



NATIONAL SCHOOL SAFETY AND SECURITY SERVICES

STRATEGIC SCHOOL SAFETY LEADERSHIP BRIEF

Independent analysis. Practical strategies. Better decisions.

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FROM KEN



School safety leadership doesn't always happen where we expect it.

Sometimes it happens at the main office desk when a school secretary notices something isn't right.

Sometimes it's an administrator repositioning staff at a football game.

And sometimes it's a superintendent making a difficult decision when the situation confronting the district isn't covered anywhere in the emergency plan.

That's a theme running through this month's *Strategic School Safety Leadership Brief*: **Effective school safety is ultimately about people, judgment, leadership, and getting the fundamentals right.**

Here are five issues worth a few minutes of your attention this month.

Best,

Ken

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1. SCHOOL SECURITY LEADERSHIP STARTS IN THE MAIN OFFICE

When school leaders think about school safety, they often think about administrators, school resource officers, security personnel, emergency plans, cameras, and access control.

They should also be thinking about the school secretary in the main office.

School secretaries and office support staff often see and hear things others don't. They encounter upset parents, custody disputes, suspicious visitors, students in distress, unusual phone calls, deliveries, contractors, and countless other situations that can quickly become safety concerns. They are also frequently among the first people expected to make decisions and communicate when something goes wrong.

Yet these frontline employees can be overlooked in safety planning, training, exercises, and even discussions about main office design and security procedures.

BOTTOM LINE: Don't just give school secretaries a role in the emergency plan. Give them a voice in developing, testing, and improving it.

READ: [School Security Leadership Starts in the Main Office with School Secretaries →](#)

2. SCHOOL ATHLETIC EVENT SECURITY: A MAJOR UPDATE TO OUR FREE PLANNING RESOURCE

Football season is underway, and school athletic event security is again demanding attention.

We've completed a **major update to our free School Athletic Event Security resource** with practical considerations for superintendents, principals, athletic directors, school safety officials, SROs, law enforcement, and others responsible for planning and managing these events.

One of the most important reminders: **The security perimeter doesn't end at the stadium gate, and the security operation doesn't end with the final whistle.**

Parking lots, admission lines, restrooms, concession areas, student sections, pickup areas, surrounding grounds, and post-game crowd dispersal all require attention. And simply having enough adults present isn't enough. Where they're positioned and whether they're actively watching the crowd matters.

Technology can help, but a screening system or camera doesn't replace planning, staffing, supervision, communications, and coordination.

BOTTOM LINE: Ask your athletic event staff a deceptively simple question: *Are our people watching the crowd, or are they watching the game?*

EXPLORE: [Major Update to Our Free School Athletic Event Security Resource →](#)

3. WHAT DOES EFFECTIVE SCHOOL SECURITY LEADERSHIP ACTUALLY LOOK LIKE?

School security leadership is about much more than managing security technology, writing emergency plans, or reacting to the latest headline.

It is about **leading people, exercising judgment, making defensible decisions, managing competing pressures, and maintaining trust.**

I recently outlined seven characteristics I believe distinguish effective school security leaders:

Ethics and integrity. Independence. Judgment and restraint. Competence and experience. Transparency and accountability. Professional courage. Strategic thinking.

That sixth characteristic, **professional courage**, deserves particular attention. Sometimes leadership means telling a superintendent, board, or community that a popular proposal isn't a good idea. Sometimes it means saying there is no quick technological fix. And sometimes it means slowing everyone down when the pressure is to "do something."

BOTTOM LINE: Doing more isn't automatically leadership. **Making better, defensible decisions is.**

READ: [7 Characteristics of Effective School Security Leaders →](#)

4. HOW DO YOU PREPARE FOR THE "UNKNOWN UNKNOWN" NOT IN YOUR EMERGENCY PLANS?

Schools appropriately plan for foreseeable emergencies: fires, severe weather, medical emergencies, threats, violence, lockdowns, evacuations, and reunification.

But some of the hardest situations that land on a superintendent's desk **don't have their own tab in the emergency plan.**

These are the "unknown unknowns": situations leaders didn't anticipate and couldn't reasonably have scripted in advance.

The answer isn't writing another 100 pages of emergency procedures. No plan can anticipate every circumstance. Instead, we need leadership teams prepared to verify information, establish decision-making authority, communicate under pressure, coordinate with partners, distinguish facts from assumptions, and adapt when a situation doesn't fit the checklist.

BOTTOM LINE: You can't predict every crisis that will confront your district. **You can prepare people to lead when the plan runs out of pages.**

READ: [Strategic School Safety Leadership: Preparing for the "Unknown Unknowns" →](#)

5. SCHOOL SAFETY STARTS WITH FUNDAMENTALS: ORDER, STRUCTURE & DISCIPLINE

Some of the most important ingredients of safer schools don't come in boxes, require software subscriptions, or appear on security grant applications.

Order. Structure. Discipline.

Clear expectations, consistent enforcement, active supervision, adult visibility, predictable routines, and an orderly and supportive school climate are fundamental components of school safety.

Students may not always ask adults for structure and discipline. But they need adults to establish reasonable boundaries, enforce them fairly and consistently, and create environments where learning and safety can coexist.

This isn't an argument for punitive schools. It's an argument for **predictable, well-managed schools where adults lead and students know what is expected of them.**

BOTTOM LINE: Before looking for the next school safety "solution," ask whether the fundamentals inside your schools are actually being implemented consistently.

READ: [Why School Safety Starts With the Fundamentals: Order, Structure, and Discipline →](#)

ONE QUESTION TO TAKE BACK TO YOUR TEAM

If something unexpected happened in one of our schools tomorrow that is not in our plans, would our people be prepared to recognize it, communicate, make sound decisions, and adapt?

The strength of a school safety program isn't measured only by the plans on the shelf or the technology on the walls. It is measured by ***how well people recognize developing problems, communicate what they know, exercise sound judgment, and adjust*** when reality doesn't follow the plan.

Building that capacity before the unexpected happens is strategic school safety leadership.

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