



## Special Issue

# New Perspectives on School Safety and Violence Prevention

## Guest Editors' Preface

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**S**chool violence is not just a modern phenomenon; surprisingly, it has a history of more than 200 years in the United States. Periodic high-profile events such as school shootings temporarily raise public awareness and concern, but memories fade, and investment in addressing school safety has typically been short lived and more rhetorical than purposeful. Policy makers and stakeholders from diverse domains and perspectives have too often emphasized punishment over prevention and security measures over learning principles in efforts to foster safe and orderly schools. Despite increased attention in recent years to more rigorous standards for evidence-based practice, local leaders and school practitioners often rely on personal beliefs and anecdotal evidence when selecting interventions. Simplistic solutions such as zero-tolerance policies, although emotionally appealing, have done little to ameliorate school safety threats and can actually increase student misbehavior and dropout rates, as concluded by the American Psychological Association's Zero Tolerance Task Force.

Although academic research has only recently focused squarely on school safety as an important educational goal, in this special issue we argue that there is sufficient knowledge to pursue an evidence-based approach to school safety and to reject a number of ineffective and sometimes misguided practices that continue to be widely used in American schools. Among these practices are the reliance on zero-tolerance policies, the emphasis on school security measures over prevention programs, and the neglect of bullying as a serious problem.

In addressing basic issues in school safety, the authors of this special issue of *Educational Researcher (ER)* examine the empirical knowledge base, provide syntheses of what we know, and identify future paths. The discussion runs the gamut from the measurement of school violence and disorder to the identification of risk factors across student ecologies, and from rare events like school shootings to pervasive problems such as bullying and the universal concern with classroom discipline. There is also a potentially provocative examination of disproportionality in achievement

and systems of discipline for minority students and a closing analysis of research challenges in studying school safety issues.

School safety is not an exclusive preserve of the field of education. A transdisciplinary approach is necessary to navigate the field of school safety with its inherent links beyond education to juvenile justice; mental health and social welfare; school, clinical, and community psychology; sociology; and related disciplines. Whether viewed through the lens of theory and research or that of policy and practice, we conceptualize school safety as a framework that focuses the full investment and engagement of all stakeholders on both physical and psychological security as well as organizational effectiveness in meeting academic and psychosocial goals.

We make purposeful use of the term *school safety*, as opposed to *school violence*, in this special issue to emphasize the broader context of schooling, academic efficacy, and community risk factors. This perspective permits clearer linkages between school safety and related topics in education research, including but not limited to instructional methods, teacher-student interactions, classroom management, curriculum design, school-family partnerships, and schoolwide programming. School safety and order transcend student misbehavior, bullying, and physical aggression; they require a more integrative approach that responds to developmental needs, promotes a positive school climate, provides engaging academic programs, and supports the varied needs of students and families.

A substantial body of evidence demonstrates that school violence and disorder interfere with normal psychosocial development and academic learning. Contributing issues can include school climate, student bonding to school, peer conflict and rejection, biased treatment of individuals, victimization, and related psychosocial adjustment problems. Research has shown that school disorder leads to problematic academic outcomes in several ways. First, disruptive behaviors interfere with teachers' instruction and contribute to instructor burnout. Second, students can experience distractions as well as anxiety and fear of victimization that can reduce motivation, impair concentration, reduce

involvement in group learning activities, and increase school avoidance. Finally, students can fall into a destructive spiral of academic and social-emotional-behavioral failure, leading to school dropout, occupational difficulties, and social maladjustment.

The history of school safety policy and legislation has been problematic, largely driven by political pressures and public fears. For example, the Safe and Drug-Free Schools Act of 1986, the Gun-Free School Zones Act of 1990, and subsequent revisions were reactive to widespread perceptions that schools were experiencing increasing violence and disorder. Yet, over the past three decades, there has been no coherent legislative focus or national policy for addressing school safety. Furthermore, research on school safety has been fragmented and not well integrated into the mainstream of education research. The article by Mayer and

Furlong in this issue of *ER*—"How Safe Are Our Schools?"—uncovers critical measurement problems and recommends development of a 10-year strategic plan to guide the field of school safety research.

The author teams in this special journal issue span six disciplines and multiple perspectives. We hope that their efforts will pave the way for national initiatives to improve school safety research, policy, and practice and that their insights will stimulate further debate and discussion among *ER*'s diverse readers, including our colleagues in allied disciplines who are concerned with school safety issues. Finally, we express our gratitude to the American Educational Research Association, to *ER* Features Co-Editor Gregory Camilli, and to the AERA Publications Committee for making this project possible.