

The Safety Minute

The Power of Review in Preparation– Brian Armes

Greetings from the Idaho Office of School Safety & Security (IOS³). Between the concerns of smoke and seismic swarms, this fall has already begun with a bang! If the last 30 days are an indicator, your school(s) may well be facing a year of natural challenges, along with the normal societal ones. Despite the extremes, the most common challenge many systems face every August is hiring and training new staff members.

Findings from our school assessments indicate that many schools have an extensive regimen of training that cover a multiplicity of topics. Everything from basic grading policies to appropriate use of ladders in the classroom is covered. We found that given the volume of training districts deliver, it is common to use videos to supplement, if not supplant, much of the induction training. While I am not opposed to video training, the efficacy of having teachers watch a dozen videos while setting up their classrooms may be less than optimal.

Even under the best of circumstances, much of the first of the year training is delivered once, with no assurance of understanding or hope for retention. As educators, we know better than that. No teacher in today's classroom would expect her students to retain critical knowledge delivered through a single video session. Likewise, why do we hope our faculty and staff will be able to provide a reasonable response in high stress circumstances based on a single training session?

Like all effective instruction, I believe one answer is found in review. I suggest that over the course of the year building administrators take 5 minutes once a month to review one critical procedure they expect their staff to perform. As a means of providing examples, we have listed nine (9 months' worth!) of the most often needed topics by staff throughout the year.

1. Evacuation
2. Reverse Evacuation
3. Intermediate security hold
4. Lockdown
5. Intruder/Visitor Policy & Procedure
6. Medical Emergency Policy/Procedure
7. Verbal de-escalation (student & adult)
8. How the system responds to behaviors of concern
9. What is suspicious?

I sincerely hope your year has begun with your schools fully staffed, the families happy, and your bus routes settled.

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What is Suspicious? – Protecting Your School with Observations - Mark Feddersen

Under your school's single point of entry policy, you have locked your front entrance and require all visitors to use some type of process (i.e. buzzer/camera system) to contact the office staff for access. Once identified, the visitor may be allowed entry, if s/he does not "look suspicious." What does suspicious behavior look like anyways?

Suspicious activity is any observed behavior that could indicate unlawful or unwanted activity at your school. This includes, but is not limited to:

Access: A person requests access or has found access into the school with no articulated/identifiable reason(s) to be there.

Unusual items or situations: A vehicle is parked in an odd location, a package/luggage is unattended, a window/door is open that is usually closed, or other out-of-the-ordinary situations occur.

Eliciting information: A person questions individuals at a level beyond curiosity about your school, its operations, security procedures and/or personnel, etc.

Observation/surveillance: Someone pays unusual attention to facilities or buildings beyond a casual or professional interest. This includes extended loitering without explanation (particularly in concealed locations); unusual, repeated, and/or prolonged observation of a building (e.g., with binoculars or video camera); taking notes or measurements, etc.

Some of these activities could be innocent-but they need to be reported and investigated to determine the intent of the action.

Identifying suspicious activity requires relying on your judgment. Your suspicions will need to be based on your knowledge of the school environment, your experience, and common sense. Your suspicion of a threat or concern may be confirmed with only one incident or it could take a series of incidents.

So, how do you know when to let the person through your school's secured front door?

Here are a few quick tips.

Observe a visitor's behavior as s/he talks with you (remember approx. 80-93% of communication is non-verbal).

Do you know them – If so, are they acting consistently with prior behavior? Anything feel wrong?

If unknown to you – Ask him/her to state the reason for the visit and then verify their purpose.

Are there any restrictions, court orders, custodial disputes, etc. that need to be considered?

It is important not to dismiss observations that make you feel a subject is questionable, odd, shady, fishy, weird, etc. Report it – See-Tell-Now!

You can take note of details using the following S.A.L.U.T.E. acronym.

S – Size (Jot down the number of people, gender, ages, and physical descriptions)

A – Activity (Describe exactly what they are doing)

L – Location (Provide exact location)

U – Uniform (Describe what they are wearing, including shoes)

T – Time (Provide date, time, and duration of activity)

E – Equipment (Describe vehicle, make, color etc., license plate, camera, guns, etc.)

For the majority of educators, student supervision is a lot like breathing; we rarely even consider the process. So unexceptional is the practice we refer to both the process, and the people involved, as “duty”. As observed in numerous Idaho schools, supervision plans and practices have casually remained unchanged through generations of students, teachers and administrators. Two evolving factors indicate a re-examination of your current supervision program.

The first factor is a changing threat environment. Educators have long accepted the role of *Loco Parentis*, a role that mandates providing a safe and secure environment for kids. In recent years, focus on incidents of bullying, harassment, and intimidation have added to the historic potential for injury in shops, labs, stages and playgrounds. Certainly not as common, but considerably more menacing, are threats of non-custodial abduction and school shooting, possible events that emphasize the critical element of intruder detection during supervision.

The second factor is a significant increase in liability tort claims against schools and school personnel. Parents expect greater levels of protection for their children, protection they expect schools to provide. Yet, the National Center for Education Statistics notes that more than 70% of the student injury cases reviewed listed inadequate or ineffective student supervision as a causal factor.

The statewide trending from over 300 Idaho schools indicates a commonly occurring vulnerability: many staff display ineffective supervision practices, additionally, areas on campuses are either lightly supervised or lack supervision altogether. Many of the supervision failings we observe are rooted in the general lack of understanding of the processes and requirements for effective student supervision.

Dr. Edward F. Dragan, a nationally noted expert on student supervision in a 2013 article states that a failure to supervise students may be construed as a failure in “Duty to Care”. In his article, Dragan identifies “General Supervision” vs. “Specific Supervision”, determines the elements of each, and suggests when either would be most appropriate. We believe that understanding the essential elements of both types of supervision is foundational to further discussions regarding this critical topic.

General supervision is the standard applied when groups of students are moving about a school building or campus. Children transitioning from one activity to another in school do not require specific supervision if there are no obvious hazards present. An effective general student supervision program results in safer student movement, a limited number of unaddressed student behaviors, and a more secure supervised area.

Specific supervision is the higher standard of care for individual students or groups when either of the following conditions is in play. The first condition exists when students are exposed to a known or obvious hazard as part of normal school activities and classes. Examples of the type of hazards requiring specific supervision would be students crossing a high traffic volume street, students on playground equipment, students in labs, weight rooms, gyms, locker rooms, shops and any other high-risk instructional area. The second condition that would require specific supervision is when an individual student’s behaviors indicate a need for it. A common example would be when the teacher or supervisor has knowledge or been warned about the “predisposition” of a child to behave in a manner that is either self-injurious or dangerous to others. This often applies to students with IEP or 504 education plans in place.

Unfortunately, today’s rigorous academic environment unintentionally exacerbates the challenges of effective supervision. Understandably, an administrator’s primary focus is on hiring, training, and maintaining a high quality teaching staff for the task of establishing the highest level of academic success. Accordingly, the bulk of financial resources and effort are directed toward supporting instruction. Not surprisingly, fewer dollars are available for other functions, leading to support staff hired at minimum wage, given little training, and scheduled for minimal work hours, conditions which often lead to high transiency. Many school systems, faced with these challenges, metaphorically roll the dice, counting on both the presence of “generally good kids” and a historic lack of problems. Student supervision, like car insurance, is only needed when there is an incident and once you have an incident, it’s too late.

The first step of implementing an effective student supervision program is reinforcing the role of general supervision. If not explicitly stated in your employee handbook, or job descriptions, consider adding language that clearly states the expectations for general student supervision by the members of a school staff. Kids are inquisitive and unpredictable; they will go where you do not want them to go, and they will do what you do not want them to do. More eyes purposefully watching students will improve the effectiveness of your general supervision program.

An area, situation, or student, with a known or foreseeable hazard, requires specific supervision. Areas and conditions that require specific supervision necessitate thoughtful planning, training, and scheduling to construct an effective supervision program. The first step is a thorough examination of your school campus, including the student population, with an eye fixed on identifying potential hazards. Next, consider when and how students may be in proximity to the areas and situations you have identified.

With specific student supervision, there are three factors to consider. The first is simply presence. While this may seem obvious, it is one of the most often overlooked elements in specific supervision. If students are to be allowed in an area plan for supervision. If resources do not allow for supervision of an area limit student access. Again, considering the nature of student behavior, verbal warning and signage may not be sufficient, particularly for interior spaces. The consistent use of securable doors and lockable gates are a better solution to limiting student access.

The second element is one of sufficiency. Are there enough staff in a supervisory role? This element addresses the identified hazard, size and observability of the space, and the number and needs of the students under supervision. Idaho does not have a mandated supervisor to student ratio. Lacking this it falls to the “best professional judgment” of the building administrator. Consider two “litmus test” questions; can you reasonably defend your supervision plan to the parent of an injured student? Can you reasonably defend your supervision plan in court?

The last element we will address here is efficacy, or the effectiveness of the person(s) acting as student supervisor. Supervisor efficacy is the pivotal factor in high quality programs. No matter the venue, asking a few simple questions will indicate the efficacy of a school’s supervisors. Is the supervisor visible and easily identifiable? Unique, easily identifiable attire can help to identify the student supervisor. Particularly in outdoor areas, a traffic orange vest can help to facilitate identification of the person(s) in supervision of a group for both students and administration. On an elementary playground, a small person may not be identifiable in a group of fifth or sixth grade students, particularly on a cold day with everyone wearing coats and hats. The orange vest eliminates this difficulty.

Does the supervisor have the ability to communicate effectively in the case of need? Effective communication normally includes an intercom system available and functional in all interior spaces, and radios for all staff supervising outdoor or remote spaces. A point for consideration as you plan for communication, cell phones, while almost universally present, may not be the most effective method of emergency communications. The manual dexterity required for cell phone use may be lost in a high stress incident, while the potential for busy signals and unanswered calls also limit the effectiveness.

Does the supervisor have training appropriate to the students, area and potential hazards? While playground supervisors generally know basic behavioral rules, have they also been trained on the expected use of specific playground equipment? Have supervisors been informed on effective techniques regarding circulation patrols and visual scanning? Are your communication procedures clearly articulated and trained? Though often left out of professional training days, playground supervisors will benefit from training on verbal de-escalation, positive re-enforcement practices, and the school’s conflict resolution program. Basic first-aid training should be a part of the training regimen, if not by all staff, certainly by key individuals. Though playgrounds are used as the example, all specific supervision positions have identifiable training requirements.

A word of caution as you develop your plan, video surveillance cameras cannot replace effective student supervision. At best, a camera will give you a record of the incident. The goal of an effective student supervision program is to prevent the incident from happening.

Effective supervision does not happen by accident. With this in mind, create a written supervision plan assigning staff members with communications capability and appropriate skills to specific locations for defined times when students will be present. Supervision planning is rarely a “one and done” endeavor, be prepared to make adjustments as conditions, students and staff change. The process will help to protect yourself, your staff and your school district from litigation. Most importantly, it will help to protect the students in your care from injury.