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Information Brief

School Districts Identify Actions to Improve School Safety Through Self-Assessment

at a glance

As required by Florida Statutes, school districts have used a self-assessment process to develop corrective action recommendations to improve school safety. Districts report meeting an average of 90% of the state's 29 safety and security best practices. However, 18% or more of Florida's school districts reported not fully meeting four best practices—those governing appropriate equipment to protect property and records; program accountability mechanisms; emergency response procedures; and school systems to minimize the risk for students indicating or exhibiting suicidal behavior.

Scope ──────────────

This report examines the results of the 2002-03 self-assessments conducted by each of Florida's school districts.

Background ──────────

Section 1006.07(6), *Florida Statutes,* requires school districts to make a self assessment of their safety and security operations using the safety and security best practices developed by OPPAGA and subsequently adopted by the Commissioner of Education. Divided into seven areas, the best practices cover a wide range of school safety goals.

- District safety and security programs are to have clear direction and be effective and efficient.
- Districts are to have comprehensive safety and security plans and procedures.
- Districts are to have a clear code of student conduct that is communicated to students and parents.
- Districts are to identify, minimize, and protect others from disruptive and/or violent student behavior.
- Districts are to have safety programs and curricula that foster a safe, positive learning climate.
- District educational facilities and equipment are safe and in good working condition.
- Districts ensure student and staff safety during transportation.

Each of these goal areas include several best practices; together there are 29 best practices. For more information on the best practices districts used to evaluate their safety and security operations see OPPAGA Report No. 02-63. [1]

The Safe Passage Act required school districts to conduct self-assessments and for superintendents to provide recommendations to the school board by July 1, 2003.

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[1] *Information Brief: School Safety and Security Best Practices Approved by the Commissioner of Education,* Report No. 02-63, December 2002.

The self-assessment reports were submitted to the Department of Education, and provided each district's conclusion as to whether or not it met each best practice. The reports also included the strategies and activities each district identified to improve school safety.

To assess the results of the Safe Passage Act, OPPAGA reviewed the school district self-assessments and analyzed each district's conclusion for each best practice.[2] The district reports typically stated whether the district met, was in progress of meeting, or did not meet each best practice. Districts that did not fully meet a best practice usually provided strategies and actions to be taken to meet the best practice. However, some districts reported meeting a best practice while also including recommendations for improvement.[3] On average, districts met, but still developed recommendations for, 18% of the best practices.

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[2] One district submitted an earlier version of the self-assessments to the Department of Education. Because this version has different reporting categories, we were unable to analyze this self assessment with the others.

[3] Four districts provided a narrative explanation without specifically saying whether or not they met the best practice. In these situations, OPPAGA coded a district as "yes" if the narrative indicated that the district was meeting the intent of the best practice, "no" if the narrative indicated the district was not meeting the intent of the best practice, and "in progress" if the activities listed indicated the district was in the process of working toward meeting the best practice. In one instance, a district did not explicitly state whether it met, was in progress, or did not meet a best practice. In this instance, OPPAGA coded the district as "no response."
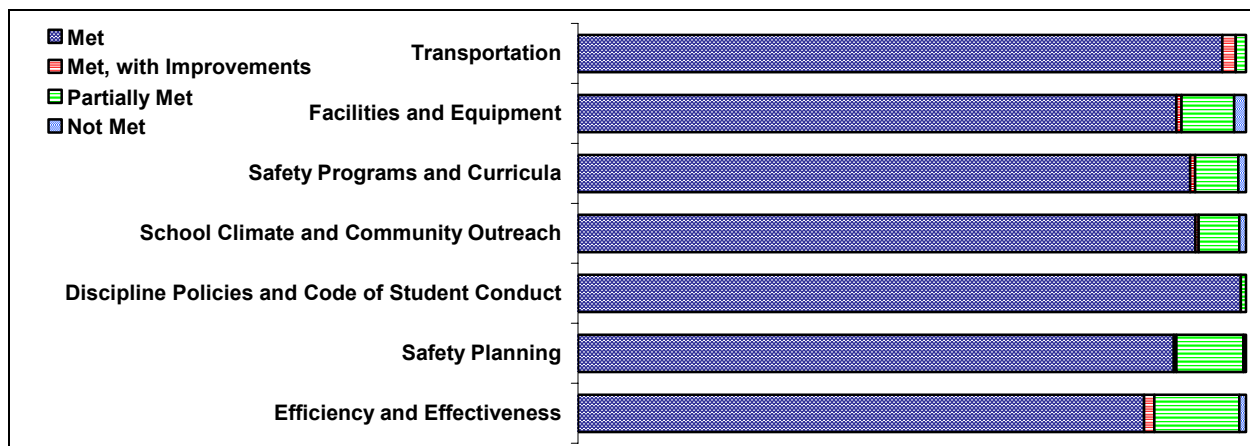
Findings —————

Districts report meeting an average of 90% of the best practices

Overall, districts reported meeting an average of 90% of the 29 best practices. However, as shown in Exhibit 1, the proportion of districts reporting they met each best practice varies across the goal areas. For example, a lower percentage of districts indicated they met the best practices addressing program efficiency and effectiveness (83%), while almost all districts (98%) reported meeting the best practices governing student discipline and code of conduct.

Within each goal area, more districts reported meeting some practices than others. Notably, 18% or more of the districts reported that they did not fully meet four best practices.[4]

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[4] This includes districts that reported being "in progress" toward meeting a best practice but did not fully meet all of the best practice indicators.

Exhibit 1
Although Districts Report Meeting Most School Safety and Security Best Practices, the Percentage Varies by Goal Area

Source: OPPAGA analysis of school district self-assessments.

- Twenty-nine percent of districts reported not fully meeting the best practice requiring each educational facility to have appropriate equipment to protect the safety and security of property and records.
- Twenty percent of districts reported not fully meeting the best practice requiring accountability mechanisms to ensure the performance, efficiency, and effectiveness of the safety and security program.
- Twenty percent of districts reported not fully meeting the best practice requiring the district to develop emergency response procedures.
- Eighteen percent of districts reported not fully meeting the best practice requiring each school to have a system in place to minimize the risk for students indicating or exhibiting suicidal behavior.

As a result of the self-assessments, districts identified a variety of recommendations for improving school safety. However, some districts did not identify a corrective action for each unmet practice, and some developed recommendations even though they reported meeting the best practice.

Districts report meeting 83% of efficiency and effectiveness best practices

Although most districts reported having accountability measures to ensure an effective and efficient safety and security program, this goal area showed the weakest compliance with the best practices.

Nineteen districts developed corrective actions to improve their accountability mechanisms. Some of these actions include establishing a committee to review safety and security, instituting a certification program for all cost centers modeled after Volusia County's program, and developing specific goals with measurable objectives. Sixteen districts recommended corrective actions to better review their safety and security program's organizational structure and to minimize its administrative layers and processes. These actions included such things as considering the addition of a safety director position, establishing a new "calling tree," and creating a

safety/security specialist within the risk management department.

Ninety percent of districts report meeting safety planning and procedures best practices

Although most districts reported meeting the practices in this area, the self-assessments of safety planning and procedures still resulted in a relatively large number of corrective actions.

Fifteen districts included recommendations in their self-assessments to improve safety training. Common strategies reported by districts involve increasing the number and types of training available and making some training available via CD or on-line. In addition, 12 districts have developed action plans to furnish appropriate agencies with updated floor plans and blueprints. Also, 16 districts reported plans to improve their emergency response procedures.

Ninety-eight percent of districts report meeting the discipline policies and code of student conduct best practices

Most districts reported meeting the discipline and code of student conduct best practices. However, districts still identified areas for planned improvement. These included reviewing their codes of student conduct with students at the school level to allow for their input in the annual update, noting changes to the student handbook on-line, and reviewing examples of anti-bullying policies from other districts for possible inclusion in future editions.

Ninety percent of districts report meeting the best practices regarding school climate and community outreach

Most districts reported meeting these practices. For example, 91% reported having a process in place to minimize danger to students from community members, staff, or other students, and 91% reported having community outreach programs.

Nineteen districts developed recommendations to improve in the area of school climate and community outreach. For example, districts recommended strategies such as developing or expanding their policy to address identification of sex offenders, developing and adding to

school board policy a reasonable force definition and standards, and compiling a database to track charges and convictions of students and employees. In addition, districts are expanding their training in how to recognize early warning signs of threat or violent behavior and are expanding outreach efforts, including reinstating crime watch activities and establishing a safety hotline in elementary schools.

Ninety percent of districts report meeting best practices related to safety programs and curricula

Most districts reported meeting the best practices in this area. For example, 99% of districts reported having an approved Safe and Drug-Free School Plan that has been developed with appropriate stakeholder input. Nonetheless, 16 districts included strategies to further foster a positive learning climate such as implementing a Positive Behavior Support pilot project and implementing additional character education programs at the middle school level. In addition, 19 districts plan to improve their systems to recognize the early warning signs of student suicidal behavior. Twelve districts reported plans to continue to implement scientifically based violence and drug prevention programs and curricula and expanding these to all grades.

Ninety percent of districts report meeting facility-related best practices

Most districts reported meeting the six facilities best practices. For example, 97% of districts reported meeting the best practices related to ensuring that playgrounds are properly constructed, maintained, and supervised so as to reduce the risk of injury. In addition, 97% reported providing appropriate safety equipment and information to prevent injuries to students and others. However, only 68% reported fully meeting the best practice which requires each educational facility to have appropriate equipment to protect the safety and security of property and records. Of the districts that reported not fully meeting this best practice, 21% reported that they are in progress in meeting the best practice.

Districts have developed numerous strategies to help them meet these best practices. Nineteen districts developed strategies to ensure that each educational facility have appropriate equipment to protect the safety and security of property and records. These include investigating additional surveillance equipment, establishing disaster recovery kits at each school site, and ensuring that security cameras are installed at all schools.

In addition, districts are working with architects who incorporate Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design principles to ensure that building renovations enhance security and reduce the likelihood of vandalism. Other strategies include ensuring that all schools adopt a key control program, regular inspection of playground equipment to ensure safety, and providing training to staff on appropriate food safety health practices.

Ninety-five percent of districts indicated they meet the transportation best practices

Districts recommended very few corrective actions related to the transportation best practices. This may be partially because much of school transportation safety procedure is codified in rule or law. The most common transportation best practice to receive corrective actions calls for districts to have procedures for an orderly arrival and dismissal process.