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School Districts Continue to Identify Actions to Improve School Safety Throughout State

at a glance

As required by the *Florida Statutes*, school districts have used a self-assessment process to develop corrective action recommendations to improve school safety. Districts report using an average of 93% of the state's 29 safety and security best practices, and compliance with the best practices has improved over time. However, at least 11% of Florida's school districts reported not fully using five best practices—those governing appropriate equipment to protect property and records; program accountability mechanisms; using “safe school design” principles when designing educational facilities; having procedures that govern access to each educational facility; and providing each school with an emergency checklist.

Background

This report examines the results of the 2003-04 self-assessments conducted by each of Florida's school districts.

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 includes 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. 03-63.¹ The best practices are also available on OPPAGA's [website](#).

The Safe Passage Act required school districts to conduct self-assessments and for superintendents to provide recommendations to the school board by July 1, 2004. 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

¹ *Information Brief: Information Brief: School Safety and Security Best Practices Updated*, [Report No. 03-63](#), December 2003.

identified to improve school safety. This self-assessment process is now in its third year.

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 provided strategies and actions they will take to meet the best practices. However, some districts reported using a best practice while also including recommendations for improvement.³ On average, districts met, but still developed recommendations for, 23% of the best practices.

Findings

Districts report using an average of 93% of the best practices

Overall, districts reported using an average of 93% of the 29 best practices, a slight increase from 90% in 2002-03. However, as shown in Exhibit 1, the proportion of districts reporting they met each best

² The Jefferson County School District submitted an earlier version of the self-assessment to the Department of Education. Because this version has different reporting categories, we were unable to analyze this self assessment with the others.

³ Five 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.

practice varies across the goal areas. For example, 89% of the districts indicated they met the best practices addressing program efficiency and effectiveness, while all districts reported using the best practices governing student discipline and code of conduct.

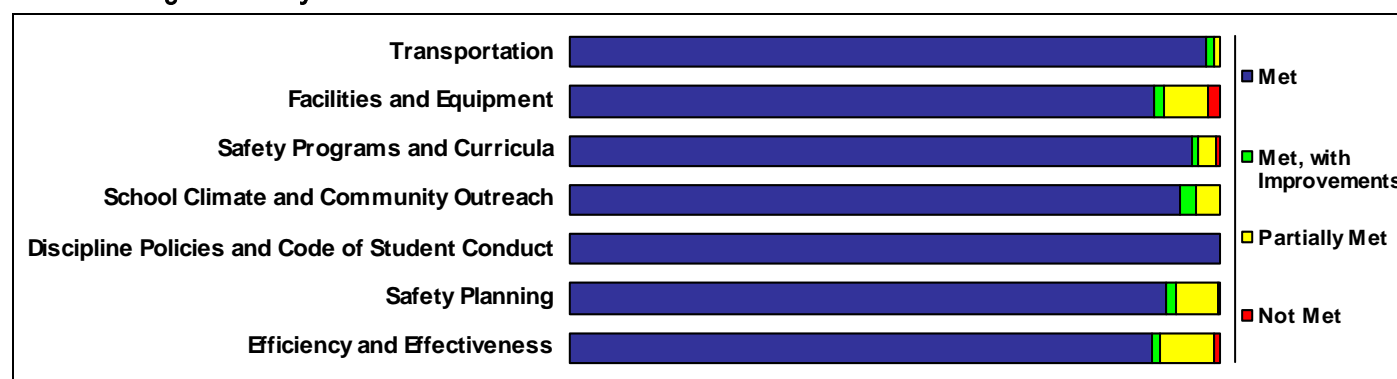
While there was a high compliance rate with most of the individual best practices, between 11% and 23% of the districts reported that they did not fully meet five best practices.⁴

- Twenty-three percent of districts reported not fully using the best practice requiring each educational facility to have appropriate equipment to protect the safety and security of property and records.
- Fourteen percent of districts reported not fully using the best practice requiring accountability mechanisms to ensure the performance, efficiency, and effectiveness of the safety and security program.
- Twelve percent of districts reported not fully using the best practice requiring the district to design educational facilities and sites to enhance security and reduce vandalism through the use of "safe school design" principles.
- Twelve percent of districts reported not using the best practice requiring districts to have procedures that govern access to each educational facility.
- Eleven percent of districts reported not fully using the best practice requiring the district to provide each school with an emergency checklist.

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 Using Most School Safety and Security Best Practices, the Percentage Varies by Goal Area



Source: OPPAGA analysis of school district self-assessments.

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 using the best practice.

Districts report using 89% of efficiency and effectiveness best practices

Districts report using 89% of the best practices dealing with efficiency and effectiveness, an increase from 78% in 2001-02. Although most districts reported having accountability measures to ensure an effective and efficient safety and security program, this goal area showed the weakest degree of compliance with the best practices.

Twenty-two districts developed corrective actions to improve their accountability mechanisms. Some of these actions include establishing a committee to develop comprehensive safety and security goals and associated performance benchmarks, forming safety committees at each site within the district to address safety concerns and issues, and establishing a new director and safety and security position within the district.

Eighteen 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 cross training all personnel in traffic and site safety, including teachers and the community in the feedback component for the safety and security self-assessment, and continuing to review organizational structure and staffing levels and make changes as needed.

Ninety-two percent of districts report using safety planning and procedures best practices

Ninety-two percent of districts report using the best practices related to safety planning and procedures, a slight increase from 90% for the 2001-02. Although most districts reported using the practices in this area, the self-assessments of safety planning and procedures still resulted in a relatively large number of corrective actions.

Twenty-two districts included recommendations in their self-assessments to improve emergency response procedures. Common strategies reported by districts involve developing safety teams in each school, developing a method to simultaneously

communicate with every school in the district, and developing a counseling team. In addition, 21 districts have developed action plans to improve safety training and 20 school districts developed action plans to implement school safety plans.

All districts report using the discipline policies and code of student conduct best practices

All districts reported using the discipline and code of student conduct best practices, a slight increase from 98% in 2002-03.⁵ However, districts still identified areas for planned improvement. These included reviewing and refining their codes of student conduct, printing the code of conduct in student planners, and including parents and students on the review committee.

Ninety-three percent of districts report using the best practices regarding school climate and community outreach

Ninety-three percent of school districts report using the school climate and community outreach best practices, an increase of three percentage points from 2001-02. Specifically, 94% reported having a process in place to minimize danger to students from community members, staff, or other students, and 92% reported having community outreach programs.

Twenty-four districts developed strategies to improve in the area of school climate and community outreach. For example, districts recommended strategies such as attending a workshop on database reporting of incidents, compiling a database to track charges and convictions of students and employees from within the district, and continuing to work on crime watch programs at district schools. In addition, districts are expanding their training in how to recognize early warning signs of threatening or violent behavior.

Ninety-six percent of districts report using best practices related to safety programs and curricula

Ninety-six percent of Florida's districts report using the safety programs and curricula best practices, an increase from 90% in 2002-03.⁶

⁵ Because a different standard was reported on districts' compliance with this best practice, OPPAGA was unable to compare 2003-04 with 2001-02 results.

⁶ Because this goal area was added for the 2002-03 self assessments, there are no 2001-02 results with which to compare.

Specifically, 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 unifying curricula for pro-social, character education, conflict resolution, and peer mediation across the district as well as including questions about bullying on upcoming school climate surveys. In addition, 15 districts plan to improve their systems to identify, assess, and minimize the risk for students indicating a threat of suicidal behavior. Ten districts reported plans to continue to implement scientifically based violence and drug prevention programs and curricula and expanding these to all grades.

Eighty-nine percent of districts report using facility-related best practices

Eighty-nine percent of school districts report using the best practices dealing with facilities. This is unchanged from 2001-02. All school districts reported using the best practice requiring districts to provide appropriate safety equipment and information to prevent injuries to students and others. Ninety-seven percent of districts reported using the best practices related to ensuring that playgrounds are properly constructed, maintained, and supervised so as to reduce the risk of injury. In addition, 96% reported following environmental and food safety health practices and regulations. However, only 71% reported fully using 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 using this best practice, 22% reported that they are in progress to meet the best practice.

Districts have developed numerous strategies to help them meet these best practices. Twenty-two districts developed strategies to ensure that each educational facility has appropriate equipment to protect the safety and security of property and records. These include investigating the purchase of additional surveillance equipment, providing disaster recovery kits to 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, developing a handbook for food service employees, pursuing certified food manager training, and providing specially designed playground equipment for special needs students and constructing new playgrounds according to United States Consumer Product Safety Commission guidelines.

Ninety-eight percent of districts indicated they use the transportation best practices

Ninety-eight percent of districts report using the best practices related to transportation, a slight increase from 97% in 2001-02. 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. Strategies identified include providing National School Safety Center training for all drivers and using capital outlay funds to modify one school per year to meet current code.

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