

Safety alert system heightens district response

More than half of all students between the ages of 12-18 have been victims of on-line bullying, according to the iSafe Foundation. In addition, 33 percent of students who were bullied reported that the behavior took place inside a classroom, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. Bullying and harassment remains a prevalent school safety problem that disrupts student learning and achievement. A safety alert reporting system can help districts respond to incidents and improve school climate for students and staff.

Key points

- Alert system empowers stakeholders to report safety concerns
- Anonymous reporting option protects respondent
- Engage parents on benefits of safety reporting system

Bullying and safety incident reporting systems empower students, staff, and parents to anonymously report bullying, harassment, intimidation, and other safety concerns, said Laura Bahar, marketing manager

for Scenario Learning in Cincinnati. The company developed SafeSchools Alert more than seven years ago to help districts combat bullying and harassment.

Staff, students, and parents can report incidents by calling, texting, or emailing, or through the website. School districts using SafeSchools Alert are given a unique phone number and website where messages can be left. "That way the caller can choose to remain anonymous or leave contact information," Bahar said. "When the report is submitted, the system administrator is immediately alerted that a tip has been received. For today's students, texting and calling are the most popular methods of reporting."

Administrators can log into the system and view the status of tips that have been reported. The district's administrator can also communicate with anonymous reporters through the system, Bahar said. "If they have additional questions, they can communicate with the tipster and also make notes in the system during the process of the investigation."

The safety reporting system should also give districts information about trends. For instance, if one school in the district experiences an uptick in reports of bullying and/or harassment compared to others, the administrators can look into it and develop safety

plans to combat the behavior, Bahar said.

Bahar provided the following tips on bullying and harassment reporting systems:

- **Educate students and staff.** There are free resources that districts can use to promote their alert system to students and staff. For instance, customizable fliers and posters can be displayed in the school and the community to show students and staff how to report bullying and harassment, Bahar said. Details about the reporting system should also be mentioned in the school handbook to become part of the overall safety policy, she added.

- **Uphold anonymous reporting.** It's important for students to have the option to remain anonymous. After all, nearly two-thirds of students who are bullied do not report the behavior, according to PACER's National Bullying Prevention Center. "[Anonymous reporting] is a big feature because students don't want to be known as a tattle-tale," Bahar said. "I would say that more tips come in anonymously than not."

- **Foster communication.** The school district representative should be able to communicate with the person reporting an incident through the system. "For instance, a school district in Washington received a tip through the SafeSchools Alert system about a student who was intent on bringing a gun to school," Bahar said. By doing so, they were able to intervene to avert a potential crisis. In addition, a district in Pennsylvania received a bomb threat that was texted into the alert system. Through communication, the school was able to investigate before anything serious happened, Bahar said.

- **Inform parents.** District leaders can use a template letter to send to parents about the reporting system. Parents should be encouraged to talk to their children about using the system. Also, encourage parents to contribute to a positive school climate through PTO, volunteering, and school-based events. Set meeting times that are convenient for parents such as evening or weekend hours. Consider additional incentives, such as providing dinner or child care for parents to attend meetings.

- **Accentuate positive behavior.** The district's safety alert system can also be used for good news. "For instance, if you want to recognize a teacher who went the extra mile for a student, or recognize student anti-bullying efforts, you can send a message to honor them," Bahar said. The school can then recognize their efforts in communications such as newsletters and social media platforms, she said.

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