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## Are You Monitoring Climate Change in Your Schools or Just Taking Attendance?

*By Donald McPherson*

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*At Issue: According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), 86 percent of the schools participating in a recent study indicated at least one violent crime, theft or other crime at their school. Despite a plethora of federal and state programs and funding, school violence will always exist in one form or another.*

**Violence in the School Environment**

Headmasters and other school administrators are well aware of

the far-reaching effects of school-related violence and student hazing. Tragic events such as these, regardless of fault or circumstance, negatively impact a school's ability to educate students, supervise staff and generally work with the school community.

Since 1987, I have worked in school-based "prevention programs" addressing issues ranging from underage drinking and drunk driving to bullying and

teasing in elementary classrooms. More recently, I have had intimate involvement in some of the nation's highest profile cases involving student (and student-athlete) behavior. I have worked directly with students, athletic teams, coaches and administrators and have advised administrators and policy makers as they have examined risk factors and sought solutions.

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While it has been enlightening to have privileged knowledge and insight to such incidents, the most frustrating aspect has been the understanding that, in many cases, the incidents could have been prevented. In the aftermath, we often ask “how could this have happened?” However, such thinking is quickly abandoned as we prepare and protect ourselves from the next event. We install security systems, metal detectors and write policy that stiffens consequences for perpetrators. While such measures may reduce the risk of catastrophic results and enable us to respond quickly, it does not provide the answers to the question “how could this have happened?”

### **Getting to the cause of violence.**

Moreover, the actions we take in the aftermath of an incident typically address the dynamics of the incident itself (e.g., installation of metal detectors in the case of a gun or knife incident). As we assume the problem is being addressed, many of us go back to our daily lives with a false sense of security. Rarely do we conduct a comprehensive analysis of why the incident occurred that includes multiple environmental and social perspectives. For example, when a group of high school students were involved in a “hazing incident” that involved older students sexually assaulting younger students at a remote camp, the issues considered in the aftermath were with regard to supervision and the efficacy

of “camps.” We failed to examine why the specific behaviors in question were considered to be “OK and appropriate” by the perpetrators and victims alike. Events such as this don’t “just happen.” This is learned behavior and there are warning signs and red flags that can indicate a greater likelihood of an occurrence. We must train ourselves to look at our school environment in a way that allows us to identify risk factors in their most benign form, before they become “normalized” (learned) behaviors.

It is important to note that our response does not always come in the form of a specific action to quell a behavior. Very often, it comes in our lack of a response. As adults we hear language we deem inappropriate (grammatically and/or socially) and yet our silence legitimizes such language. Our lack of engagement only reinforces such language and makes it acceptable. Further, as technology has transformed the lives of young people with a language devoid of adult interference, such language and attitudes can quickly become their norm.

For administrators, faculty and staff with a long tenure in one building or district, identifying critical shifts in student behaviors and trends may be easily detected, but difficult to address nonetheless. Still, such familiarity can also desensitize school personnel who, like a frog in a pot on a stove, don’t recognize the



temperature has reached a boiling point until it’s too late. The question is: how do we respond in an appropriate and measured way that is consistent with the perceived risk?

### **Evaluating the overall climate.**

In order to assess the presence of risk factors, an environmental scan involving all school stakeholders and constituents should be taken to understand if a climate exists that may support egregious behaviors.

Some questions that should be answered include, but are not limited to:

- Is there open bullying and/or harassment of “other groups” in the school newspaper, fliers and other public documents and announcements?
- Do members of “other groups” feel ignored or marginalized by a “mainstream” culture?
- Have there been complaints in the past and if so, how have they been addressed?

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Other environmental questions should include how students socialize with one another and the expectations placed on them to uphold certain traditions.

- Are there dominant and demonstrative social groups (cliques) present?
- Are there traditions in sports teams, student organizations and other student activity groups that have the potential to escalate?
- Has “techno-social” behavior taken the place of interpersonal interaction?

Such questions can give school officials a clearer understanding of how students experience their school and culture and help identify potential areas of risk. The purpose of this assessment is to determine an appropriate prevention action plan. Faculty and staff should be included in a climate assessment.

### **The influence of media and technology.**

Scientists and psychologists are now studying the effects of prolonged exposure to electronic media violence on viewers, particularly school-age viewers. Media violence – including films, television, video games and the Internet – creates exposure to violent threats and images that were once limited to children residing in “bad” neighborhoods or in high-crime areas. School officials should determine if students are exhibiting behaviors

indicative of overexposure to media violence. It is also wise to evaluate the effectiveness of school policies relating to cell phone, video game and Internet use.

Following the events of September 11, 2001, I was struck by how many people made the comment that it resembled a “scene from a movie like Independence Day.” In particular, I was disturbed by how desensitized children had become as they witnessed such destruction. While so many merely commented, I was troubled by our lack of sustained dialogue and response to that reaction. Our students (children) have become more mean-spirited, jaded and tolerant of cruelty and inhumane behavior with an increased exposure to such behavior as happenstance or entertainment.

As we consider “action steps,” we must differentiate between risk reduction and prevention, responsive versus proactive approaches and strategies that address risk factors but not behaviors. There is much to learn from the “prevention” field. While the field has been well informed by the experiences of victims and criminal investigations, we must get away from a “victim-based” approach and understand the climate that creates and fosters inappropriate behavior and criminal perpetration. A lesson can be learned from the futile fight against underage drinking. “Prevention programs” that are more

broadly targeted with messages such as “say no” are grossly ineffective against a culture that glorifies and normalizes the use of alcohol in the pop culture, family traditions and holidays. Programs and campaigns that employ “scare tactics” also do little to address the climate that leads to nonlethal but problematic behaviors.

### **Involve everyone every day.**

As we learn more about the climate of our schools and culture of our students, we can begin to employ effective strategies that best apply. School-wide programs that engage all constituencies and members of the school community as well as student-led, peer-to-peer programs are effective in enlisting multiple perspectives. Engaging multiple and varied groups also provides school officials with a greater understanding of the overall school environment. Further, by enlisting a wide range of constituents in the conversation, a greater sense of community and congeniality will be created.

Addressing these concerns should not be reactive or infrequent. Understanding why such incidents occur requires a comprehensive understanding of the climate and culture of our schools on a daily basis. Such knowledge and awareness will enable us to provide a safer environment for students to learn. Assessment and evaluation of that climate should be as regular as taking attendance. ■

# Sponsoring a Summer Recreation Program? Be Wary of These Loss Drivers

*By Robert Bambino, CPCU, ARM, Vice President – Risk Management*

Ask any summer recreation camper about their favorite activities, and you are likely to hear about sports, swimming, boating, and mountain biking. You also will hear about excursions such as kayaking, canoeing, and overnight camping – exciting and challenging activities for sure, but ones that present a higher risk for accidents and injuries. Unless a school is going to prohibit the trip or activity, which is unlikely in many instances, the loss exposure cannot be completely eliminated.

When loss exposures associated with summer recreation programs cannot be eliminated or avoided, the appropriate (and logical) approach is to look for ways to make the activity as safe as possible. One way to accomplish this is to understand what conditions or factors increase the likelihood of accidents – identifying the loss drivers – and base a safety or risk control program on the information developed as a result of the analysis. Here are some common exposures that may require your immediate attention and corrective action.

## **Sports and Athletic Activities**

- Lack of staff supervision of campers and other counselors (especially counselors in training) by experienced supervisors

- Uncertified life guards or instructors
- Improper or poorly maintained equipment
- Improper instruction
- Failure to render adequate first aid
- Defective playing fields or courts

## **Excursions and Travel**

- Activities that are not suitable for the students (age, experience or development level)
- Improper accommodations
- Insufficient supervision
- Poorly trained chaperones
- Failure to enforce rules, policies and/or the school's code of conduct
- Excessive "free-time"

## **Housing**

- Inadequate supervision – poorly trained counselors or an insufficient number of counselors
- Unsafe bunks, dorms or cabins
- Missing or inadequate emergency management plan
- Failure to enforce curfews and housing rules

## **Facilities**

Facility issues are usually physical hazards associated with improper maintenance

and poor housekeeping. Inadequate funding, insufficient and improperly trained staff (given the size of the facility) often contribute to maintenance and housekeeping issues. Check your facilities for the following conditions:

- Sidewalks and Stairs – unlevel debris and loose handrails
- Grounds Keeping – untrimmed bushes and trees, unhealthy trees that can fall during windstorms and the presence of poisonous plants
- Parking Lots – inadequate parking spots that lead to illegal and unsafe parking; potholes and depressions
- Pools – improper depth or missing markings, poor housekeeping (such as excess water around the pool), improper lifeguard protection, unfenced pool area, and no safety equipment in the pool area.

Once identified, these hazards should be eliminated. If there is not sufficient time or resources to do so, consideration should be given to restrict access to an area, or discontinue the activity. ■

# Practical and Inexpensive Security Measures

By Brett Carruthers, CSP, Regional Risk Management Supervisor



In today's world, there is a tendency to lean towards high tech solutions to many of our challenges. In managing school campus security, a number of security measures can be implemented for little or no cost. These measures help provide a high margin of campus security without introducing unnecessary costs.

These low cost solutions focus on things that can be done inside and outside the school campus. The following are some low cost measures to improve security.

## **What you can do outside school buildings.**

- Trim shrubbery and trees and relocate other obstacles such as trash receptacles to eliminate hiding places and provide clear lines of sight throughout school grounds. Where vegetation obstructs clear vision, tree branches should be removed below seven feet and shrubbery

trimmed to three feet (18 inches for vegetation bordering walkways and steps). This allows for easy surveillance by school staff, neighbors, passersby and law enforcement.

- Prevent access to windows and roofs by trimming trees; relocating objects near the building that can be used as climbing devices; and ensuring down spouts, covered walkway supports, light posts and other building features are not scalable. It is surprisingly easy to gain access to windows and roofs in some schools exposing the building to vandalism and robbery and teenagers to temptation and potential injury.
- Keep trees well trimmed if they are located near building exits, access roads and utility wires so they do not block site access and building egress in an emergency.
- Secure roof hatches, operable skylights and rooftop equipment doors and access panels. Where possible, this is best done from inside the building so locks and hatches are not exposed.
- Ensure that fire hydrants on and near school grounds are visible and unobstructed.
- Regularly inspect exterior lighting for damage and burned out bulbs. Two of these inspections should be done during hours of darkness to assess "dark areas" where additional lighting may be needed. Vandals often target exterior lighting fixtures and seek areas darkened by inoperable or low lighting.
- Fence off or otherwise enclose niches and blind spots in exterior walls that provide hiding places. Do not impede or obstruct any means of egress. When exterior doors are involved, consult with your local fire department or code enforcement officer.
- Clearly mark and separate visitor parking. Visitor parking should be easy to locate and within sight of the main entry, separated from staff and student parking. Number non-visitor parking spaces and use signs to direct visitors to their parking area.
- Clearly mark the main entry to the school and post signs on other entries redirecting visitors to the main entry. Signs should include arrows, maps or directions, not just the statement, "Visitors must report to the main office."
- Ensure fresh air intakes for the school's mechanical systems

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are screened and located at least 12 feet off the ground or are otherwise inaccessible. This reduces the risk of accidental or intentional exposure to irritating or dangerous substances.

### **What you can do inside school buildings.**

- Limit entry into buildings to one location or as few as possible. Adjust locking hardware on all other entrances opening to the outside so they cannot be opened from the outside without a key or access control device.
- Routinely inspect exterior doors for damage and faulty hardware, making immediate repairs. School doors take a beating. Door frames, hinges, locks and latches should be examined at least monthly and lubricated, adjusted and repaired as needed.
- Install face plates at exterior door latches to prevent jimmying. Face plate kits are available from door hardware suppliers and are easy to install.
- Institute tight procedures for key control. Where keys are used, their careful control enhances building security and reduces spending on re-keying locks and issuing new keys when they are lost or stolen. Master and Grand Master keys must be closely controlled and their issuance strictly limited.
- Number doors in a logical, sequential manner so emergency responders can locate them quickly.
- Routinely inspect all windows

accessible from the street for damage and faulty hardware and make immediate repairs. This helps prevent accidents and reduces the opportunity for unauthorized passage of people, weapons and contraband.

- Ensure all classroom windows designed to provide a secondary means of egress are in working order and are not blocked by screens, security grilles, louvers, awnings or other devices. Rescue windows should be easily accessible and readily opened from inside the classroom.
- Consider an all-lights-off policy for the school when it is not being used. This policy is based on the assumption that intruders' lights give them away. The policy costs nothing to implement and can significantly reduce energy bills. Discuss this policy with your local police department so they focus attention on the building when lights are "on," but are supposed to be "off."
- Keep unoccupied rooms and spaces locked when not in use.
- Keep egress pathways — such as corridors, stairs, stairwells and exits — clear of obstructions and combustible materials.
- Ensure no more than 20 percent of the wall space in corridors is covered with teaching materials and artwork. Fire codes generally prohibit coverage greater than 20 percent for fire safety reasons.
- Ensure corridor and rest room lighting controls are protected



from unauthorized use. Installing keyed switches is the simplest solution to this problem.

- Regularly check that exit signs are visible and illuminated. Keep a supply of spare bulbs so bulb replacement can be done in a timely fashion.
- Use Caller-ID on all school phones to help identify and deter threatening callers.
- Install a battery or generator backup power supply for telephones and emergency communications. Schools without an uninterruptible power supply should have a sufficient backup source to maintain voice communications for at least several hours, preferably 24 hours. Test the backup power supply on a regular basis.
- Restrict access to all rooms and areas containing building wiring, heating equipment and controls.

These solutions can improve campus security without a significant commitment of school resources. Many of these solutions can be done by a team of members from the school community. Security is not a matter of convenience; it is a matter of providing a secure learning environment for students and staff. ■

# The Heat Wave is Back!

By Joseph Previti, Risk Management Intern

In the Summer 2007 edition of *At Issue*, we featured an article warning educators about the serious nature of heat stress. We would like to inform you once again. According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), 3,442 people died from extreme heat from 1999 to 2003. Most at risk for heat stress are athletes participating in sports during the summer months. Heat stress occurs when the body is unable to cool itself by perspiration, and includes several heat-related illnesses that can result in fainting, brain damage, harm to other vital organs, or possibly even death.

## Risk Factors

Heat stress may result from a number of factors including:

- poor physical condition
- high air temperature
- some medications
- high humidity
- poor tolerance for hot environment

- direct sun or heat
- physically exerting activities
- limited air movement

## Symptoms

The symptoms of heat exhaustion and heat stroke are different and it is best to know what they are to ensure an appropriate response.

Heat exhaustion occurs as a result of losing large amounts of fluids and salt through perspiration. Most victims with mild cases of heat exhaustion recover quickly, but severe cases may not be resolved for several days. There are no known permanent effects. Symptoms include: headaches, dizziness, weakness, clammy skin, irritability, upset stomach.

Heat stroke occurs when the body's temperature regulatory system fails, and sweating becomes inadequate for cooling. Heat stroke provides little warning, and without quick medical attention, the result may be fatal. Symptoms include: dry/hot/red skin, no

sweating, severe headaches, high body temperature, rapid pulse, confusion, or seizures. Always call emergency services whenever heat exhaustion or heat stroke is suspected.

## Prevention

Coaches and athletes should know the warning signs of heat stress and how to prevent it:

- Drink lots of water
- Give the body adequate time, and rest if necessary, to deal with warmer temperatures
- Provide training about heat related illnesses
- Use fans and air conditioners when possible
- Improve ventilation
- Properly schedule work and practices (strenuous tasks early and when cool)
- Limit overtime and double shifts. ■

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