

## Leadership in Times of Crisis



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**W**e join the nation in mourning the victims of the Virginia Tech University tragedy. We are deeply saddened that so many lives were cut short in such a senseless manner and our sympathies go out to the victims' families, friends, and community members.

School violence on any campus, whether it's K-12 or post-secondary, is a devastating occurrence. Unfortunately the education community has experienced too many of these tragedies within the past few years, including last year's shooting deaths of a Wisconsin principal, a Vermont teacher, and students in Colorado and Pennsylvania. In our post-Columbine and post-9/11 society, the anxiety level has steadily increased and placed a greater emphasis on school safety. The duck-and-cover drills of the 1950s have been replaced with today's campus lockdowns and shelter-in-place drills.

When tragedies like these occur, the major concerns that our members have is for the children and teachers in their schools. Because long after the media coverage has diminished, there are lingering effects on schools and communities. No matter how tragic the event or threat, the impact can last much longer and be much greater for children who witness it or even hear about it.

Here's a troubling statistic—students, ages 12-18, are more likely to report being afraid of an attack or harm at school than away from school, according to a National Center for Education Statistics study. While the number is relatively low (6 percent) any student who is afraid of being attacked at school is one too many. It goes against every basic principle of what our educational system is supposed to provide—safe learning environments for all children. Children should fear scary movies, not attending school. But for many of them, this fear has become a state of mind and children cannot learn in a climate of fear.

Let's be clear, the majority of the 55 million children in K-12 schools in this country attend classes with no incident. Most of the incidences that do occur are isolated ones. That being said, there is a need for greater vigilance in ensuring that our children feel safe and secure in their schools.

There is also a greater need for institutions and communities to collaborate more effectively. Creating and maintaining safe learning environments requires much more than the installation of metal detectors and the assignment of security officers. School

crisis planning must involve all of the people and institutions that support children. Parents, principals, teachers, counselors, and law enforcement and emergency agencies must work more closely together and be more observant of how students are socializing with one another, whether or not they are being bullied, and if any of them are exhibiting signs of mental illness. Sometimes the intervention can be as easy as letting young people know that we are here for them; sometimes it requires much more than that.

The best schools provide personalized learning environments, so that students feel comfortable enough to call on at least one adult for support. Caring adults are a critical component of high performing schools.

Principals have an important leadership role in preserving the safety and welfare of the students entrusted in their care during the school day. They constantly reassure children that they are safe in the hallways of their schools and they work hard to support their words. Our associations continue to be proactive by reaching out to our members and providing them with school safety resources. We encourage our members to establish step-by-step safety, crisis, and disaster plans; properly train school personnel on the plans; and translate the plans into several languages for diverse populations. We also believe guidance and counseling services should be available in every school to assist principals, teachers, and parents in meeting the special needs of children.

Principals have accepted this additional responsibility and are doing their part, but federal support must not diminish. The Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities program, authorized under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, provides financial assistance for state and local drug and violence prevention activities in K-12 schools. But President Bush's Fiscal Year 2008 budget proposal calls for the program to be turned into a block grant and its funding slashed by two-thirds.

Let's not walk down that counterproductive path. Instead, let us pay tribute to the memory of victims of school violence by showing our commitment to those who are currently in our care and who depend on us to protect them during their academic journey.