

# How School & District Leaders Can Recognize & Prevent Student Harm to Self & Others



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# Recognizing & Preventing Student Harm, Both to Self and Others



As more schools reopen for in-person learning and students return to the classroom, there will be a lot of challenges to address, including helping students understand and cope with the trauma of the past year. Most students will be coming back to school carrying emotional baggage, whether that's the grief of losing a loved one to COVID-19, the trauma of an unstable home life during remote learning, or even simply spending a year isolated from friends and extracurricular activities. Such stressors can leave a student feeling overwhelmed and prone to negative behaviors, including possibly violent behaviors to either self or others. Recognizing and preventing student self-harm as well as harm to others is going to be a crucial goal of administrators and teachers.

This guide includes the expertise of a few subject matter experts who are regularly recognized for their work in youth violence prevention, youth suicide prevention and social-emotional learning:



**Dr. Dewey G.  
Cornell, Ph.D.**

A forensic clinical psychologist and professor of education at the Curry School of Education and Human Development at the University of Virginia, Dr. Cornell provides his expertise for behavioral threat assessment in this guide. He is the principal author of the leading evidence-based school behavioral threat assessment model, Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines (CSTAG).



**Dr. Scott  
Poland, Ed.D**

A professor at the College of Psychology and director of the Suicide and Violence Prevention Office at Nova Southeastern University in Florida, Dr. Poland is a nationally certified school psychologist. He is also a recognized expert on school safety, youth suicide, self-injury, bullying, school crisis prevention and intervention.



**Dr. Crystal  
Ladwig, Ph.D.**

The director of research and content development at Navigate360, Dr. Ladwig is an expert of social-emotional learning. She is an educator, writer and speaker and holds a Ph.D. in special education from the University of South Florida.

# Where We Are Coming From

It's a common refrain: 2020 brought an influx of challenges to schools. Administrators, teachers and students all had to adapt to remote learning or a hybrid model, which placed stress on everyone involved. These adjustments were just one piece of the puzzle. Some students were dealing with many other stressors unrelated to academics, including domestic violence, family unemployment and financial distress. There's also the growing racial justice movement that took center stage for most of 2020, leading to a societal reckoning that may have had a particular impact on students of color.



While we may think these specific challenges are adult issues, a number of studies show that they affect young people just as much. For example, in [a recent poll conducted by Navigate360 with John Zogby Strategies](#), 59% of teenagers report that they know someone who has considered self-harm or suicide. That's an increase of three percentage points from the poll conducted in January.

Recognizing and preventing student self-harm in distance learning environments has been a challenge for many schools, which means administrators and teachers need to be proactive about their students' mental health and wellbeing as more schools reopen for in-person learning.

It's also important to consider how the return to in-person learning may contribute to a rise in bullying and other harmful activities. In that same Navigate360/Zogby poll, half the teenagers and parents surveyed reported knowing someone who has been bullied because of their race, sexual orientation or income level. More than half of teens don't have faith that their schools can effectively respond to critical emergencies, and that doesn't even scratch the surface of the effects cyberbullying has had on students — before, during and after the pandemic. Addressing the needs of students who harm others must be an essential part of the process.

# Where We Are Headed

As in-person learning resumes, there is a wide range of concerns raised by students, caregivers, teachers and administrators, such as:

## 01. Academics

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Remote learning is not optimal for many students, and it caused some to fall behind academically. In addition, adjustments may need to be made for students who have been learning virtually for more than a full school year and are trying to re-adapt to a new classroom learning environment.

## 03. Social media

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The toxicity of social media is nothing new but cyberbullying and leakage (a warning behavior that signals a preoccupation with someone and usually precedes a violent act) will continue to cause problems for students.

## 05. Socialization

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One of the key triggers of harm to self or others is when students return to school after a break such as Christmas, spring or summer break. The pandemic has caused a much longer break from in-person learning, and students will need to relearn socialization skills, which may pose a difficulty for some.

All these challenges affect students' mental health and can increase the risk of student harm, whether internally or externally. School administrators and teachers must understand how to properly mitigate student harm as well as provide strategies for students to address their social-emotional needs. In doing so, students will develop more positive self-identities, be able to better manage their mental health, and feel more connected to the people and the world around them. This will lead to happier, more well-adjusted students who find it easy to focus on academics and engage in higher-order learning.

## 02. Pandemic-related stressors

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The pandemic isn't quite over, and students may still be dealing with the stressors related to COVID-19. They may still be grieving for lost loved ones, worried about their family's finances or concerned about contracting COVID-19 in the classroom.

## 04. New school rules and policies

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Students will have new policies to learn, including possible mask-wearing, hygiene or social-distancing protocols.





# What We Can Do to Mitigate Harm

Mitigating harm, both to self and to others, falls to three important tools: behavioral threat assessment, suicide prevention programs and social-emotional learning.

## BEHAVIORAL THREAT ASSESSMENT

Behavioral threat assessment is a standardized evaluation process that involves three phases. The ultimate goal is to coordinate services for troubled students, such as those engaging in bullying behaviors, before problems escalate into violence.

“We see it as a problem-solving approach to violence prevention in which we’re trying to help young people solve problems,” says Dr. Cornell. “This is not a new idea. Actually, it’s been 20 years since the FBI recommended the use of threat assessment rather than profiling ... [We] took these recommendations and worked with a group of local educators to come up with a model of how schools can do threat assessments in a way that would be practical [and] efficient, recognize the developmental needs of our students, and take protective action only if the threats are truly serious or substantive.”

Behavioral threat assessment involves:



### Seeking help

Schools must cultivate an open, supportive environment where students feel comfortable seeking help for someone who appears to be in distress, may have threatened violence or has engaged in threatening behavior.



### Evaluating threats

Once a threat has been reported by a student, school administrators should do a full assessment of the threat to decide if there is a serious concern. The focus here should be on evaluating the source of the concerning behavior: Why is the student acting the way they are acting?



### Providing non-punitive services

After evaluating a threat, administrators should identify and coordinate services for the student, such as mental health counseling. This should be an individualized approach based on the seriousness of the threat and the student’s mental wellbeing.

During a threat assessment, it's important to remember that threats fall on a continuum — some are fairly innocuous while others can involve a student planning to carry out a serious act of violence. That's why evaluating the threat is crucial to this process, allowing administrators to take appropriate, non-punitive action and provide equitable, fair support services to troubled students.

Dozens of studies show that behavioral threat assessment works. After studying hundreds

of schools and thousands of threats, research has shown that the vast majority of student threats are mitigated when a threat assessment is completed beforehand and appropriate intervention is implemented. What's more, threat assessment can lead to increased use of school counseling services and a more positive school climate. It also avoids excessive punishments and racial disparities in discipline.



## SUICIDE ASSESSMENT AND PREVENTION PROGRAMS

One of the most widely used suicide assessment tools is the Columbia-Suicide Severity Rating Scale, or C-SSRS. This evidence-based tool asks a set of questions to classify a student's suicidal ideation or behavior so that teachers, counselors and administrators can offer the right level of support for their students. The C-SSRS is a beneficial tool for schools because it:



Is a simple questionnaire that doesn't require anyone to have prior mental health training to ask the questions



Is a free tool that any school or district can access and has been translated into more than 100 languages



Utilizes resources effectively because school officials will be able to properly identify the severity of suicide risk so they can align the level of support a student needs, whether that's school counseling or more in-depth intervention

**While some administrators and teachers may think that asking such direct questions about suicide may have a negative impact on a student's suicidal ideations, the opposite is true. According to many studies, asking these pointed questions can reduce suicidal thoughts and allow students to feel more supported in their mental health journey.**

# How to Build a Suicide Prevention Program

The first step in building an effective suicide prevention program is aligning all staff to the need for such a program in their schools. School administrators should educate faculty about the statistics of suicide among K-12 students. For example, suicide is the second leading cause of death for children over the age of 10, and there has been a marked increase in suicide rates among middle school-age children and young Black students.

The second step is providing suicide prevention education for all staff who interact with students. There should be a commitment that all school faculty will work together to help students who are exhibiting warning signs or risk factors of suicide. Educators and other school personnel are not formally trained on suicide awareness and prevention. Professional training ensures program fidelity, builds confidence in staff and contributes to a culture of safety throughout the school. All faculty should be familiar with the following concepts:

- ✓ Basic facts about students and suicidal thoughts
- ✓ Risk factors for suicide among students
- ✓ Warning signs of suicidal youths
- ✓ Best practices for suicide prevention & awareness
- ✓ Mental health challenges among K-12 students
- ✓ Suicide intervention & helping students
- ✓ “What Would You Do?” scenarios
- ✓ Protecting & helping students through suicidal ideation
- ✓ What to do after a suicide intervention



Effective suicide prevention programs should also incorporate a comprehensive case management process. This ensures everyone in the school district is aligned on how to respond to students with suicidal ideation and allows for a consistent, documented process that can follow students from the initial concern to wellness checkpoints and beyond. Building relationships with outside agencies is also a key component of suicide prevention programs. Most schools are not equipped to provide the full suite of resources that students need, and cultivating positive relationships with law enforcement, social services, licensed therapists and other support personnel is a crucial part of the process.

# SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Implementing social-emotional learning curricula can help students improve their overall wellbeing and enhance their connections with others, essential protective factors that can help prevent suicide among students. SEL also promotes effective problem-solving, improved self-esteem, and the development of kindness and compassion for themselves and those around them, all characteristics that help students acquire strategies to manage anxiety, depression and stress.



Additionally, SEL curricula can have a positive impact on bullying, violence to others and other harmful behaviors. SEL can establish a positive, accepting and respectful school environment in which students' mental wellbeing is valued and bullying and violence is unacceptable. Through SEL, students learn to self-regulate their emotions, appreciate and empathize with others (including those who are different from them) and apply responsible decision-making skills to their lives. As a result, there is a reduced opportunity for behavior patterns common with bullies (such as lack of empathy, low self-esteem and not understanding their emotions) to flourish.



SEL curricula can help students get their basic needs met so they can move into higher-order academic learning. Maslow before Bloom is a concept that many educators believe has a big impact on learning. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, which outlines five tiers of basic human needs, starts with physiological and safety needs. These primary needs must be met before students can engage in the more rigorous learning tasks of Bloom's Taxonomy.



# The Time to Act Is Now

Developing a supportive school environment in which all students are encouraged to flourish academically and emotionally is crucial, especially as schools reopen. Many students will be returning to a classroom setting after being at home for more than a year, and it will be important that they understand where they can go for help when they need it. The time to act is now.

Learn more about suicide prevention programs in schools by checking out these:



Expert Insights on Youth Suicide Awareness and Prevention in Schools.

[\*Download the eBook\*](#)



What You Know Could Save a Life. Launch Your Suicide Prevention Program with Help from the Experts.

[\*Visit the Website\*](#)



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