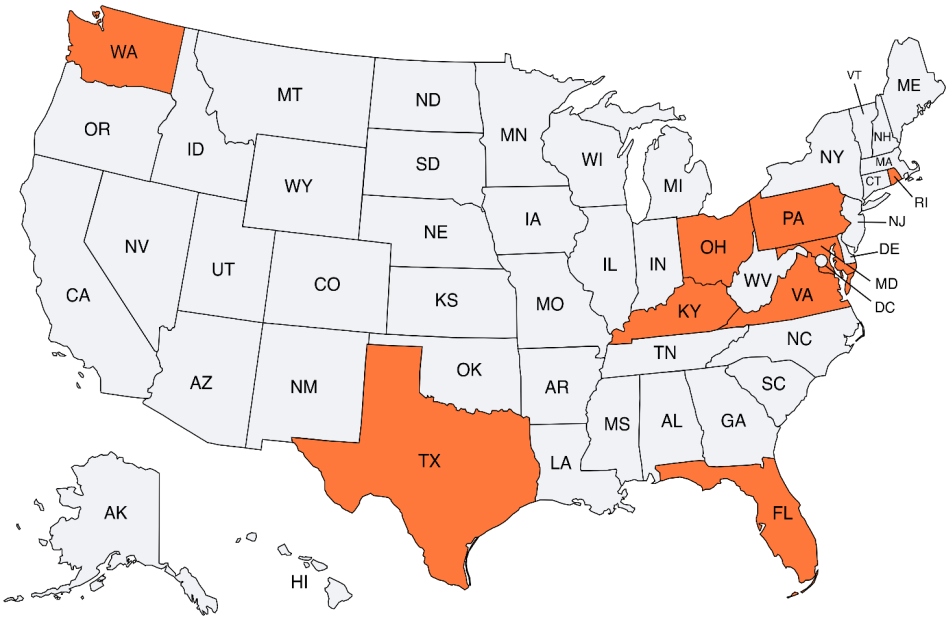
As of this writing, nine states–Florida, Kentucky, Maryland, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Texas and Washington, Virginia and Washington have passed legislation requiring some form of behavioral threat management and/or the use of behavioral threat assessment teams.

Some superintendents prefer titles like "Student Assistance Teams." For, in the end, one of the big ideas is that the pathway to violence can be diverted by the right student supports.

Superintendents' Takeaway | **Support**

- Identify and review your state's regulations around school safety and the use of behavioral threat assessment practices
- Gather student data to inform cross-disciplinary 'Student Assistance Teams'

Figure 2: States requiring some form of behavioral threat management



"Absolutely, we want to make sure we capture the eleventh-hour incident before it happens, the kid who has weapons in his backpack and is on his way. That's big, right? That's success. But I'll tell you this: It's also failure. If a kid makes it that far and is under our watch, **we've failed**. That kid has now committed a crime, probably a felony, and he's going to be institutionalized. Yes, we've saved the people who were in harm's way. But now we've also lost that kid."

– *John Van Dreal, from Trigger Points*

Deter

Readying the school to physically mitigate risks and potential threats

Deterring would-be violence and the ability to physically protect students and staff is the next category in our continuum of school safety. As an industry topic, it is often comprised of safety measures, technologies, and people, such as school resource officers.

Safety and security measures increasingly employed by many districts include, for examples, controlled access to school buildings; classrooms that can be locked from the inside; and faculty/staff badges/IDs.

In the technology market, there are traditional public safety technologies, like silent alarms, metal detectors, and panic buttons. One week after staff members at Apalachee High School were outfitted with wearable panic buttons, the devices were used to alert law enforcement of the shooting.

NCES data shows the majority of schools report using security cameras to monitor the school (93%) and two-way radios for any staff (83%). Seventy-five percent (75%) report using staff IDs or badges.

93%

of schools use security monitoring cameras

83%

of schools use two-way radios for staff

75%

of schools use staff IDs or badges

But the industry now abounds with a broader range of school safety products: e.g., Kevlar backpack inserts, smoke cannons, bulletproof white boards, "aggression detection" microphones, impact-resistant film for classroom windows, facial recognition systems, attack-resistant door frames, and armored safe rooms. There are more, of course. The market of school security products is documented extensively in other literature and is not explored in depth in this paper.

Two out of three schools employ one or more security staff, per 2019-2020 data (the most recent available). The U.S. DOE defines an SRO as career sworn law enforcement officers with arrest authority, who have specialized training and are assigned to work in collaboration with school organizations. School districts and law enforcement agencies often use memoranda of understanding (MOUs) to structure SRO programs. MOUs spell out expectations for all participants in an SRO program, including schools, law enforcement agencies, and individual SROs. They establish clear boundaries for the role of SROs to prevent them from assuming misaligned responsibilities.

There are heated debates on the topic of SROs in schools, with some arguing SROs prevent some violent incidents and some arguing that the presence of SROs is associated with higher rates of arrest, exclusionary discipline, and violence. Some studies suggest SROs appear to reduce some forms of violence in schools, and that they impact stakeholders' perceptions of school climate and safety. Empirical studies of SROs suggest that law enforcement referral rates increase in schools where SROs are present, and several studies find disproportionalities in law enforcement referrals and school disciplinary sanctions for historically marginalized students increase in schools with SROs.

When it comes to security measures and the employment of SROs, many believe an Emergency Operations Plan should be developed for each school (supported by the district) and that it is in those planning activities that decisions be made around deterring threats. The ability of the district to respond to an incident is covered in the next section.

Superintendents' Takeaway | **Deter**

- Assess safety and security measures in place in schools, such as controlled access and recent site assessments
- Require that technology vendors share data on effectiveness of their product(s)

Respond

Planning for the community to respond to an incident

In responding to an incident like a school shooting, a K-12 school district and its superintendent play crucial roles in coordinating and implementing an effective response plan. The district often plays a part in ensuring that each school has a comprehensive Emergency Operations Plan (EOP) that is tailored to its specific needs and circumstances. This involves collaborating with schools to ensure that all involved parties know their roles and responsibilities and ensuring that these plans are integrated with local, regional, state, and federal emergency plans

The superintendent's role in this point on the continuum is to facilitate a partnership between the district and other stakeholders, including the police department, school personnel, first responders, and community partners, to define how the district will respond to emergencies ranging from natural disasters to human-caused threats like active shooter situations. The superintendent creates an atmosphere of collaboration between school officials and their community partners to prepare for, and to respond to, a threat.

In *The Role of Districts in Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans* (District Guide), the U.S. DOE outlines the recommended responsibilities of a district:

- Coordinating with schools and community partners to make EOPs a collaborative effort and help ensure integration with district, local, regional, state, tribal, and Federal agency EOPs;
- Providing planning parameters for use by schools throughout the entire district, e.g., minimum set of annexes, minimum set of prioritized hazards and threats;
- Supporting schools at each step as they develop EOPs that address all types of emergencies and are tailored to fit each school's individual needs.

The development process also emphasizes the importance of understanding the specific needs and vulnerabilities of the school community to create a tailored and effective EOP. Schools must also consider the diverse needs of their student population, including those with disabilities or limited English proficiency. Based on their EOPs, schools typically conduct regular training and drills to ensure that staff and students are familiar with the response procedures.

The U.S. DOE's *Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans*, provides guidelines and toolkits for schools. These guidelines recommend a six-step planning process that involves collaboration with community partners and regular updates to the plan to address new threats or changes in the school environment. States and local regulations may dictate specific drills or exercises to be conducted by schools, but superintendents should be wary of check-the-box initiatives and look closely at the effectiveness of the drill.

Through the leadership of the superintendent integrating community partners into the planning and execution of these plans, schools can enhance their response capabilities.

Superintendents' Takeaway | **Respond**

- Build or facilitate the partnerships needed in the community to respond to an incident, such as with the police department.
- Support schools in developing their Emergency Operations Plans.

Recover

Planning for the resources necessary to recover from an incident

Recovering from a traumatic event like a school shooting requires a comprehensive and empathetic approach that involves the entire school community.

In our framework, we use the term 'recovery,' but recovery happens at many levels: individual students, teachers, staff, even first responders; the school; the district; the community. Recovery from the trauma lasts indefinitely. Many superintendents of districts that experienced an incident have gone on to form non-profit advocacy groups lending advice and support to other districts hoping to mitigate what happened in their district.

The superintendent must establish a representative leadership team to guide the development of a recovery plan (before the incident). This team should include school administrators, mental health professionals, teachers, parents, and community partners.

The recovery process itself is long-term and involves several phases, each with specific action items tailored to the unique needs of the affected community. Initially, the focus would be on stabilizing the learning environment and promoting a sense of community for healing. This includes providing emotional and behavioral supports to help students and staff cope with the immediate aftermath of the trauma.

The capabilities of the district in our 'Recover' category involve developing a post-crisis recovery plan. In *Recovery from Large-Scale Crises: Guidelines for Crisis Teams and Administrators*, the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) share, "Most often, the communities that go through these events come together as never before.

However, it is important to keep in mind that they may be forever altered after a large-scale crisis event. Thus, the task for everyone is to integrate the trauma into their lives and find a new normal…

School administrators and school crisis teams play a critical role in assisting the school community in response and recovery efforts and in fostering healing and resilience."

Challenges and needs often addressed by a recovery plan, include:

1. Identifying and assessing traumatized individuals.
2. Finding space to provide crisis intervention services.
3. Timing the return to school.
4. Helping adults manage their own reactions.
5. Responding to spontaneous memorials and other remembrances.

Recovery plans should consider both short- and long-term needs of the community, such as activities to be done in the immediate aftermath, one month after the disaster, six months after disaster, and beyond.

Emphasize the importance of student-teacher relationships, says the American Psychological Association, as they are powerful predictors of student emotional wellness and academic success. Returning to routine activities gradually and purposefully helps restore a sense of normalcy and safety. Schools should also provide training for educators and staff on resilience strategies and self-care to prevent burnout and compassion fatigue.

By fostering a supportive and nurturing school culture, districts can support students and staff as they heal and recover from the traumatic event.

Superintendents' Takeaway | **Recover**

- Don't wait. Draft a recovery plan now.

The Building Blocks of School Safety

Given the many practices and skillsets required of district-wide school safety, the superintendent needs a particular view. A visual representation of the strategic areas by which to plan and assess. These would be the building blocks of a district-wide school safety framework.

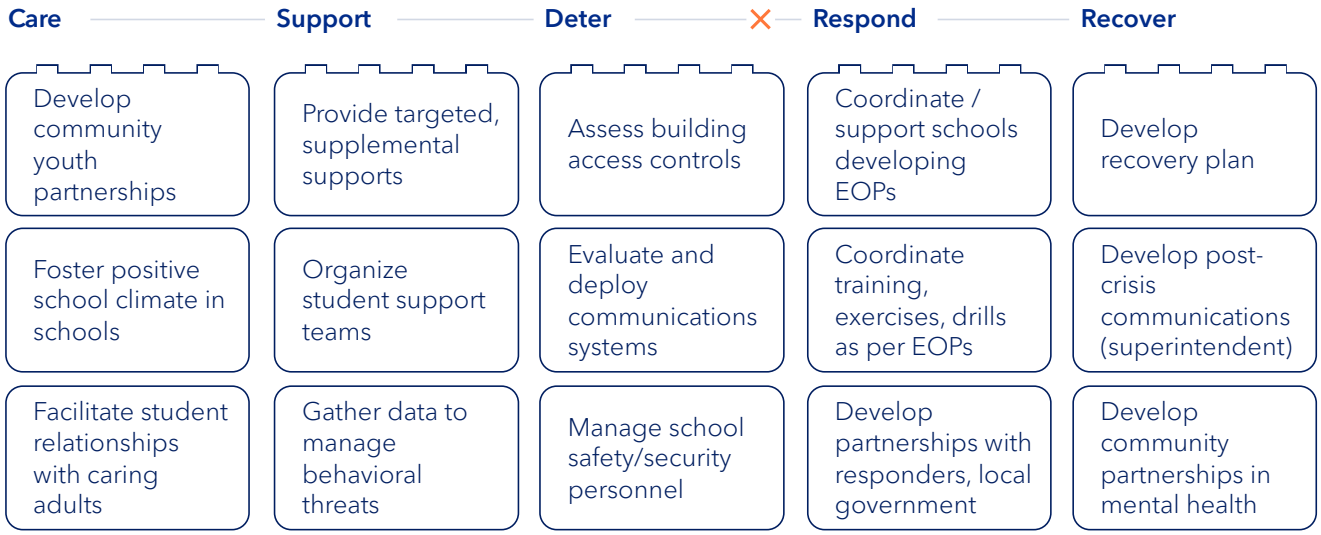
The key topics discussed on the preceding pages touched essentially on the work of the district. The framework below illustrates what a district does in operational terms, irrespective of the existing org chart and roles. It outlines the practices of a balanced approach to the district's role in school safety.

Districts can use this framework to examine their districts and communities for gaps in preparedness; and assess themselves in terms of resources, progress on initiatives, financials, etc.

The building blocks display the work and facilitate the coordination that should cut across departments and break down silos in the district and community. It is what the district does, (not who it is or why it exists). By extension, it depicts the capabilities the Superintendent must ensure are supported and sustained.

The building blocks of school safety can be used as a framework to assess a district or community's portfolio of school safety work. It can also be used as the structure for a district-wide school safety plan. And it can facilitate cross-disciplinary discussions by helping everyone to speak the same language.

Figure 3: School Safety Building Blocks



The Superintendent as Leader and Partner

Most principals and superintendents today would agree school safety takes a village. Literally, in fact. It takes a team of individuals in the teaching, mental health, counseling, law enforcement, youth and correctional spheres.

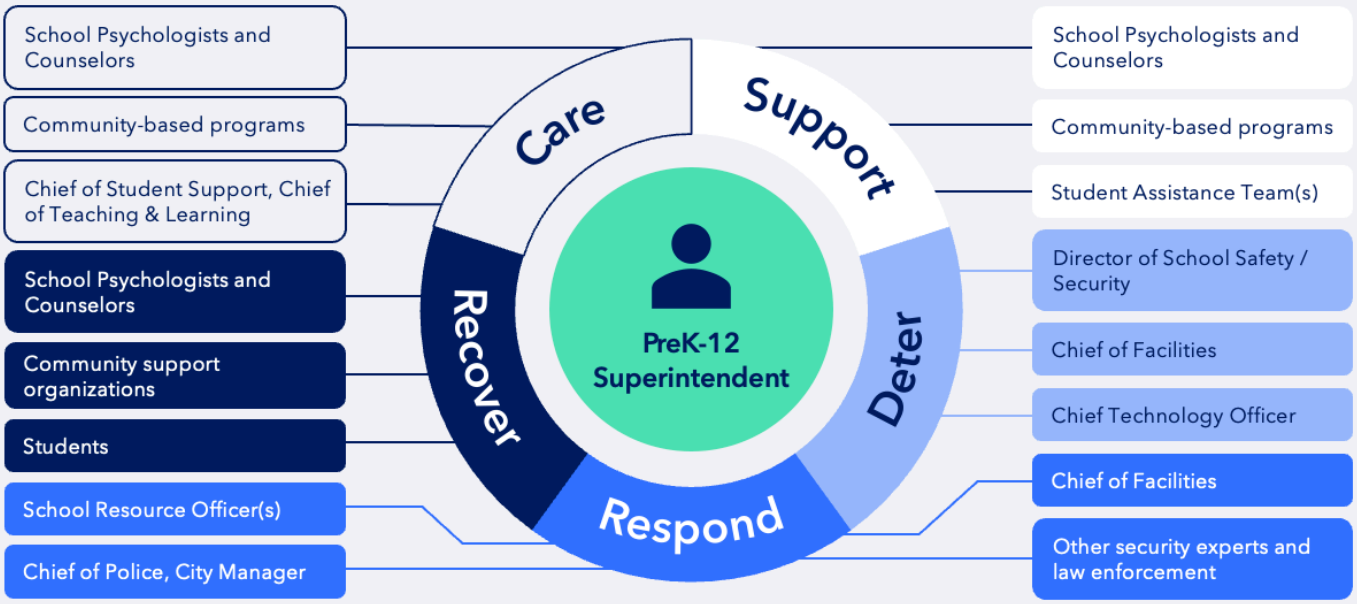
It's important to identify with whom the superintendent should partner. Those partners will include individuals both within the district and outside of it. Frank Kitzerow, President of the National Association of School and Campus Police Chiefs, told us, "You should be asking, who comprises the ecosystem?" Where districts have the resources, a head of security or district police chief typically plays a leading role in the district's school safety work. In many small districts, this role often falls to the superintendent and individual principals to collaborate with law enforcement.

District staff overseeing operations, facilities, and communications could also be part of a school safety team. Some districts include attorneys who can write policy, principals, and support staff. Cabinet-level involvement is key.

"Every school district has a cabinet member that leads teaching and learning. They need a cabinet-level member that oversees school safety if you want it to be prioritized,"

- *Director of School Safety and Security at a school district in Maryland*

Figure 4: A Superintendent's School Safety Ecosystem



*Principals, teachers, paras and related services providers play a key role in the work of all 6 areas and are assumed in the boxes above, as well.

*Roles designated above play critical or lead roles in the area. The teams within each area would often be much broader.

Outside of the district, law enforcement plays a central role. In addition, representatives from emergency management services and fire are likely partners, as are the city manager, and a public information officer. Other community partners, such as mental health providers, may also play a role.

Regardless of where on the continuum an activity may sit, however, the Superintendent should always represent the community's interests and serve as the face of the district's efforts. For example, the superintendent may not individually develop the emergency operations plan, but they should understand it to ensure they can both explain and justify it to staff, students, and families. At every stage, the Superintendent should also be able to identify who else may need to be at the table and stand ready to communicate with the broader school community.

"The superintendent is the leader, and whether the situation is good, or it is bad, the school community will be looking to the superintendent."

- *Frank Kitzerow, President of the National Association of School and Campus Police Chiefs and former Chief of Police for Palm Beach County School*

Conclusion

The operations of a school district include traditional organizational processes, such as budgeting, HR and IT. There are also education processes and district-level practices specific to the PreK-12 environment, like teaching and learning, student support, and procuring textbooks. At **thru**, we often write about the optimization of both types of "business processes" in a school district; those that comprise the business of education, for which the superintendent is responsible. School safety can be viewed and managed as another of these business processes.

Key areas of business in a school district are typically comprised of roles, processes, and tools. Often a cabinet member is appointed, who, along with their staff, manage the respective business processes and they work within the parameters of that function. Their dedication is what makes the work happen every day.

Superintendents lead the way on these traditional business areas, but also in spaces that might be new and emerging, such as AI and Pre-K in today's landscape. Superintendents should regard and manage school safety as a business process. They can apply their natural instincts in leadership to bring the right people together. Lead the planning efforts. Maintain the focus and resources. Be the communicator and advocate.

For superintendents wondering if they are doing enough on school safety, like the one who confessed their apprehension to us in New York, know that you are not alone. The school safety landscape is filled with a tremendous amount of noise and precious little practical guidance for district leaders. Nonetheless, the superintendent is ultimately responsible for the safety of all on their campuses, and as such, must chart a path forward.

This report offers a starting point for doing so.

- Ensure that you are attending to all five phases of the continuum.
- Identify the right partners in the community to support students.
- Recognize the activities where you are positioned to lead.
- Champion the work.

A student walked into a Counselor's office in Cheatham County, Tennessee with an automatic weapon and written plan of attack in his backpack. The Counselor talked with the student, listened, and the event was de-escalated. The Counselor received the Congressional Medal of Honor.

In Chesterland, Ohio, a student found a bullet left by a classmate in the men's bathroom and reported it to the school's SRO. Searching the camera surveillance footage in the hallway, the student was identified and law enforcement found a weapon and ammunition in his backpack.

Students on a bus in West Virginia reported seeing guns in a classmate's backpack. The authorities would later find guns and ammunition in the backpack, and the student admitted he was planning to kill someone that day. "If it wasn't for those students speaking up, the day could have ended a lot differently," said the Superintendent.

To mark the 25th anniversary of the Columbine shooting, four students planned a mass shooting at their high school in Pennsylvania. A parent reported to police seeing a group chat in which the students detailed their plans to use guns and explosives. The students were arrested on multiple charges.

In Denver, a student, abused by his parents, had plans to "express my anger and rage" at his high school and then take his own life. But a fellow student noticed his plight and invited him over to his house for some food and shower. Through the simple act of kindness, the student said he was changed, and he shared his story in a TED talk.

A student was arrested after his grandmother discovered a journal that contained detailed plans to commit a school shooting and reported the plan to police. The plan involved pressure-cooker bombs under the bleachers and using zip-ties on door handles. His grandmother also discovered a carbine rifle hidden in his room.

thru.co