

# The Right Steps to Student Safety

Prevention – Planning – Preparedness

## **Sumter County Schools**

*Preparing The Next Generation Today*

### **Superintendent**

Richard A. Shirley

### **School Board Members**

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Dear Parents, Staff and Concerned Citizens,

There is nothing more important than the safety of the children entrusted to our care. Despite the extraordinary coverage of violent school sieges, schools remain places where students are safer than any other place except their homes. We do, however, recognize the potential threat of violence, which exists every school day. Additionally, there are a variety of other critical incidents, such as tornadoes, lightning, and serious accidents that are very real occurrences easily capable of causing student injury. We in the Sumter District Schools know both the possibility which exists for student harm and the schools' fundamental commitment to safeguard all children from any such harm. With the assistance of community and school participants as a part of the 2018 Sumter Schools Safety Task Force, we have developed response plans to be used as resources in a variety of hazardous situations. Additionally, we are providing staff and student training for our school Critical Incident Response Teams, as well as more specific training for teachers concerning their roles in crisis response.

We want to apprise you, too, of numerous changes that have been made, or are in progress, which will improve student safety in our schools. We are pleased that this year, **all schools** will be staffed with a School Resource Officer (SRO); all of our SRO officers are from the Sumter County Sheriff's Office and are funded through an agreement and cost sharing between the Sumter County School Board and the Sumter County Board of County Commissioners. Additionally, the school district has employed a School Safety Specialist who has an extensive background in law enforcement charged with coordinating the district's safety initiatives, as well as serving as a liaison with emergency response agencies. The Sumter County Sheriff's Department has provided, free of charge, the RAVE phone app which will enable teachers and other school personnel to immediately report incidents to school personnel-- or if the situation warrants-- 911 for assistance. Through another app (FortifyFL), to be made available by the State of Florida, any citizen or student can report threatening behavior or suspicious activity relative to students or schools. The district has invested approximately \$1 million this year to better "harden" school facilities, making them less vulnerable to any perpetrators. As a part of new state law, all schools and all grade levels must participate in Active Shooter drills. While the drills are absolutely necessary, we will make every effort to prepare the students and minimize any uncertainty they might feel. We ask that you, as parents, talk with your children about the drills as an important way to keep them safe—just as your family buckles seatbelts when getting in the car. The probability is that you will not have an auto accident, but your family is prepared in case you do. Schools and families must work together to prepare students for safety precautions-- while assuring them that school is one of the safest places they can be. Student safety is never "done" and you should expect to see other modifications and improvements on a continual basis.

A disturbing link to school violence is that of bullying. Data revealed that several of the students involved in violent sieges occurring in schools had previously been victimized by school bullies. Based upon this early research, the Sumter School District initiated steps which addressed bullying at all school levels. Over the past several years, we have secured nationally recognized experts on bullying to provide the very best information to teachers and staff concerning the nature and prevention of, as well as techniques for, handling bullying.

Whether or not bullying leads to violence is but one part of a larger issue—bullying hurts everyone. Victims of bullying react in many, many ways; some suffer a drop in self-esteem, others become bullies themselves, others use whatever tools they have to demonstrate some degree of power. Bullies themselves are more likely to have unsuccessful, and many times violent, relationships in adulthood. Although the Sumter Schools have devoted years of effort and made much progress, the bullying issue is a societal one, not merely a school issue. Intensive efforts on the part of school personnel, parents, students and our communities will be required to extinguish bullying.

Obviously, a large part of our safety initiative concentrates on **prevention** of crises and a proactive approach to avoidance of crisis situations. However, should a crisis occur, we intend to be mobilized to handle the crisis effectively, whatever the incident might be.

I hope you will read the material enclosed in this pamphlet. Excerpts from leading national studies are provided to give us all examples of behaviors considered to be precursors of violence, as well as positive interventions we can take whether we are educators, parents, or citizens truly concerned about young people. We **all** have much work ahead of us if we are to continue improving safety for our children in our schools, our communities and our country. Remember, if you see something, say something!

Sincerely,



Richard A. Shirley, Superintendent

After the tragic loss of life and injuries at Thurston High School in Springfield, Oregon, President Clinton directed the Department of Education and the Department of Justice to develop an early warning guide to help “adults reach out to troubled children quickly and effectively”. The result was the publication of **Early Warning, Timely Response: A Guide to Safe Schools**. The document continues to be an important resource on school safety. While following the plan cannot insure that schools will not experience violence, following the plan does provide a proactive measure which can reduce the likelihood of violence. Several key elements of that report are included in the document and are intended to be of help in recognition of early warning signs that relate to violence and other troubling behaviors and action steps that school communities can take to prevent violence and to respond to violence should the need arise.

## **EARLY WARNING SIGNS**

It is not always possible to predict behavior that will lead to violence. However, educators and parents—and sometimes students—can recognize certain early warning signs. A good rule of thumb is to assume that these warning signs, especially when they are presented in combination, indicate a need for further analysis to determine an appropriate intervention.

The following early warning signs are presented with the described qualifications. They are not equally significant and they are not presented in order of seriousness. The early warning signs include:

- **Social withdrawal.** In some situations, gradual and eventually complete withdrawal from social contacts can be an important indicator of a troubled child. The withdrawal often stems from feelings of depression, rejection, persecution, unworthiness, and lack of confidence.
- **Excessive feelings of isolation and being alone.** Research has shown that the majority of children who are isolated and appear to be friendless are not violent. In fact, these feelings are sometimes characteristic of children and youth who may be troubled, withdrawn, or have internal issues that hinder development of social affiliations. However, research also has shown that, in some cases, feelings of isolation and not having friends are associated with children who behave aggressively and violently.
- **Excessive feelings of rejection.** In the process of growing up, and in the course of adolescent development, many young people experience emotionally painful rejection. Children who are troubled often are isolated from their mentally healthy peers. Their responses to rejection will depend on many background factors. Without support, they may be at risk of expressing their emotional distress in negative ways—including violence. Some aggressive children who are rejected by non-aggressive peers seek out aggressive friends who, in turn, reinforce their violent tendencies.
- **Being a victim of violence.** Children who are victims of violence—including physical or sexual abuse—in the community, at school, or at home—are sometimes at risk themselves of becoming violent toward themselves or others.
- **Feelings of being picked on and persecuted.** The youth who feels constantly picked on, teased, bullied, singled out for ridicule and humiliated at home or at school may initially withdraw socially. If not given adequate support in addressing these feelings, some children may vent them in inappropriate ways—including possible aggression or violence.
- **Low school interest and poor academic performance.** Poor school achievement can be the result of many factors. It is important to consider whether there is a drastic change in performance and/or poor performance becomes a chronic condition that limits the child's capacity to learn. In some situations—such as when the low achiever feels frustrated, unworthy, chastised, and denigrated—acting out and aggressive behaviors may occur. It is important to assess the emotional and cognitive reasons for the academic performance change to determine the true nature of the problem.
- **Expression of violence in writings and drawings.** Children and youth often express their thoughts, feelings, desires, and intentions in their drawings and in stories, poetry, and other written expressive forms. Many children produce work about violent themes that, for the most part, is harmless when taken in context. However, an over-representation of violence in writings consistently over time may signal emotional problems and the potential for violence. Because there is a real danger in misdiagnosing such signs, it is important to seek the guidance of a qualified professional—such as a

school psychologist, counselor, or other mental health specialist—to determine its meaning.

- **Uncontrolled anger.** Everyone gets angry; anger is a natural emotion. However, anger that is expressed frequently and intensely in response to minor irritants may signal potential violent behavior toward self or others.
- **History of discipline problems.** Chronic behavior and disciplinary problems both in school and at home may suggest that underlying emotional needs are not being met. These unmet needs may be manifested in acting out and aggressive behaviors. These problems may set the stage for the child to violate norms and rules, defy authority, disengage from school, and engage in aggressive behaviors with other children and adults.
- **Past history of violent and aggressive behavior.** Unless provided with support and counseling, a youth who has a history of aggressive or violent behavior is likely to repeat those behaviors. Aggressive and violent acts may be directed toward other individuals, be expressed in cruelty to animals, or include fire setting. Youth who show an early pattern of antisocial behavior frequently and across multiple settings are particularly at risk for future aggressive and antisocial behavior. Similarly, youth who engage in overt behaviors such as bullying, generalized aggression and defiance, and covert behaviors such as stealing, vandalism, lying, cheating, and fire setting also are at risk for more serious aggressive behavior. Children who engage in aggression and drug abuse at an early age (before 12) are more likely to show violence later on than are children who begin such behavior at an older age. In the presence of such signs, it is important to review the child's history with behavioral experts and seek parents' observations and insights.
- **Intolerance for differences and prejudicial attitudes.** All children have likes and dislikes. However, an intense prejudice toward others based on racial, ethnic, religious, language, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and physical appearance—when coupled with other factors—may lead to violent assaults against those who are perceived to be different. Membership in hate groups or the willingness to victimize individuals with disabilities or health problems should be treated as early warning signs.
- **Drug use and alcohol use.** Apart from being unhealthy behaviors, drug use and alcohol use reduces self-control and exposes children and youth to violence, either as perpetrators, as victims, or both.
- **Affiliation with gangs.** Gangs that support anti-social values and behaviors—including extortion, intimidation, and acts of violence toward other students—cause fear and stress among other students. Youth who are influenced by these groups—those who emulate and copy their behavior, as well as those who become affiliated with them—may adopt those values and act in violent or aggressive ways to certain situations. Gang-related violence and turf battles are common occurrences tied to the use of drugs that often result in injury and/or death.
- **Inappropriate access to, possession of, and use of firearms.** Children and youth who inappropriately possess or have access to firearms can have an increased risk for violence. Research shows that such youngsters also have a higher probability of being victims. Families can reduce inappropriate access and use by restricting, monitoring, and supervising children's access to firearms and other weapons. Children who have a history of aggression, impulsiveness, or other emotional problems should not have access to firearms and other weapons.
- **Serious threats of violence.** Idle threats are a common response to frustration. Alternatively, one of the most reliable indicators that a youth is likely to commit a dangerous act toward self or others is a detailed and specific threat to use violence. Recent incidents across the country clearly indicate that threats to commit violence against oneself or others should be taken very seriously. Steps must be taken to understand the nature of these threats and to prevent them from being carried out.

### **Identifying Imminent Warning Signs**

Unlike early warning signs, imminent warning signs indicate that a student is very close to behaving in a way that is potentially dangerous to self and/or to others. **Imminent warning signs require an immediate response.**

No single warning sign can predict that a dangerous act will occur. Rather, imminent warning signs usually are presented as a sequence of overt, serious, hostile behaviors or threats directed at peers, staff, or other individuals. Usually, imminent warning signs are evident to more than one school staff member as well as to the child's family.

**Imminent warning signs may include:**

- **Serious physical fighting with peers or family members.**
- **Severe destruction of property.**
- **Severe rage for seemingly minor reasons.**
- **Detailed threats of lethal violence.**
- **Possession and/or use of firearms and other weapons.**
- **Other self-injurious behaviors or threats of suicide.**

**When warning signs indicate that danger is imminent, safety must always be the first and foremost consideration. Action must be taken immediately. Immediate intervention by school authorities and, possibly, law enforcement officers is needed when a child:**

- **Has presented a detailed plan (time, place, and method) to harm or kill others—particularly if the child has a history of aggression or has attempted to carry out threats in the past.**
- **Is carrying a weapon, particularly a firearm, and has threatened to use it.**

Extremely valuable information is found in the “tips” section of **Early Warning, Timely Response**. The recommendations listed are based upon ideas that parents in other communities have tried and, as a result, have found positive benefits to creating safer schools. The items that follow highlight many of those recommendations.

### **TIPS FOR PARENTS**

- Discuss the school's discipline policy with your child. Show your support for the rules and help your child understand the reasons for them.
- Involve your child in setting rules for appropriate behavior at home.
- Talk with your child about the violence he or she has seen on television, in video games, and, possibly, in the neighborhood. Help your child understand the consequences of violence.
- Teach your child how to solve problems. Praise your child when he or she follows through.
- Help your child find ways to show anger that do not involve verbally or physically hurting others. When you get angry, use it as an opportunity to model those appropriate responses for your child—and talk about it.
- Help your child understand the value of accepting individual differences.
- Note any disturbing behavior in your child. For example, frequent angry outbursts, excessive fighting and bullying of other children, cruelty to animals, fire setting, frequent behavior problems at school and in the neighborhood, lack of friends, and alcohol or drug use can be signs of serious problems. Get help for your child. Talk with a trusted professional in your child's school or in the community.
- Keep lines of communication open with your child—even when it is tough. Encourage your child always to let you know where and with whom he or she will be. Get to know your child's friends.
- Listen to your child if he or she shares concerns about friends who may be exhibiting troubling behaviors. Share this information with the school psychologist, principal, or teacher.
- Be involved in your child's school life by supporting and reviewing homework, talking with his or her teachers, and attending school functions.
- Work with your child's school to make it more responsive to all families. Share your ideas about how the school can encourage family involvement and include families in meaningful ways in their children's education.
- Talk with parents of your child's friends. Discuss how you can form a team to ensure your children's safety.
- If you hear or know of something suspicious, call the school.

*A similar action list for students, teachers, and the rest of us is found on the Web site for the National Crime Prevention Council. The "starter list" of ideas includes responses such as:*

### **TIPS FOR STUDENTS**

- Refuse to bring a weapon to school.
- Refuse to carry a weapon for another.
- Refuse to keep silent about those who carry weapons.
- Report suspicious or worrisome behavior or talk by other students to a teacher or counselor.  
You may save someone's life.
- Learn to manage your own anger effectively. Find out ways to settle arguments by talking it out, working it out, or walking away rather than fighting.
- Help others settle disputes peaceably.
- Mentor a younger student. As a role model and a friend, you can make it easier for a younger person to adjust to school and ask for help.
- Participate in student crime watch.
- Ask each student activity or club to adopt an anti-violence theme. The newspaper could run how-to stories on violence prevention; the art club could illustrate the costs of violence.
- Welcome new students and help them feel at home in your school. Introduce them to other students. Get to know at least one student unfamiliar to you each week.
- Start a "peace pledge" campaign, in which students promise to settle disagreements without violence, to reject weapons, and to work toward a safe campus for all. Try for 100% participation.
- Use the Crime Watch boxes to anonymously report suspicious activities.
- See something, say something.
- If a situation is concerning you, report it to a teacher or administrator.

## **TIPS FOR TEACHERS**

- Use the RAVE app to report and request school or 911 assistance, as indicated.
- Report to the principal as quickly as possible any threats, signs of or discussions of weapons, signs of gang activity, or other conditions that might invite or encourage violence.
- With help from students, set norms for behavior in your classroom. Refuse to permit violence. Ask students to help set penalties and enforce the rules.
- Regularly invite parents to talk with you about their children's progress and any concerns they have.
- Learn how to recognize the warning signs that a child might be headed for violence and know how to tap school resources to get appropriate help.
- Firmly and consistently but fairly enforce school policies that seek to reduce the risk of violence. Take responsibility for areas outside as well as inside your classroom.
- Insist that students not resort to name-calling or teasing. Encourage them to demonstrate the respect they expect. Involve them in developing standards of acceptable behavior.
- Teach with enthusiasm. Students engaged in work that is challenging, informative and rewarding are less likely to get into trouble.
- Learn and teach conflict resolution and anger management skills. Help your students practice applying them to everyday life.
- Incorporate discussions on violence and its prevention into the subject matter you teach whenever possible.
- Encourage students to report crimes or activities that make them suspicious.



## **TIPS FOR THE REST OF US**

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- Adopt a school. Help students, faculty, and staff to promote a sense of community in the school with the larger community.
- Help to strengthen links between school services and the network of community services that can help students and families facing problems.
- Help students through such opportunities as job skills development, entrepreneurship opportunities, and internships. Make your facilities available for these activities when possible.
- Provide anger management, stress relief, and conflict resolution training for your employees. They can help build an anti-violence climate at home, at school, and in the community.
- Speak up in support of funding and effective implementation of programs and other resources that help schools develop an effective set of violence prevention strategies.
- Help employees who are parents to meet with teachers by providing flexible hours or time off, encourage employee involvement in sponsoring or coaching students in school or after-school activities.
- Report crimes or suspicious activities to the police immediately. Encourage employees and families to do the same.

## School Bullying

It is the policy of the Sumter County School District that all of its students and school employees have an educational setting that is safe, secure and free from harassment and bullying of any kind. The District will not tolerate bullying and harassment of any type. Conduct that constitutes bullying and harassment is prohibited.

<http://www.sumter.k12.fl.us/pdf/Bullying-Harassment.pdf>

Bullying is everyone's business because it affects the school environment and inhibits learning—and freedom from being bullied is every child's fundamental right. Bullying may be physical, such as hitting, kicking, or taking possessions. It may be verbal, including name calling and threatening. It may be psychological in nature with exclusion and spreading rumors. It may be cyber, using hateful information through technology. Bullying is not a rite of passage; it is a conscious, deliberate and hostile behavior intended to hurt. No student should ever be afraid to come to school. For some students, however, bullies make fear a daily part of the school experience. Bullies come in all sizes and shapes and while you cannot identify them by what they look like, you can always identify them by what they act like. Bullies always:

- Intend to hurt
- Take advantage of an imbalance of power
- Repeat bullying behaviors

Victims of bullies are always hurt physically or psychologically. Students who are victims of bullies often:

- Are reluctant to go to school
- Complain about being sick before school
- Come home with unexplained bumps and bruises
- Experience declining academic performance
- Have a poor appetite
- Show changes toward depression or being withdrawn
- Begin acting aggressively
- Have no good friends in their classes
- Awaken with nightmares

Parents can play a huge role in helping children who are bullied by:

- Taking complaints of bullying seriously
- Reassuring the child that he or she was right to tell about the problems
- Teaching the child to be assertive, not aggressive
- Helping the child identify and role play strategies for dealing with bullying
- Encouraging the child to develop positive social opportunities to make friends
- Communicating with the school regarding instances of bullying

Schools' efforts must mirror that of parents, making students comfortable in reporting bullying and teaching students appropriate responses to bullying. Too, the school must stop the bullying, support the child being bullied, refer to rules against bullying, and use immediate and appropriate consequences for bullying. The clear and consistent message must be that bullying will not be tolerated. Students need to be given some options to use with bullies including:

- Tell an adult
- Talk it out
- Walk away
- Distract the bully with a joke
- Stay with friends on campus
- Respond to taunts or insults with a bland response
- Stand up and look the bully in the eye, saying a firm "NO" if the bully is requiring an undesired action

Potential victims can reduce their risk of being bullied by learning how to exhibit self-confidence, avoid the bully's tactics, respond with assertiveness, and obtain the support of others. This, of course, is much easier said than done. **According to one study, when peers intervene, bullying stops within ten seconds 57% of the time.** Bystanders, then, become crucial in any school's anti-bullying efforts. Teaching students to treat others with respect, to make everyone feel welcome and included, and to help those being bullied or picked on are primary means of diminishing bullying at any grade level at any school. Thus, all children must receive instruction in what is acceptable behavior and what their role is as a fellow student, to:

- Tell the bully to stop
- Help the victim walk away
- Recruit friends to help the victim
- Befriend the victim
- Tell an adult

For parents whose child exhibits bullying behavior, there are also key actions indicated:

- Spending additional time with the child
- Knowing where the child is and with whom
- Making it clear that the behavior will not be tolerated but that the child is accepted
- Providing nonviolent consequences if the child continues to bully
- Teaching the child positive ways of solving problems and managing anger
- Rewarding good behavior

Teachers, parents, students, and communities all need to recognize that **bullying is unacceptable, but it is not unstoppable.**

The Sumter School District has implemented a policy regarding bullying and the consequences of bullying. Under this policy, bullying includes cyberbullying and means systematically and chronically inflicting physical hurt or psychological distress on one or more students or employees. It is further defined as unwanted and repeated written, verbal, or physical behavior, including any threatening, insulting, or dehumanizing gesture, by a student or adult, that is severe or persuasive enough to create an intimidating, hostile, or offensive educational environment; cause discomfort or humiliation; or unreasonably interfere with the individual's school performance or participation; and may involve but is not limited to unwanted teasing; social exclusion; threat; intimidation; stalking; physical violence; theft; sexual, religious or racial harassment; public or private humiliation; destruction of property; cyberstalking; cyberbullying, including text messaging; and rumors or spreading falsehoods.

Concluding whether a particular action or incident constitutes bullying requires a determination based on all of the facts and surrounding circumstances. At each school, the principal or principal's designee will be responsible for receiving complaints alleging bullying. **All employees are required to report alleged acts of bullying to the principal or designee.** Students, parents, guardians, volunteers and visitors may report any act in violation of the district policy anonymously or in person to the principal or designee. Complaints deemed to be within the purview of the school will be investigated by an employee of the school trained in the policy and investigative procedures.

When bullying is suspected or when a bullying incident is reported, counseling services will be available to the victim, perpetrator, and parents/guardians.

If committing an act of bullying is determined to have occurred, consequences for students may range from positive behavioral interventions up to and including suspension or expulsion as outlined in the *Code of Student Conduct*.

Consequences and appropriate remedial action for employees found to have committed an act of bullying will be determined in accordance with district policies, procedures, and agreements. Some actions by certified educators may result in sanction against the educator's state certificate. Consequences for a visitor or volunteer found to have committed an act of bullying will be determined by the School Administrator after consideration of the nature and circumstances of the act including reports to law enforcement officials.

There are also severe consequences listed in the policy for any student, school employee, visitor or volunteer who wrongly and intentionally accuses another of bullying.

The Sumter County School Board expects students to conduct themselves as appropriate for their level of development, maturity and demonstrated capabilities with a proper regard for the rights and welfare of other students and school staff, the educational purpose underlying all school activities, and the care of school facilities and equipment.

There are many charges given to schools. None, however, are more important or imperative than student safety. Our goal will always be “every child safe every day” and your help with that endeavor, whatever your role, will help us insure that right for all children.

### **Schools**

**Bushnell Elementary School**

**Lake Panasoffkee Elementary School**

**Webster Elementary School**

**Wildwood Elementary School**

**South Sumter Middle School**

**South Sumter High School**

**Wildwood Middle/High School**

**Adult Education Center**

**Sumter PREP Academy**

**The Villages Charter School**