



ANONYMOUS TIP LINES – DO THEY WORK?

There has been a surge of interest in anonymous school violence reporting systems since the February 14, 2018 shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. Families of slain students have lamented the missed warning signs of the shooter's violent intentions, including comments to coworkers and troubling posts on social media. Anger spread throughout the community at the revelation that the FBI and local law enforcement had received previous tips about the gunman. Most school shooters tell someone of their plans.

Tip lines represent one approach that schools and communities use to promote school and student safety and well-being. Tip lines are designed to provide students or other members of the public with a safe and confidential way to report a threat or potential threat to a student or school safety. The Stop School Violence Act, signed into law in March 2018, includes grant funding to help state and local governments create anonymous reporting apps and tip lines.

Educating students on how to recognize and report potential threats and risky behaviors will ensure early interventions and prevention. Tapping into students' knowledge is key to response and prevention, and tip lines break the code of silence; they knock down barriers by giving voice to students who might otherwise remain silent out of fear of retaliation or rejection. Tip lines provide an avenue for students to step up and speak out. Some types of problems often reported to tip lines are bullying, drug possession or use, suicidal ideation, threat of school assault, and sexual assault or harassment.

Resources for child sexual abuse have mostly focused on treatment for victims and criminal justice-oriented approaches for perpetrators. While these efforts are important after child sexual abuse has occurred, little investment has been made in primary prevention, or preventing child sexual abuse BEFORE it occurs. Tip lines are an effective way to prevent inappropriate behavior and an opportunity to target sexual abuse training opportunities.

Successful tip lines require coordination and buy-in from multiple stakeholders across various disciplines. Some relevant stakeholders include: school personnel, safety resource officers, parent-teacher organization, families, state attorney general, state and local law enforcement agencies, community leaders. Only about 25% of schools report the involvement of mental health professionals or students as active partners. The lack of mental health professionals needs to be addressed as tip lines across the country receive an increasing number of alerts and concerns about student suicide attempts.

When considering implementing an anonymous tip line program, it will be important to include recording information, archiving and maintenance of the program, compliance with state and federal privacy laws. Dissemination of information and summary reports are effective ways to promote the program for wider use and communicate value to the key stakeholder. A tip line website can be a key information hub for partners, including critical information on how to access the tip line, what to report, and key metrics on tip line usage and outcomes.

A National Institute of Justice report on school safety found that 51% of public middle and high schools have a tip line. Most school tip lines have been implemented within the past three years. The survey was conducted with a nationally representative sample of 1,226 school principals to determine the prevalence of tip lines for

school safety, types of schools that are more likely to use tip lines, ways in which tip lines are designed and implemented, challenges of operating tip lines, and perceived effectiveness of tip lines.

Fifty percent of the principals reported they had prevented violent incidents thanks to the use of tip lines, and two-thirds believed tip lines enabled their schools to respond more effectively to bullying. Seventy-three percent of respondents reported that tip lines had prevented incidents of self-harm or suicide.

References:

1. RTI International: www.rti.org/publications/tip-lines-school-school-safety/fulltext.pdf
2. EDUCATION WEEK: www.edweek.org
3. CDC: www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childabuseandneglect/childsexualabuse/
4. HOMELAND SECURITY: www.hstoday.us/subject-matter-areas/infrastructure-security/first-national-study-on-tip-lines-finds-them-to-be-an-effective-school-safety-strategy/

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