

Building Empowered Learning Environments: A Playbook for Wellness and Inclusion



Pennsylvania
Department of Education

COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

607 South Drive
Harrisburg, PA 17120



Pennsylvania
Department of Education

Commonwealth of Pennsylvania

Josh Shapiro, Governor

Department of Education

Angela Fitterer, Interim Acting Secretary

Office of Elementary and Secondary Education

Dr. Carrie Rowe, Deputy Secretary

Office for Safe Schools

Dr. Scott Kuren, Director

The Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) does not discriminate in its educational programs, activities, or employment practices, based on race, color, national origin, [sex] gender, sexual orientation, disability, age, religion, ancestry, union membership, gender identity or expression, AIDS or HIV status, or any other legally protected category. Announcement of this policy is in accordance with State Law including the Pennsylvania Human Relations Act and with Federal law, including Title VI and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967, and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990.

The following persons have been designated to handle inquiries regarding the Pennsylvania Department of Education's nondiscrimination policies:

For Inquiries Concerning Nondiscrimination in Employment:

Pennsylvania Department of Education
Equal Employment Opportunity Representative
Bureau of Human Resources
607 South Drive, Harrisburg, PA 17120 Voice Telephone:
(717) 787-4417, Fax: (717) 783-9348

For Inquiries Concerning Nondiscrimination in All Other Pennsylvania Department of Education Programs and Activities:

Pennsylvania Department of Education
School Services Unit Director
607 South Drive, Harrisburg, PA 17120-0333 Voice
Telephone: (717) 783-3750, Fax: (717) 783-6802

Complaints regarding discrimination in schools:

Human Relations Representative
Intake Division
Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission www.phrc.pa.gov

Harrisburg Regional Office:
Voice (717) 787-9780, Text (717) 787-7279

Pittsburgh Regional Office:
Voice (412) 565-5395, Text (412) 565-5711

Philadelphia Regional Office:
Voice (215) 560-2496, Text (215) 560-3599

If you have any questions about this publication or for additional copies, contact:

Pennsylvania Department of Education
School Services Office
607 South Drive, Harrisburg, PA 17120 Voice: (717) 783-
3750, Fax: (717) 783-6802
www.education.pa.gov

All Media Requests/Inquiries: Contact the Office of Press & Communications at (717) 783-9802.

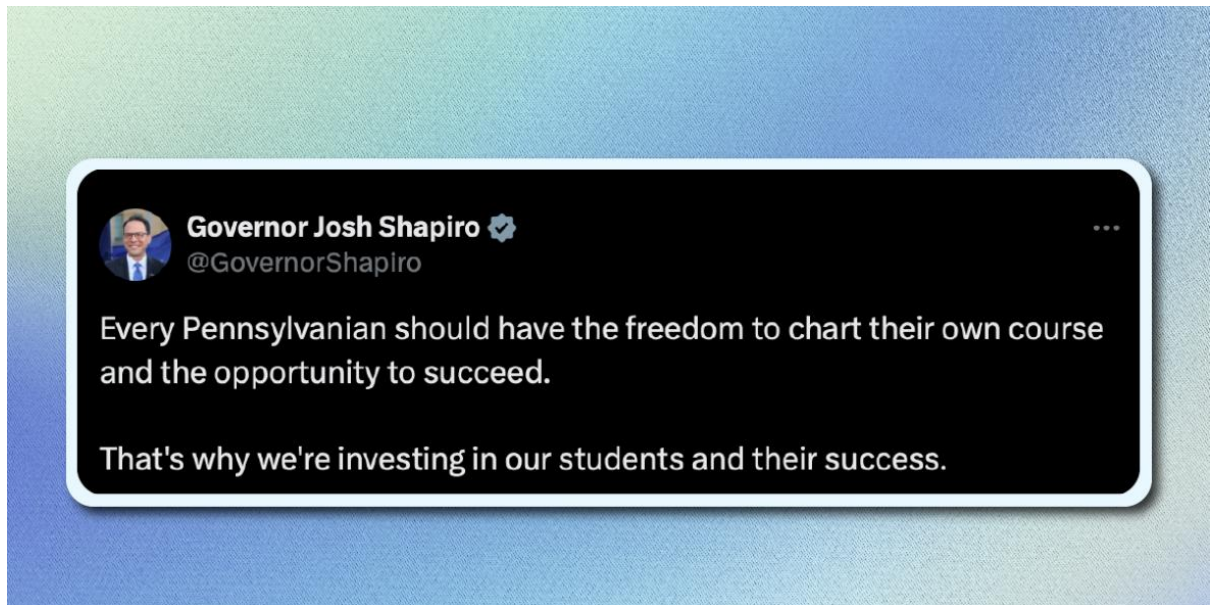
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	5
INTRODUCTION	6
PURPOSE	7
DEFINITIONS AND TERMINOLOGY	9
PREVENTION: BEFORE A CRISIS OCCURS	10
BEFORE YOU GET STARTED: THINGS TO CONSIDER	10
PREVENTION: KEY ISSUES AND AREAS OF FOCUS	10
PREVENTION: OTHER RESOURCES AND TOOLS	15
KEY TAKE AWAYS: PREVENTION	17
RESPONSE: WHEN THERE'S A CRISIS	18
BEFORE YOU GET STARTED: THINGS TO CONSIDER	18
RESPONSE: KEY ISSUES AND AREAS OF FOCUS	18
RESPONSE: OTHER RESOURCES AND TOOLS	21
KEY TAKEAWAYS: RESPONSE	24
RECOVERY: AFTER THE WORST IS OVER	25
RECOVERY: OTHER RESOURCES AND TOOLS	29
KEY TAKEAWAYS: RECOVERY	30
APPENDIX A: FEDERAL AND STATE REQUIREMENTS	31
APPENDIX B: WEBSITES	33
APPENDIX C: SAMPLE AFTER-ACTION REPORT	34

Acknowledgments

The Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) would like to acknowledge and thank the following organizations for their contributions to the original *Pennsylvania Equity and Inclusion Toolkit*¹

- Center for Safe Schools/Center for Education Equity
- Juvenile Court Judges' Commission
- Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD)
- Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission (PHRC)
- Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network (PaTTAN)
- Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE)

¹ Pennsylvania Department of Education (2017). [Equity and Inclusion Toolkit](#).
Revised 2024



Introduction

Societal issues that impact our communities also impact our schools. Our success in addressing these issues is directly related to our ability to collaborate and work together as a community.

These issues (e.g. bullying, viral media events, bias-related incidents) in our communities and schools challenges us all to take effective measures to create and sustain a safe and supportive learning environment for our learners.

Pennsylvania's schools should be spaces where all learners – regardless of their race, color, religion, ancestry, gender, sexual orientation, gender expression or identity, national origin, or ability – feel safe, experience honored dignity, and feel welcomed.

Throughout the country and within the Commonwealth, community members, school entities' staff, administration and board members, youth, and other key partners are coming together to combat the issues arising in the schools and communities. They are working to build an environment of wellness and inclusion for all learners.

This commitment and the resources included in this *Playbook* are integrally linked to PDE's mission to ensure that every learner has access to a world-class education system that academically prepares children and adults to succeed as productive citizens. A safe, secure, and supportive environment for each school and every child is essential for realizing that mission.

PDE and partnering agencies have developed the Building Empowered Learning Environments: A Playbook for Wellness and Inclusion to support you in creating a plan and action steps for prevention, response, and recovery, and to support physical and psychological safety in schools. This is an updated educational resource that expands the original *Equity and Inclusion*

*Toolkit*², available to you as part of a continuing process to provide you with current trend tools and information that lead toward safe, supportive learning environments. While there is no true cure to eliminate behaviors that create barriers to psychological or physical safety we can – and must – work together by creating conditions to prevent their occurrence and minimize their effect.

Purpose

The *Building Empowered Learning Environments: A Playbook for Wellness and Inclusion* is designed to assist all school entities in their efforts to prevent and address behaviors that create barriers to psychologically or physically safe learning environments. Everyone from the state level of government to all school entities and the community at large has a moral and legal obligation to ensure the safety of all children placed under their care.

The *Playbook* was designed to provide relevant, evidence-based resources and information for school leaders and administrators to ensure that all students feel safe, respected, and welcomed in classrooms across the Commonwealth. This *Playbook* has three focus areas – prevention, response, and recovery – aimed at helping educators address and eliminate barriers to a safe and supportive learning environment.

Table 1. Adapted from the Framework for Promoting Inclusion and Equity³

Prevention: When a Crisis Occurs
How can you and other school leaders assess your school’s learning environment with an eye toward preventing psychological and physical harm?
Response: When There’s a Crisis
What are the nine points to consider when responding to a crisis that is negatively impacting the psychological and physical safety at your school?
Recovery: After the Worst is Over
How can you address long-term planning and capacity building for the future, including the development of social emotional skills?

² Pennsylvania Department of Education (2017). [Equity and Inclusion Toolkit](#).

³ Teaching Tolerance. [Responding to hate and bias at school: A guide for administrators, counselors, and teachers](#).

What's in the *Playbook*?

Each section of the *Playbook* includes information, resources, and links to help you identify and implement best practices – whether you're trying to proactively evaluate your school or district's learning environment, policies, or to respond to a bias-related incident.

Table 2: *Playbook for Wellness and Inclusion* Structure

<p>Prevention</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Conducting a Needs Assessment/Environmental Scan• Improving School Climate and Culture• Proactive Services and Supports• Prevention Resources
<p>Response</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Putting Safety First• Denounce the Act(s)• Investigate• Involve Others• Communications• Support Targeted Students• Seek Justice, Avoid Blame• Promote Healing• Response Resources
<p>Recovery</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lessons Learned• Planning for the Long Term• Capacity Building• Recovery Resources

Definitions and Terminology

Definitions and Terminology have been developed by the Pennsylvania Department of Education related to Trauma-Informed and Equitable Learning Environments. Resources with full definitions and linkages to Safe, Supportive Learning Environments can be found by accessing the below resources or by accessing PDE's website at www.education.pa.gov:

[Empowerment Through Common Language in Pennsylvania: A Dictionary of Terms Related to Trauma-Informed Approaches in Schools.](#)

[Glossary of Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging \(EIB\) Terms for Pennsylvania Learning Environments.](#)

PREVENTION: Before a Crisis Occurs

Before You Get Started: Things to Consider

- How knowledgeable are you and your colleagues regarding behaviors that impact psychological and physical safety such as bullying, viral media events, bias-related incidents, implicit and structural bias, cultural competency, and educational equity? What resources (i.e., professional development, curricula, etc.) are currently available for students, educators, staff, and community members?
- What are the most common issues that your school deals with on a regular basis? How do you know these are issues?
- What do you feel completely prepared to handle? What do you feel unprepared to handle? (ex., learning environment, professional development plan, etc.)
- Who needs to be at the table as you think about these issues and develop a plan? Are these individuals engaged and ready to contribute? Who's missing from these conversations?
- Do you know what services and supports are available in your community if an incident were to occur? Do you have existing relationships with these partners? If not, who do you need to connect with to build those relationships?

Prevention: Key Issues and Areas of Focus

Any good relationship needs to begin with trust. In a crisis, we often draw on trusted partners to help provide support and assistance, and they are willing to come to the table because of that longstanding relationship and a shared desire to help the community. When those relationships don't exist, it can be challenging to efficiently, effectively, and credibly respond when a crisis does occur.

It is important to identify and provide community-specific solutions, and to remember that "community" isn't a monolithic term: there are communities within communities, and educators need to build trust and relationships that ensure all students and families feel valued, recognized, and respected.

As such, prevention efforts should account for varying levels of incidents that incorporate situations occurring within specific school buildings, at-large within a school district, community-wide, and via social media platforms. Table 3 provides a snapshot overview of these incident levels. Incident levels were developed in accordance with the PREPaRE model. Additional information on social media incidents and ways to prepare for them can be found in the *Responding to Hate and Bias at School: A Guide for Administrators, Counselors, and Teachers*⁴.

⁴ Learning for Justice. [Responding to hate and bias at school: A guide for administrators, counselors, and teachers](#)
Revised 2024

Table 3. Varying Levels of Incidents

Minimal Level Incidents/Response

Incidents in which the scope is limited to one or a small group of individuals in a school setting. No outside assistance is needed, no new policies are required, and staff is able to respond without leaving their normal roles or functions (e.g. a student directs a racial slur or bullies another student, teacher responds and notifies administrator who addresses behavior based on school-level anti-bias/anti-bullying policy/plan).

Building Level Incidents/Response

Incidents in which the scope is limited to school settings and school-based personnel. No outside assistance is needed but threat assessment team is involved, or incident is at a level where staff response is outside of their traditional roles (e.g. a student directs a racial slur or bullies another student and incident escalates beyond the scope a teacher can address individually). This level of response would involve initiation of the Incident Command Team.

School District Level Incident/Response

These are incidents where support and involvement is required from school district personnel outside of the school building or members of the School District Incident Command Team. Bias or behavioral incidents involve groups of students. While these incidents may require help from community liaisons, they do not reach the scope and impact of a regional-level incident.

Regional Level Incident/Response

These include incidents during which coordination of services from school building, district and municipal community response agencies is warranted. In these incidents, the Incident Command Team is coordinating with outside Incident Command Teams. Such incidents include confirmed hate crimes, other bias incidents that have prompted community concern, fights at district-sponsored events, and community violence. (Ex., during a varsity football game, several students call spectators from the other school by a variety of racial slurs, throw food wrappers and empty cups at them.)

Social Media Incidents

These include incidents occurring via cell phone or online platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, and others. (Ex., posting photoshopped pictures of a targeted student on a snapchat “burn page”, a negative texting campaign targeting a marginalized population such as LGBTQ or refugees.) Although it is impossible to know every online platform used by youth, it is in the purview of school leadership to stay apprised of new social media avenues to ensure they are not being used for bias, bigotry, discrimination, targeting, and bullying.

Needs Assessment

To best determine where to focus prevention efforts for each of these varying incident levels before they occur, schools and districts should conduct a needs assessment and/or environmental scan to determine strengths and gaps at each level. Based on the results of that needs assessment, schools, districts, and community partners should then identify and implement targeted work to build a positive school climate and culture, including developing training opportunities to enhance skills and knowledge. In Pennsylvania, schools have the option of using the [Pennsylvania School Climate Survey](#) as an additional tool to conduct a school specific environmental scan. The Pennsylvania School Climate Survey is available for free on PDE's website, and includes surveys for different targeted audiences (students, teachers, parents/families, etc.). Additional resources and tools to support these efforts are listed below.

KEY RESOURCES: Needs Assessment

- [Pennsylvania School Climate Survey](#)
Use the Pennsylvania School Climate Survey to determine school climate and identify next steps. All schools vary in need and demographics. This survey can be adapted to meet the needs of your community.
- [School Health Assessment and Evaluation System \(SHAPE\)](#)
Use the SHAPE survey to determine school climate, tiered interventions, mental health supports, equity and anti-racism needs and gaps, and trauma-responsiveness.
- [Colorado Department of Education Equity Toolkit for Administrators](#)
Pages 22-31 provide a sample self-assessment to be administered to students and staff to complete an environmental scan of current equity and inclusion needs and gaps along with guiding questions and action steps.
- **Available School and LEA Data**
Use data to inform decision-making around curriculum choices and policies. The data that is already being collected can be used to support the identification of strengths and weaknesses within the school community. Examples of data include the standardized test scores, discipline reports, Office of Safe Schools' annual report, Student Assistance Program reports, programs for English learners, advanced coursework (Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, dual enrollment), remedial classes, parent and student perception surveys, etc.

School Culture and Climate

School climate refers to the quality and character of school life. School climate is based on patterns of students', parents/families', and school personnel's experiences of school life, and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures.⁵ Research suggests that a positive school climate is associated with students' academic achievement, engagement, and social skills development.⁶

⁵ Teri Dary and Terry Pickeral. (2013). Citing School Climate Practices for Implementation and Sustainability. School climate practice briefs, no. 1. Retrieved from [School Climate Practice Briefs](#).

⁶ A. Thapa, et al., [School Climate Research Summary](#), National School Climate Center, August 2012.

KEY RESOURCES: School Culture and Climate

- [Pennsylvania School Climate Survey](#)
Use the Pennsylvania School Climate Survey to determine school climate and identify next steps. All schools vary in need and demographics. This survey can be adapted to meet the needs of your community.
- [National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments](#), U.S. Department of Education
This website provides information on a variety of topics related to improving engagement, safety, and school climate, including cultural and linguistic competence, school climate measurement, and safety and environmental considerations for preK-12 schools and higher education.
- **Youth Involvement in School Climate Efforts**
Educators should deliberately support students to be engaged as co-leaders of school climate improvement efforts for those efforts to be successful.⁷ Suggested practices include:
 - Frame your work with youth at the center of all decisions;
 - Start with an assets-based approach;
 - Prepare youth for meaningful roles;
 - Value the perspective of youth and allow them to contribute in the decision-making process;
 - Work to create the leaders of today, not as a preparation for the future; and
 - Engage youth in addressing equity issues and celebrating diversity.
- **School- and District-Level Planning Discussions**
Consider exploring the following topics as part of prevention and planning efforts:
 - Does the school:
 - Display a mission statement committing the work of the school to students, families and the community it serves?
 - Reflect an orderly and safe environment conducive to effective learning by student and productive work by staff?
 - Display internal and external signs welcoming visitors to the school?
 - Use friendly language to describe what visitors should do when entering the school?
 - Engage youth in addressing equity issues and celebrating diversity?
 - Employ office staff who are friendly to all who enter, provide needed information easily, answer the phone in a way that make the caller glad they have called, and make all feel welcome?

⁷ R. Cardillo, [School Climate and Youth Development](#), National School Climate Center, February 2013.

Training and Development

Maintaining practices that effectively engage students from diverse backgrounds can be challenging for many administrators and staff given time constraints, limited resources to engage content experts, and general uneasiness with some topics. Training and development is critical to ensuring staff and students are equipped with knowledge and skills on relevant topics specific to equity, diversity, and fostering a supportive school culture.

Engaging youth who are impacted by specific topics, when appropriate, can serve as a tremendous empowerment strategy and provides great opportunity for authentic dialogue and relationship building amongst staff and fellow peers.

A summary of “Key Resources” for student and staff training and professional development is available below. Additional information can also be found for population/content specific topics on PDE’s website:

- Disabilities
- Gender and Gender Identity
- Immigration Status
- Racial, Ethnic, and Cultural Diversity
- Religious Diversity
- Sexual Orientation

KEY RESOURCES: Training and Development

- [Colorado Department of Education Equity Toolkit for Educators](#)
Pages 32-35 provide guiding principles to support a plan for training participants in the areas of bias and communication as well as discrimination and harassment.
- [Teacher Training: Micro-messaging](#)
National Alliances for Partnerships in Equity: evidence-based program on micro-messaging and how to address it in the classroom.
- [U.S. Department of Justice’s Community Relations Service: SPIRIT \(Student Problem Identification and Resolution of Issues Together\)](#)
Provides a free leadership training for students to identify and address racial and intergroup tension.
- [Pennsylvania State Police: Heritage Affairs](#)
Provides training on discrimination, hate crimes/speech, ethnic intimidation, cultural diversity and sensitivity, and racial profiling.

Prevention: Other Resources and Tools

Articles, Data & Reports

- [Classroom Resources](#), Teaching Tolerance
- [Youth Suicide Prevention Program](#)
- [Responding to Hate and Bias at School: A Guide for Administrators, Counselors and Teachers](#), Teaching Tolerance
- [Supporting Marginalized Students in Stressful Times: Tips for Educators](#), National Association of School Psychologists (NASP)
- [Checklist for a Comprehensive Approach to Addressing Harassment](#), U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights
- [StopBullying.gov](#)

Templates, Sample Documents & Lesson Plans

- [Pennsylvania's Equitable Practices Hub](#), Pennsylvania Department of Education
The purpose of the Equitable Practices Hub is to provide a cohesive collection of resources that an educational community may use in promoting intentional equity in their communities.
- [Safe Supportive Learning – Products and Tools](#), National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments, U.S. Department of Education
This section of the Center's Safe Supportive Learning website provides links to guides, training products, learning briefs, and other tools that schools and educators can use to measure and improve school climate. The Center also includes a list of archived materials from conferences and learning events, as well as links to upcoming webinars and in-person professional development opportunities.
- [Colorado Department of Education Equity Toolkit for Educators](#)
Pages 41-43 provides an action planning checklist for creating an Equity Plan grounded in cultural competence and proficiency in an effort to promote educational equity.

Technical Assistance & Support

- [U.S. Department of Justice's Community Relations Service: SPIRIT \(Student Problem Identification and Resolution of Issues Together\)](#)
- [Center for Safe Schools](#)
Pennsylvania-based organization provides training on a variety of school safety and youth violence prevention topics, including training for staff to prevent, recognize and respond to identity-based bullying and harassment.

Community Engagement

- [Pennsylvania State of Police: Office of Community Engagement](#)
Provides training to build and maintain positive relationships between law enforcement and communities across the Commonwealth, with an emphasis on underserved communities.
- [Colorado Department of Education Equity Toolkit for Educators](#)
Pages 36-40 provide guiding principles regarding rationale, guiding questions, and actions steps specific to community and parent engagement as a means to prevent and respond to issues related to equity and inclusion.



KEY TAKE AWAYS: Prevention

Creating a positive school climate – one that encourages inclusion and promotes respect – is vital for proactively preventing and disrupting bias, discrimination, hate, and intolerance, and for effectively addressing incidents if and when they occur. ***Relationships and trusted partners will play a key role*** in identifying areas for improvement (through a ***needs assessment*** or similar tool), and for developing strategies and resources to address community-specific issues.

Schools and districts should consider establishing ***Quick Response Teams (QRTs)*** that build on these partnerships and resources. Potential members could include administrators, school counselors and/or school psychologists, school nurses, teachers that have rapport with students, SAP team members, athletic coaches, civil rights coordinators, and social workers or home-school visitors. Your QRT should ***reflect the unique needs of your school and community***, and should ***include diverse individuals with relevant expertise and perspectives***.

- Evaluate school climate through a ***needs assessment*** or school climate survey.
- ***Explore data*** to ensure equity in academic programs and discipline practices.
- Engage in ***community resource mapping*** to determine which resources may serve as liaisons in supporting students and families.
- Build frameworks to establish and enhance ***multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS)*** to address academic and behavioral needs.
- ***Identify action steps*** – based on priorities identified through a needs assessment – to initiate a systemic approach to creating a positive school climate.
- Develop ***formal grievance procedures*** and promote the process widely to students, parents/families, and staff. Be sure to take steps to evaluate whether the procedures are working well, and to identify areas for improvement.
- Provide students and staff with ***training and support programs*** to empower individuals in your school community to take effective steps to prevent and disrupt bias, discrimination, harassment, and violence. These trainings and supports should provide evidence- and reality-based strategies for recognizing and addressing hate, harassment, and violence in multiple contexts, such as verbal, written, or online (social media).

RESPONSE: When There's a Crisis

Before You Get Started: Things to Consider

- If a learning environment incident were to occur (bias related, student protests, violent event, etc.), do you have a process and/or team in place to respond effectively?
- Do you know what policies and protocols are in place regarding responding to barriers to healthy learning environments? Who serves as the primary coordinator or contact when these incidences occur? Who can provide support (including external resources)?
- How would you ensure your response is relevant and meaningful to impacted school and community and members (targeted individuals, students, staff, community, and media)?
- Do you have a good working relationship with the local media? Do you have protocols and capacity for organizing a press conference and/or community forum?

Response: Key Issues and Areas of Focus

The way a school entity responds is critical in containing, controlling, and bringing resolution for all concerned, and is a litmus test of your relationships and credibility with your community. Without knowledge of current and historical challenges, or without engaging in a dialogue or planning before something happens, it is extremely difficult to respond to an incident effectively and in a way that maintains credibility and authenticity, which are vital to long-term progress.

Response activities should include reducing the probability of harm to youth and school entities, and response actions should be performed in a way that moves into recovery operations and maintenance. The level of the incident will guide you in determining the people who need to be involved; this may include external assistance to individuals affected by the situation or event. While it is not expected that every step will be perfect, you should make every effort to be collaborative, respectful, and transparent.

Beyond the moral imperative to respond to incidents of large-scale learning environment disruptions, bias, harassment, and discrimination, schools also have a legal responsibility to immediately and effectively respond, investigate, and prevent the recurrence of these actions. Listed below is a snapshot of state and federal response obligations as well as suggested key areas to focus your response activities including establishing a “safety first” mindset, followed by essential components of a messaging and media campaign for any level of incident, and a final step of ensuring targeting students feel and experience support throughout the response process.

Responsibilities for School Response under Federal & State Laws

Under both federal and state laws, school entities have obligations to address, respond to, and prevent the recurrence of incidents of harassment and violence, including those that are motivated by bias and discrimination, regardless of whether those incidents meet the level of a

hate crime.⁸ For example, schools have a responsibility to address incidents of discriminatory harassment that it knows about – or reasonably should have known about – and must take prompt and effective steps to stop the harassment, eliminate any hostile environment, and prevent the harassment from recurring. Schools should keep in mind that regardless of the type of incident (i.e., bullying, hazing, teasing), any harassment that is on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, or disability that creates a hostile environment mandates a response in accordance with federal civil rights laws. School entities are also responsible for designating individuals responsible for coordinating compliance with Title IX,⁹ Section 504, and Title II,¹⁰ including the investigation of any complaints of discriminatory harassment.

KEY RESOURCES: Responsibilities for School Response under Federal & State Laws

- **[U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights \(OCR\) – Reading Room](#)**
This webpage includes links to relevant laws and regulations; policy; case resolutions; correspondence; OCR manuals, pamphlets, publications, and reports; Title IX exemptions; testimony; and additional resources.
 - [Dear Colleague Letter on Harassment and Bullying](#) (October 26, 2010)
 - [Resources for Addressing Racial Harassment](#)
 - [Sexual Harassment Resources](#)

- **Other Federal Civil Rights Offices**
 - [U.S. Equal Employment Opportunities Commission](#)
 - [Americans With Disabilities Act \(ADA\) Home Page](#)
 - [U.S. Department of Justice, Office of the Attorney General, Civil Rights Division](#)
 - [U.S. Commission on Civil Rights](#)
 - [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office for Civil Rights](#)
 - [U.S. Department of Agriculture, Civil Rights Office](#)
 - [Federal Aviation Administration, Civil Rights Office](#)
 - [U.S. Department of Transportation, Civil Rights Office](#)
 - [U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Fair Housing Civil Rights](#)
 - [U.S. Department of Labor, Civil Rights Enforcement for Department of Labor and Grant Recipients](#)

- **[Fed Law: Civil Rights](#)**
This online resource provides a list of federal civil rights laws with links to relevant information and texts.

- **[Checklist for a Comprehensive Approach to Addressing Harassment](#)**
This checklist for approaching harassment provides an update to the original document entitled Protecting students from harassment and hate crime: A guide for schools

⁸ [Dear Colleague Letter: Harassment and Bullying](#), U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, October 26, 2010.

⁹ [Fact Sheet: US Department of Education's 2024 Title IX Final Rule Overview](#), U.S. Department of Education, November 12, 2024.

¹⁰ [Disability Discrimination](#), U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights.

originally published by the U.S. Department of Education in January 1999. Additional information regarding guidance can be found in the OCR reading room.

Safety First

Establishing safety (physical and psychological) is the most important first step in any incident response. Based on the variety of ways in which an incident of bias or discrimination can occur, each response will need to be individualized for the situation. After following local entity policies and procedures, including notification of proper authorities and accounting for those involved and impacted, you should determine if, and when, parents and caregivers will be contacted.

Restoring order is a key step to reestablishing any sense of safety. Consider developing a Quick Response Team (QRT), Incident Command Team (ICT) or reach out to your Threat Assessment Team and engage them in providing support for establishing and ensuring safety throughout the incident. This can include making physical adjustments to a location and could also include establishing safe places for staff and youth to process and debrief. Ideally, members of an incident response team need to project a sense of calm as well as earnest concern.

KEY RESOURCES: Safety First

- [Responding to Hate and Bias at School, Learning For Justice](#)
Includes recommendations, best practices, and relevant resources for schools to guide responses to bias, discrimination, harassment, and violence. The guide also includes information on establishing a Quick Response Team (QRT) and ensuring student safety when responding to incidents.
- [Checklist for a Comprehensive Approach to Addressing Harassment](#)
This checklist for approaching harassment provides an update to the original document entitled Protecting students from harassment and hate crime: A guide for schools originally published by the U.S. Department of Education in January 1999. Additional information regarding guidance can be found in the OCR reading room.

Messaging and Media

The type and frequency of communication and messaging in response to an incident is critical in containing rumors, ensuring safety, and establishing trust to begin the recovery phase. It is often the most critical element of a response plan and should be timely, accurate, and provide details on when updates will occur. Several resources are available to support the development of messaging and media response plans that can be developed and saved for future use when an incident occurs.

Consider developing templates and sample communications for a variety of situations you may encounter as identified through a needs assessment or environmental scan. As an additional step, you should also consider creating opportunities to develop relationships with your local news and media outlets and provide them with information regarding how you will handle communication when incidents of bias and discrimination (or other critical response events)

occur.

Examples may include posting information on the school entity website, social media posts, robocalls, and/or text alerts. It is also helpful to provide similar information to staff, parents and caregivers; consider regularly scheduled reminders at the end of marking periods or other natural time blocks.

KEY RESOURCES: Messaging and Media

- [Responding to Hate and Bias at School, Learning For Justice](#)
Includes recommendations, best practices, and relevant resources for schools to guide responses to bias, discrimination, harassment, and violence. The guide also includes detailed plans, sample templates, and other useful messaging and media tools.

Supporting Targeted Students

Disruptions to the learning environment, including bias and discrimination, can often cause targeted victims and those associated with them to feel a sense of isolation and vulnerability. As a school administrator, it is important to take primary steps that ensure both physical and emotional safety, as well as privacy, for the victim and others who may have connections with the victim. It is important to speak with the victim and family to determine what needs they have in order to establish a sense of safety and support. This can include ensuring victims have access to supportive staff with whom they have a close relationship, allowing access to safe and confidential space when needed, and assurance that all steps will be taken to preserve privacy and discourage additional harassment.

Ensuing harassment can happen both overtly and covertly, sometimes through peer groups, parent and caregiver groups, and even among staff. As a preventive response measure, administrators can both apologize on behalf of the school community and denounce any efforts that could do additional harm to the victim. This communication and subsequent follow through of consequences for any level of additional harassment sends a clear message that these types of behaviors and acts will not be tolerated as part of the school community.

KEY RESOURCES: Supporting Targeted Students

- [Supporting Educational Environments Free from Discrimination](#), U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, July 2023
This resource collection features a selection of OCR guidance and resources that may be useful to elementary and secondary schools throughout the school year.
- [Responding to Hate and Bias at School](#), Learning for Justice
Pages 14-22 provide detailed information on messaging, specific suggestions for supporting staff and students, as well as suggested messaging for denouncing incidents and promoting healing. The guide also includes suggestions, tools, and a detailed checklist.

Response: Other Resources and Tools

Documents & Lesson Plans

- [Safe Supportive Learning – Implementation](#), National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments, U.S. Department of Education
Online clearinghouse of implementation resources, including evidence-based programmatic interventions to address a variety of school climate and student safety issues, including harassment.

Technical Assistance & Support

- [Pennsylvania State of Police: Office of Community Engagement](#)
Provides training to build and maintain positive relationships between law enforcement and communities across the Commonwealth, with an emphasis on underserved communities.
- [Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network \(PaTTAN\)](#)
The Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network has developed a broad array of web-based publications, materials, and streaming media resources addressing the topic of learning environment. These materials span an array of educational topics and can be accessed via the following links:
- [Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission](#)
The Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission (PHRC) enforces the Commonwealth’s anti-discrimination laws, the Pennsylvania Human Relations Act (PHRA), and the Pennsylvania Fair Education Opportunities Act (PFEOA). The PHRC’s also provides free trainings and assistance to a wide variety of institutions, including schools and LEAs. These resources can be accessed at www.phrc.pa.gov.
- **Center for Schools and Communities**
The Center for Schools and Communities is committed to improving outcomes for children and families through prevention and intervention initiatives. Staff possess diverse backgrounds in education, human services, community development and the law, as well as specialized skills and experience in program development and design, evaluation, training and resource development. Please see [Training and Consulting](#) for more information about technical assistance resources provided by the Center.

Parents, Families & Caregivers

- [PDE: Mental Health – Family Resources](#)
Information on mental health supports for families and resources on addressing mental health concerns.
- [Mental Health America BIPOC Mental Health Month Toolkit](#)
Free, practical resources to help navigate mental health stigma, bridge generational differences, dismantle mental health myths and encourage meaningful conversations.
- [PA Parent and Family Alliance](#)

Playbook for Wellness and Inclusion: Response

Information on the warning signs of suicide and access to support for families.

- [**PDE: Managing Your Youth's Emotions When You're Stressed**](#)
Resources to assist families, educators, and community members in having conversations with youth while also managing their own emotions.



KEY TAKEAWAYS: Response

How a school district or school responds is critical in containing, controlling, and resolving the situation or event. When an incident of bias, hate, discrimination, harassment, or violence occurs, schools and districts should take the following key steps to address and repair the harm created by the act(s):

- **Denounce the act(s)** and **apologize** on behalf of the school community;
- **Designate a lead individual** to oversee the logistics and needs during response, and to identify and outreach with allies and partners who can help in the response effort (student leaders, staff in the building with established rapport with students, community partners and organizations, etc.);
- Initiate an **immediate and thorough investigation** of the issue, mindful of requirements for investigation and resolution expected under federal and state laws,¹¹ including necessary steps to **document and report** to outside authorities;
- Take prompt steps to **address and remediate the offense**, keeping in mind age-appropriate response strategies;
- **Support targeted and affected students**, including providing interim protective actions and accommodations;
- Provide **emotional and psychological support**, as needed;
- Develop and disseminate **communications** to the school, community, and media as soon as possible, and follow strategies for ensuring ongoing communications to dispel misinformation and provide accurate information (consider developing or modifying a template or other document to help prepare for these communications);
- **Involve others in the response process**, including highlighting voices of internal and external allies in these communications to demonstrate support and share relevant resources for students, staff, parents, families, and other community members; and
- Regularly **evaluate the effectiveness** of anti-bias and anti-violence efforts.

¹¹ [Checklist for a Comprehensive Approach to Addressing Harassment](#), U.S. Department of Education, October, 2015.
Revised 2024

RECOVERY: After the Worst is Over

Before You Get Started: Things to Consider

- Do you have a mechanism to evaluate, from the perspective of multiple and diverse stakeholders, what worked and what needs improvement in a future response?
- What partners can you collaborate with to sustain progress and support prevention efforts moving forward?
- How will you support educators and staff in transitioning to new practices, policies, procedures, and principles as part of the recovery process?
- Do you have a plan for accommodating ongoing supports to restore and support physical and psychological safety (financial, space, referrals, etc.) to support returning to the school's regular schedule and structure?
- How will you keep your community engaged and updated regarding ongoing recovery efforts?

Ultimately, the goal of recovery is to promote long-term prevention so that behaviors that impact the psychological or physical safety are identified and addressed before they create harm. In this section, we will identify resources that can aid schools and districts in developing systems of support that empower students, educators, staff, and communities to take the lead in identifying underlying factors that impact students and school communities, and proactively preventing bullying, harassment, discrimination, and violence from occurring.

It's important that educators and school leaders continue to have conversations, no matter how difficult, with students, parents, families, staff, and community members long after an incident has left the headlines. Engaging in the change process is a two-way street; it is important for educators and school leaders to keep the dialogue going around where improvements can be made and how to address concerns openly even when the spotlight on an incident fades away.

In thinking with the end in mind, the list that follows includes elements that you should be prepared to tackle and address throughout the recovery phase, and to consider as you move into long-term prevention. As part of this recovery phase, ensuring school leaders are scheduling feedback sessions and evaluating the response and recovery related to the event is a vital step. This step allows for additional prevention of future behaviors that can impact the psychological or physical safety of the learning environment and support a full recovery that allows for a return to structure and routine.

Table 4. Considerations for Recovery Phase and Long-term Prevention¹²

The Power of Policy

- Understandably, victims and their families may judge some disciplinary measures to be ineffective or too lenient. This is less likely to happen if schools have addressed behaviors of concern, including harassment and bias-motivated incidents in their policies, particularly policies that have been well-publicized and reviewed by the school and the community at large. Be open to the need for change; use this incident as an opportunity to review and improve policy. Incorporate a policy review and necessary changes as part of your recovery phase.

Fair Enforcement

- When incidents do occur, it is crucial that schools enforce the consequences fairly and without regard to the offender's status. If some offenders seem to be treated more leniently than others, the victims and the school community will have little sense of justice and closure. Offenders also will be less likely to change their behavior, and victims may feel more vulnerable and be less likely to report future incidents. This dynamic can contribute to a divisive and unsafe school environment.

A Community Approach

- Alliances with parents and caregivers, community or service organizations and advocacy groups can help school officials develop more creative consequences that will require offenders to face the destructive nature of what they did and perhaps even help them take steps to repair the damage they have done. Dialogue groups and peer mediation programs are particularly helpful for incidents involving large groups of students. Some communities also have restorative-justice programs in place, which can help.

Promote Healing

- Your community has been wounded. That wound might have come from a source outside the school, such as vandals spraying hateful graffiti on school walls. On the other hand, it may have come from inside the school, identifying a deep division among students. Either way, opportunities for healing need to be part of your crisis response. As the crisis decreases, it is helpful to find a way to gather together and share messages of healing and unity. This becomes an initial step into the post-crisis phase, a bridge between crisis management and longer term strategic planning around improving school climate.
- One option is to plan a schoolwide or community-wide show of unity. Orchestrating a demonstration of school unity after a high-profile incident can be a way to begin repairing the sense of community within a school. Distributing ribbons or wearing certain colors can become symbols of determination to recover from the incident and show unity in opposing behaviors that negatively impact safety in the learning environment at school. Involve the neighborhood and wider community, as appropriate. This type of gathering can have a galvanizing effect, especially if it includes a pledge to work together to address issues raised by the incident.
- Consider creating posters or buttons, promoting school values. "Our school stands for..." Paint that slogan on a banner along the hallway, and invite students to add their thoughts (*Inclusion. Fairness. Kindness.*). Do not frame this as the end of your efforts, but rather as a beginning of further work toward improving school climate and culture.

¹² Willoughby, B., (2010). Citing [Responding to Hate and Bias at School: A Guide for Administrators, Counselors, and Teachers](#), Teaching Tolerance.

Administrative

There are administrative details that must be put into place to ease the transition from response to recovery and restore daily operations that support the educational process.

- Keep documentation of all actions, meetings, and decisions.
- Implement the Succession Plan if top administrators and other staff are not able to return to work for an extended length of time.
- Review Incident after Action Report and discuss possible changes to the School Entity 'All Hazards' School Safety Plan (if applicable; see appendix for sample document).
- If records have been destroyed in the incident, contact off-site storage area to get back-up copies.

KEY RESOURCES: Administrative

- [All-Hazards School Safety Planning Toolkit](#), Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency (PEMA)

This toolkit provides guidelines and information for schools, LEAs, and communities to address a variety of crises and emergency situations that might impact their campuses. The toolkit provides a framework for effective planning and response.

[A Framework for Safe and Successful Schools: Policy Recommendations for Implementing the Framework.](#)

Provides policy and practice recommendations to increase safety in schools based on the Framework for Safe and Successful Schools.

Ensuring Mental Well-Being of Staff, Students, and Community

Traumatic events can cause psychological and emotional turmoil, cognitive problems and behavioral changes for students, staff, and community members. Developing a mental health recovery plan, within your All Hazards Plan, can increase a school's ability to support psychological and emotional recovery. Work with School Based Mental Health Professionals Student Assistance Team, Employee Assistance Programs, local Disaster Crisis Response Teams (DCORT), flight teams, mental health providers, and other ancillary organizations to help restore emotional stability and learning. The county mental/behavioral health office in your community or your SAP liaisons can direct you to available resources and providers specific to your geographic region.

As part of this process, you and your colleagues should pay special attention to planning for the first day back to school after an incident including how staff, students, and community members will receive information and instructions for obtaining the necessary supports, when supports will be available, and the location in which they will be provided. It may also be necessary to partner with other local school districts that can assist in situations when the school and/or district level staff may not be emotionally able to provide services or support to others. Typically, local Intermediate Units (IU) can provide support in mobilizing additional supports within the IU area.

KEY RESOURCES: Ensuring Mental Well-Being of Staff, Students, and Community

- [Emotional Safety, National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments](#)
This webpage provides information and links to research, best practices, case studies, and technical assistance related to creating emotionally safe learning environments.
- [Responding to Hate and Bias at School, Learning for Justice](#)
Refer to the appendix section for tools specific to organizing community partners.
- [A Framework for Safe and Successful Schools](#)
This joint collaborative framework outlines evidence-based policies and practices for improving school safety and increasing access to mental health supports for children and youth through a comprehensive, school wide focus.
- [Pennsylvania Education Directory/Maps, Pennsylvania Department of Education](#)
This webpage provides links to maps and directories for Pennsylvania’s school districts, IUs, career and technical centers, and postsecondary institutions.

Debrief and Action Planning for Future Prevention Efforts

Every response effort, whether large or small, has lessons to be learned from and areas for improvement. It is important to engage multiple stakeholders in the debriefing process as each group will experience the response from a different lens. It can also be helpful to have a neutral person (not directly involved in the response) facilitate this process.

Highlights of the discussion should include what went well, where there was breakdown, and what additional resources (training, goods, people, etc.) may be needed in preparation for a future response. A key element of the debrief should be promoting equal ownership for both successes and areas of growth, as well as establishing next steps and action planning to ensure necessary changes don’t fall to the wayside.

An after-action report form to assist with team debrief and evaluation of the incident response is attached as part of the *Playbook’s* appendix. Evaluation of incident responses is a valuable learning tool for the team and provides opportunities to plan and revise operation plans prior to any other incidents occurring. After action debriefs also serve as a learning tool for team members. Additional information and processes can be modified from other in-house school safety incident management plans and activities that may already be in place.

KEY RESOURCES: Debrief and Action Planning for Future Prevention Efforts

- [Responding to Hate and Bias at School, Teaching Tolerance](#)
See “What Comes Next?” on p. 24 for an overview of how to debrief following an incident. The section includes suggested discussion and reflection questions, as well as recommendations for long-term planning and capacity building activities to ensure continued progress and improvement.
- [All-Hazards School Safety Planning Toolkit, Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency](#)

Playbook for Wellness and Inclusion: Recovery

This toolkit provides guidelines and information for schools, LEAs, and communities to address a variety of crises and emergency situations that might impact their campuses. The toolkit provides a framework for effective planning and response.

Recovery: Other Resources and Tools

Articles, Data & Reports

- [Responding to Hate and Bias at School: A Guide for Administrators, Counselors and Teachers](#), Learning for Justice

Templates, Sample Documents & Lesson Plans

- **Appendix C – Other Resources**
 - Sample After Action Report



KEY TAKEAWAYS: Recovery

Decisions and actions taken after an incident should be taken with a view to restoring or improving the pre- incident conditions of the stricken school entity and community, while encouraging and facilitating necessary adjustments to reduce risk in and diminish frequency of future incidents. Key steps for recovery include:

- Strive to restore the learning environment as quickly as possible.
- Meet initially with faculty to review schedules and procedures. Note any changes, if necessary.
- Provide for the emotional well-being of staff, students and school community (i.e. psychological first aid).
- Enlist the support of student service personnel (counselors, psychologists, social workers, SAP team members) and community mental health agencies for ongoing care in the recovery process.
- Consider the developmental age of the students when providing recovery efforts. Student responses to stress or trauma may vary in type and intensity.
- Debrief with faculty as well as district/building crisis response teams to determine staff reactions and any needed recovery support for adults.
- Keep documentation of all actions, meetings, and decisions. Consider “Lessons Learned” and discuss what worked well, where there are areas to improve in prevention and response, etc.
- Maintain constant communication with parents and families (i.e. website updates, face-to-face meetings, and letters).
- Assist in the restoration of the school community.
- Engage in ongoing meetings and action with community groups that serve as “brokers” in open dialogue in the family-school-community partnership.
- Continue to manage the media, if needed.
- Promote accurate information and dispel rumors.
- Demonstrate unity among the school community and the community at-large. Consider creating promotional items (buttons, posters) that promote school values (i.e. “Our school stands for...kindness”).

Appendix A: Federal and State Requirements

Overview of Relevant Federal and State Requirements for Schools

Acts of bias and discrimination may be illegal, interfere with learning, and contribute to an unsafe learning environment. School leaders and educators should be aware of their responsibilities under relevant administrative, civil, and criminal laws, including:

- 22 Pa. Chapter 14; Pennsylvania Human Relations Act (43 P.S. §§ 951 *et seq.*);
- Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (federal law prohibits discrimination based on race, color, and national origin in programs and activities receiving federal financial assistance);
- Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 (federal law protects against discrimination based on sex in education programs or activities that receive federal financial assistance);
- Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (federal laws prohibiting discrimination based on disability); and Pennsylvania Crimes Code;
- The Equal Educational Opportunities Act of 1974 (EEOA), which prohibits the denial of equal educational opportunity based on race, color, sex and national origin.

The Pennsylvania Crimes Code defines ethnic intimidation (Pennsylvania’s legal term for a hate crime) as an event when a person commits an underlying crime with malicious intention towards the person’s race, color, religion or national origin. For the purposes of collecting statistics, the FBI has defined a hate crime as a “criminal offense against a person or property motivated in whole or in part by an offender’s bias against a race, religion, disability, sexual orientation, ethnicity, gender, or gender identity.”¹³ To be a hate crime, the act must be criminal. The use of a racial slur or the expression of an intolerant opinion does not typically rise to the level of a criminal act. Certain offenses become hate crimes because of what motivated the criminal act.

18 Pa. C.S. § 2710. Ethnic intimidation.

(a) Offense defined. -- *A person commits the offense of ethnic intimidation if, with malicious intention toward the race, color, religion or national origin of another individual or group of individuals, he commits an offense under any other provision of this article or under Chapter 33 (relating to arson, criminal mischief and other property destruction) exclusive of section 3307 (relating to institutional vandalism) or under section 3503 (relating to criminal trespass) with respect to such individual or his or her property or with respect to one or more members of such group or to their property.*

(b) Grading. -- *An offense under this section shall be classified as a misdemeanor of the third degree if the other offense is classified as a summary offense. Otherwise, an offense under this section shall be classified one degree higher in the classification specified in section 106 (relating to classes of offenses) than the classification of the other offense.*

¹³ Federal Bureau of Investigation. (2017). What We Investigate, Civil Rights. Washington, DC. Retrieved from <https://www.fbi.gov/investigate/civil-rights/hate-crimes>.

(c) Definition. -- *As used in this section "malicious intention" means the intention to commit any act, the commission of which is a necessary element of any offense referred to in subsection (a) motivated by hatred toward the race, color, religion or national origin of another individual or group of individuals.*

Appendix B: Websites

Resource	Website
American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry:	www.aacap.org
American Academy of Pediatrics:	www.aap.org
American Psychiatric Association:	www.psych.org
American Psychological Association:	www.apa.org
American Red Cross:	www.redcross.org
Center for Mental Health in Schools:	http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu
Center for Safe Schools:	www.safeschools.info
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:	www.cdc.gov
Crisis Management Institute:	https://cmionline.com/www.cdc.gov www.cmionline.org
Federal Emergency Management Agency:	www.fema.gov
International Critical Incident Stress Foundation:	www.icisf.org
National Association of School Nurses (NASN):	https://www.nasn.org/homeg
National Association of School Psychologists:	http://www.nasponline.org
National Center for Trauma-Informed Care:	www.samhsa.gov/nctic
National Education Association:	www.nea.org
National Institute of Mental Health:	www.nimh.nih.gov
National Organization for Victim Assistance:	www.try-nova.org/
PDE - Office for Safe Schools:	www.education.pa.gov/safeschools
Pennsylvania Department of Education:	www.education.pa.gov
Pennsylvania Department of Health:	www.health.pa.gov
Pennsylvania Department of Human Services:	www.dhs.pa.gov
Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency:	www.pema.pa.gov
Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission:	www.phrc.pa.gov
Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network:	www.pattan.net
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration:	www.samhsa.gov
The National Child Traumatic Stress Network:	www.nctsn.org
U.S. Department of Education:	www.ed.gov
U.S. Department of Homeland Security:	www.dhs.gov
U.S. Department of Mental Health:	www.mentalhealth.gov

Appendix C: Sample After-Action Report

AFTER-ACTION REPORT¹⁴

Incident Name:		
Author of After-Action Report		
Participants:		
Event Description:		
Location(s):		
Date/Place of Incident:		
Time/Date Review:		

Plan of action for incident (what was expected to happen):

Discussion of:

What actually happened?

¹⁴ Modified from Association of California School Administrators [School Crisis Toolkit- After an Incident](#). Revised 2024

Strengths of team response:

Areas for improvement:

What can we learn as a team?

