Partnership Alliance for Safer Schools

WHITE PAPER: Creating a Culture of Safety in Schools

The volunteers who make up the Partner Alliance for Safer Schools (PASS) bring together their research and expertise from the education, public safety, and industry communities to develop and support a coordinated approach to effectively apply proven security practices in schools. The PASS team is also dedicated to developing white papers on specific, school-safety topics.

The content in these white papers may point to specific products, brands, or organizations as illustrations of how certain safety and security measures are implemented. PASS does not endorse specific products or brands. Together, the volunteers and partners of the PASS share a single vision: making all schools safer is both achievable and urgently needed.

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KEY TOPIC

Building and sustaining a culture of safety in K-12 schools by prioritizing people, processes, and purpose alongside technology.

PROBLEM SOLVED

Correcting the overreliance on technology as the primary school-safety solution and refocusing administrators on developing a comprehensive safety culture grounded in clearly defined roles, sound procedures, and a shared mission.

RELEVANT PASS GUIDELINES SECTION

Administrative and Safety Planning

School Safety and Security Assessment

(Sections addressing safety teams, site assessments, emergency planning, and layered security principles.)

MOST RELEVANT FOR

K-12 administrators, security directors, school resource officers, school board members, and district leadership teams

TIME TO READ

Approximately 12 minutes

Executive Summary

This white paper accompanies the PASS webinar, “Creating a Culture of Safety in Schools,” and is designed to help school administrators, facilities leaders, and safety professionals better understand how to build a sustainable culture of safety in K-12 environments.

School security is often approached with the misconception that technology alone is sufficient to create a safe environment. Administrators are too often approached by parents, school boards, and the broader community to “do something.” In many cases, that response centers on implementing new technology.

Technology is an important and vital part of a comprehensive security plan. However, it is not the sole solution. Administrators and experts should remember that technology is a tool that supplements and enhances a culture of safety, but it is not the entire toolbox.

With advances in artificial intelligence, schools risk becoming overly reliant on technology while overlooking the essential human element. People control, manage, and respond to risk. Without clearly defined roles, established procedures, and active staff participation, technology initiatives may fall short or misallocate valuable resources.

A true culture of safety is achieved when people, processes, and purpose are prioritized alongside technological enhancements. This white paper explores how districts can define their standard of care, clarify the roles of first responders of staff, volunteers, and others within the school community, and align training, leadership, and technology decisions with a shared commitment to safety.

Why This Topic Matters

PASS is committed to protecting the whole child by promoting safe, secure, and supportive learning environments. This holistic approach means balancing:

- Security
- Fire and life safety

- Emergency training, including severe weather, medical, and other localized emergencies
- Accessibility
- Everyday functionality
- Mental and emotional well-being

A culture of safety goes beyond preparing for a single active-threat scenario. It encompasses proactive security, emergency preparedness, supervision, mental health support, and continuous site assessment. Schools must move beyond reactive measures and develop systems that are strategically embedded in daily practice.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this white paper, readers should be able to:

- Define what a “culture of safety” means in a K-12 setting
- Explain why technology alone cannot create a safe school environment
- Describe the concept of “standard of care” in school safety planning
- Identify who the true first responders are within a school community
- Recognize how safety teams support both compliance and culture
- Implement practical strategies to strengthen people, processes, and purpose alongside technology

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Section 1: The Role of Technology in School Security:

School security is often approached with the belief that technology equates to safety. Administrators face pressure to act, and that action frequently takes the form of purchasing cameras, access control systems, duress systems, artificial intelligence-based monitoring tools, and other technology-based solutions.

Technology plays a critical role in a comprehensive security plan. It enhances visibility, communication, and response capabilities. However, technology is a tool — not the entire toolbox.

Without trained personnel, defined procedures, and a shared understanding of purpose, even the most advanced systems will be ineffective. Overreliance on technology can divert attention, resources, and budget away from training, supervision, and relationship-building — all of which are foundational to safety.

A culture of safety recognizes that people are the central component. Staff members supervise hallways, build relationships with students, identify concerning behavior, and initiate emergency protocols. Technology supports those actions but does not replace them.

Section 2: Defining a Culture of Safety:

A culture of safety reflects shared ownership across the entire school community. It is grounded in the idea that **"it takes a village"** to create and sustain safe learning environments.

This approach includes:

- Leadership commitment from administrators and district executives
- Engagement from teachers and support staff, and as appropriate, unions
- Partnerships with school resource officers, local public safety agencies, mental health professionals, and other emergency response personnel at the local, state, and federal levels
- Communication channels that empower students to report concerns
- Community involvement and transparency

Safety encompasses more than active-threat scenarios. A comprehensive culture addresses:

- Medical emergencies, including the availability of AEDs, bleeding-control kits, and lifesaving medications such as naloxone (Narcan)
- Fire and natural disaster preparedness through regular drills
- Mental health crises and early intervention strategies
- Ongoing supervision and situational awareness

When safety is strategically embedded in daily operations, response to crises becomes more coordinated and confident.

Section 3: Standard of Care in School Safety

The standard of care for school safety is the level of caution, prudence, and supervision that a reasonable professional would exercise to protect students from foreseeable harm. It does not make schools absolute insurers of safety. Instead, it requires reasonable and proactive measures.

Key components include:

Proactive Security
Controlling building access, issuing visitor credentials, utilizing surveillance appropriately, and employing school resource officers or other security professionals.

Emergency Preparedness
Conducting regular and practiced drills for fire, severe weather, lockdowns, and other emergencies (i.e., how to handle cardiac events).

Active Supervision
Providing adequate supervision to prevent accidents and reduce opportunities for misconduct.

Mental Health Support
Offering counseling services, bullying prevention initiatives, and early intervention programs.

Site Assessment
Regular use of the district's safety team to conduct ongoing, documented surveys of school grounds, facilities, and policies to address safety, accessibility, and environmental risks.

PASS often states, **"Once you have seen one school, you have seen one school."** While each campus is unique, the concept of a standard — a required or agreed level of quality or attainment — still applies. The standard of care establishes a baseline expectation while allowing flexibility based on age, layout, community context, and available resources.

Section 4: Identifying the True First Responders

In a school setting, the true first responders are often already inside the building. Teachers, administrators, front-office staff, and support personnel are typically the first to recognize and respond to an emergency. While some staff might be hesitant to serve as first responders, being in the area of an emergency means the safety of students, staff, and themselves can rest on their ability to respond appropriately. When it comes to willingness to prepare for and respond to an emergency, leaders can remind staff of the adage, "If not you, who? If not now, when?"

School resource officers and local law enforcement are essential partners, but it is staff members who typically initiate lockdowns, provide initial first aid, supervise evacuations, and communicate with students.

Training equips nontraditional first responders with the confidence and clarity needed to fulfill their roles safely. By utilizing clear protocols, frequent drills, and scenario-based exercises, staff develop muscle memory that allows them to perform effectively even under high stress and fear.

In creating a culture of safety, it's important to remember not to reprimand a staff member for reacting based on the training they've received, even if it seems like the staff overreacted at the time of the incident. During the debrief, remind them that their job is to respond appropriately as outlined in their training. If they respond as trained, they have fulfilled their responsibility. The debrief is also a great opportunity to seek feedback on training and responsibilities based on the lessons learned from the incident.

Empowering school personnel reinforces the understanding that safety is a shared responsibility — not a function delegated solely to external agencies or technology systems.

Section 5: Leadership, Buy-In and Safety Teams

Creating and maintaining a culture of safety requires leadership at all levels. Safety teams should share a strong passion for student safety, and a desire for ongoing growth as leaders. They must strive for continual empowerment of staff and safety teams, and encourage strong communication among school staff, law enforcement, first responders, and all people involved in the safety team. Regular assessments of a district's safety culture are recommended, and **leadership should be open to feedback from these evaluations, and act accordingly.**

The PASS guidelines recommend that both public and private schools form multidisciplinary safety teams to conduct security assessments and guide planning efforts. To expand on the "village" concept for safety, administrators should consider expanding these teams to include representatives from administration, facilities, human resources, school resource officers, teachers, and, where appropriate, parents or students to strengthen buy-in and improve communication.

Inclusive safety teams foster transparency, encourage shared ownership, and align decisions with the school's mission and values.

Section 6: Training and Competing Demands

Educators face numerous training requirements and responsibilities. Balancing safety training with instructional priorities requires creativity and intentional planning.

Strategies may include:

- Integrating safety concepts into existing professional development
- Conducting brief, focused refreshers rather than lengthy sessions
- Using tabletop exercises to reinforce decision-making

- Leveraging partnerships and support with public safety agencies

When training is practical, relevant, and respectful of staff time, participation and retention improve.

Section 7: Aligning Culture and Technology Decisions

When a strong culture of safety is in place, technology decisions become more strategic. Rather than purchasing systems out of fear or pressure, leaders evaluate whether a proposed solution aligns with clearly defined needs and processes.

A mature safety culture may:

- Prevent unnecessary or redundant purchases
- Prioritize training and supervision before expanding technology
- Ensure that any new system integrates with established protocols and other systems

The question is not whether technology or culture is more important. They work hand in hand. However, culture must lead. We could spend tens of thousands of dollars on technology and still struggle with preventing incidents and responding to emergencies; it comes down to the human factor. Technology should support people and processes — not replace them.

Conclusion

Technology is an essential component of modern school security, but it cannot, by itself, create a safe environment. A true culture of safety is not solely about policies and procedures; it is built from the ground up by the people implementing it. A successful culture is defined by the seamless integration of decisive human response and supplemental technology, ensuring both elements work in tandem to manage emergencies.

By defining a clear standard of care, identifying and training internal first responders, forming multidisciplinary safety teams, and aligning technology decisions with established procedures, schools can move beyond symbolic action and build sustainable safety systems.

Creating safer schools is achievable. It requires intentional leadership, shared responsibility, and a commitment to balancing human relationships with thoughtful security practices.

Resources

- PASS Guidelines and Checklist
- SchoolSafety.gov
- Fire and life-safety code references