II. SCHOOL CLIMATE

When our children walk into the school, the most fundamental thing they want is to have a relationship with a caring adult, who will listen to them. They need those relationships; that's the gateway to all of our learning.[61]

– Maurice J. Elias, Ph.D.

The Need for Safe and Healthy School Climates

During its deliberations, the NJSBA School Security Task Force identified four critical components of a secure school:

1. A healthy school environment;
2. Counseling for troubled students;
3. Effective relationships with law enforcement and first responders, and
4. Controlled access to the school buildings and grounds.

Within one year of the December 14, 2012 tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School, 25 shootings took place at schools and colleges in the United States, according to an article that appeared on a news website just prior to the first anniversary of the incident.[62] Many involved suicides or gang-related violence; a handful, including incidents in Fresno, California (January 2013) and Sparks, Nevada (October 2013), fit the commonly held perception of school shootings.

The Newtown tragedy has sometimes been described as "not a school shooting, but a shooting that took place at a school" because, unlike many previous incidents, the perpetrator had no current direct connection to the school. Rather, the facility was a convenient and "soft" target. That observation is relevant and underscores the legitimate need to focus on "target hardening," i.e., safeguarding the school building from outside threats through physical alterations and security equipment.

Experts in security, building design and law enforcement who spoke to the NJSBA task force highlighted "target hardening" as an element of school safety. *At the same time, nearly every one stressed the importance of a healthy school culture and climate.* This is critical because, in most

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[61] Maurice J. Elias, Ph.D., "The Essential Connection between a Safe and Secure School Climate and Students' Educational and Life Success" (presentation to Safe and Secure Schools: Perspectives after Newtown, a forum sponsored by the New Jersey School Boards Association, The College of New Jersey, Ewing, N.J., January 18, 2013), http://www.njsba.org/training/materials/njsba-school-safety-forum.ppt and http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VM4WtwyeTKQ&list=UU9-T5UwBZXksBK0i-ulcHWA.

[62] Brandy Zadrozny, "The School Shootings You Didn't Hear About—One Every Two Weeks Since Newtown," *The Daily Beast* (http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/12/12/the-school-shootings-you-didn-t-hear-about-one-every-two-weeks-since-newtown.html). Accessed Sept. 8, 2014.

school shootings, ranging from Jonesboro, Arkansas (March 1998) and Jefferson County, Colorado (April 1999) to Centennial, Colorado (December 2013), the perpetrators were students and, typically, their actions extended from their experience in school.

In a training program for law enforcement personnel, the FBI's Newark Division cites the work of the bureau's Behavioral Analysis Unit and advises that, although a demographic profile of the school shooter does not exist, certain commonalities are found among most, but not all, of the perpetrators.

- School shooters are "brittle people" who are likely to experience feelings of persecution and alienation and who are sensitive to slights and rejection.
- They are often victims of neglect and abuse and have an absence of family or friend support.
- They are mission-oriented and typically not under the influence of drugs during the assault.[63]

A 2004 report by the U.S. Secret Service and the U.S. Department of Education cites the findings of the federal government's Safe School Initiative, which include the following:

- Most attackers engaged in some behavior, prior to the incident, that caused concern or indicated a need for help;
- Most attackers were known to have difficulty coping with significant losses or personal failures, and many had considered or attempted suicide;
- Many attackers felt bullied, persecuted, or injured by others prior to the attack.[64]

In April 2013, the governor's select study group, the NJ SAFE Task Force[65], cited additional findings from the 2004 federal report:

- 71% of attackers "felt persecuted, bullied, threatened, attacked, or injured by others" before they engaged in their acts of violence.
- Only 34% had received a mental health evaluation prior to their attacks, even though 78% had attempted suicide or had suicidal thoughts.

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[63] Tonya M. DeSa, "Identifying Warning Signs of School Violence" (presentation to law enforcement and school officials, sponsored by Federal Bureau of Investigation, Newark Division, Freehold, N.J., January 29, 2013).

[64] U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, Safe and Drug-Free Schools Program, and U.S. Secret Service, National Threat Assessment Center, *Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the Prevention of School Attacks in the United States*, by Bryan Vossekuil, Robert A. Fein, Ph.D., Marisa Reddy, Ph.D., Randy Borum, Psy.D., and William Modzeleski (Washington, D.C: Education Public Center, U.S. Department of Education, 2004), 31. (http://www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/preventingattacksreport.pdf, accessed Sept. 10, 2014)

[65] New Jersey Office of the Attorney General, *The New Jersey SAFE Task Force on Gun Protection, Addiction, Mental Health and Families, and Education Safety*, by Peter G. Verniero, John J. Degnan, Manuel Guantez, James Romer, Evelyn Sullivan, Brian Zychowski, Lee Vartan, Ron Susswein, Paul Salvatoriello, and Joseph Fanaroff (Trenton, N.J., April 10, 2013), 43. (http://nj.gov/oag/newsreleases13/NJSAFE-REPORT-04.10.13-WEB.pdf, accessed Sept. 10, 2014)

- Alcohol or substance abuse (24%), or non-compliance with prescription medication (10%), was not prevalent within this population.[66]

Finally, the NJ SAFE Task Force also offered the following "commonalities of school shooters":

> In the last 10 years, male students have been responsible for the majority of school shootings nationwide. Students who perpetrated attacks were also more likely to know their intended targets. When students targeted an administrator, they believed that either the school failed to protect them from bullies, or the student felt school officials unfairly reprimanded them.[67]

The history of school violence requires that school officials continually review policies, procedures and resources to build a healthy school climate, including the provision of mental health services and counseling.

Mental Health Services/Counseling

While the specific circumstances that drive school shooters to commit their crimes differ, the painfully obvious commonality this: They were troubled individuals.

At NJSBA's January 2013 Safe and Secure Schools Forum, Dr. Maurice J. Elias of Rutgers University made a critical distinction:

> There are very few troubled children who are violent, or become violent as adults…very few. But virtually all of our perpetrators have histories of abuse, neglect and turmoil. That's why schools must nurture and strengthen *all* children.[68]

In fact, the NJSBA Task Force found that the schools' role in addressing the emotional health of children grows in importance as mental health services diminish in other sectors of government. Since the economic crisis of 2008, for example, 30 states have reduced their mental health budgets. The cuts came at a time of rising unemployment, loss of private health insurance and other fall-out from the great recession.[69]

Dr. Elias warns of the negative consequences on learning that can result when schools cut back on support services. "[W]hen we take away from our schools the specialists that help our kids deal with mental health issues, we allow those issues—health issues, violence and safety issues, drug issues—[to] simply collapse into the academics…" He advises, "…the greatest safety for the greatest number of individuals comes from a safe, caring, supportive, academically

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[66] *The New Jersey SAFE Task Force*, 43.

[67] *Ibid*, 67.

[68] Elias, "The Essential Connection," January 18, 2013.

[69] Thomas Beaumont, "After shootings, states rethink mental health cuts," Associated Press, January 23, 2013 (http://bigstory.ap.org/article/after-shootings-states-rethink-mental-health-cuts). Accessed Sept. 8, 2014.

challenging, healthy school culture and climate, where mental health needs are met, as well as educational needs; where troubled children are embraced…"[70]

In its school security guidelines and requirements, the State of New Jersey emphasizes the significant role of counseling and mental health services during crisis recovery in schools.[71]

The NJ SAFE Task Force, in addressing mental health services, observed the following:

> "… because an attempt at mass violence is often the culmination of long-term struggles that include identifiable and treatable experiences such as shaming, humiliation, and ostracizing, opportunities exist to intervene in the lives of people who are at risk of becoming violent."[72]

In all, the SAFE Task Force issued ten recommendations in the area of mental health services, including the creation of an "interagency working group" comprised of representatives from six state government departments (Law and Public Safety, Corrections, Health, Human Services, Children and Families, and Education), the Juvenile Justice Commission, the State Parole Board and "university research partners." This working group would "produce a multi-disciplinary approach aimed at decreasing violence, particularly among youth, through prevention efforts that will promote safer and healthier communities and highlight the importance of de-stigmatizing mental illness and encouraging early intervention."[73]

Other recommendations include placing greater emphasis on early intervention and crisis prevention; expanding access to outpatient services; identifying and providing assistance for individuals in high-risk circumstances, and training law enforcement to identify those in crisis.[74]

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[70] Elias, "The Essential Connection," January 18, 2013.

[71] New Jersey Department of Education, Office of School Preparedness and Emergency Planning, *School Safety and Security Plans: Minimum Requirements*. (Trenton, N.J., August 2011), 15. "Recovery is an ongoing process that includes physical, mental, and the emotional healing process of the entire school community…" (http://www.state.nj.us/education/schools/security/req/req.pdf, accessed Sept. 10, 2014).

New Jersey Department of Education, Office of Educational Support Services, School Security Unit, *School Administrator Procedures: Responding to Critical Incidents*, by Lucille E. Davy, Barbara Gantwerk, and Susan Martz. (Trenton, N.J, October 2007). The procedures emphasize the need for counseling and mental health services following bomb threats, evacuation, lockdown and active shooter situations. (This document is not publicly available.)

New Jersey Department of Education, *School Safety and Security Manual: Best Practices Guidelines*, by Lucille E. Davy, Barbara Gantwerk, and Susan Martz. (Trenton, N.J., December 2006), 182. "Just as schools must develop plans and procedures to respond to emergency situations, a plan to assist students and staff [in recovering] from the physical, psychological and emotional trauma associated with tragic events must also be developed. The recovery plan should provide immediate help and referral procedures for students, staff and parents who may be experiencing significant emotional reactions to a crisis." (The document is available only to designated school district officials through a password-protected portal at http://www.nj.gov/education/schools/security/safetycenter/).

[72] *The New Jersey SAFE Task Force*, 43.

[73] *Ibid*, 49.

[74] *Ibid*, p. 49-54.

Dr. Elias advises that outreach to students facing severe stress, such as personal or family medical conditions, job loss or incarceration, as well as the death of a loved one, should take place "even before they show specific signs of disordered behavior."[75]

Bullying Prevention and the Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights

> *"Bullying is related to the climate of the school and is most strongly and significantly related to the respect that students feel in the school, especially among their peers. Where there is a respectful environment, bullying is less likely to exist in schools."[76]*

The Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights

State education policy recognizes the importance of educating students in a safe and secure environment, free of fear, intimidation and bullying. In 2002, the state enacted its first anti-bullying law, requiring local school boards to adopt policies addressing harassment, intimidation and bullying (HIB) and requiring the training of district staff and students in the awareness and prevention of HIB. The law was amended in 2007 and 2008.

In January 2011, Governor Christie signed the Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights Act into law, enhancing the previous statutes and providing a definition of HIB.[77] "This act sets forth standards for preventing, reporting, investigating and responding to incidents of HIB of students on school grounds, at any school-sponsored function, on a school bus and off school grounds."[78]

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[75] Maurice J. Elias, Ph.D., email message to report authors, May 11, 2014.

[76] Maurice, J. Elias, Ph.D., "Proven and Practical Approaches to Understanding and Improving Your School Climate and Culture for School Safety and Achievement" (presentation to the NJSBA School Security Task Force, Trenton, N.J., July 18, 2013).

[77] *P.L.* 2010, c. 122 (http://www.njleg.state.nj.us/2010/Bills/PL10/122_.HTM), later amended by *P.L.* 2012, c. 1 (http://www.njleg.state.nj.us/2012/Bills/PL12/1_.HTM); *N.J.S.A.* 18A:37-13 *et seq*. The statute (at *N.J.S.A.* 18A:37-14) defines HIB as follows:

"Harassment, intimidation or bullying" means any gesture, any written, verbal or physical act, or any electronic communication, whether it be a single incident or a series of incidents, that is reasonably perceived as being motivated either by any actual or perceived characteristic, such as race, color, religion, ancestry, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, or a mental, physical or sensory disability, or by any other distinguishing characteristic, that takes place on school property, at any school-sponsored function, on a school bus, or off school grounds … , that substantially disrupts or interferes with the orderly operation of the school or the rights of other students and that:
a. a reasonable person should know, under the circumstances, will have the effect of physically or emotionally harming a student or damaging the student's property, or placing a student in reasonable fear of physical or emotional harm to his person or damage to his property;
b. has the effect of insulting or demeaning any student or group of students; or
c. creates a hostile educational environment for the student by interfering with a student's education or by severely or pervasively causing physical or emotional harm to the student.

[78] New Jersey Department of Law and Public Safety and New Jersey Department of Education, *A Uniform State Memorandum of Agreement Between Education and Law Enforcement Officials*, Article 8.6. (Trenton, N.J., 2011), 35. (http://www.state.nj.us/education/schools/security/regs/agree.pdf, accessed Sept. 10, 2014)

School Safety/Climate Teams

The Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights Act also requires districts to proactively address climate and culture through the establishment of school safety teams (SST).[79]

The SST must meet at least twice a year. It consists of the principal, teacher, anti-bullying specialist, a parent and other members determined by the principal. Its responsibilities include the following:

- Receiving records of all complaints of HIB of students that have been reported to the principal;
- Receiving copies of all reports prepared after an investigation of an HIB incident;
- Identifying and addressing patterns of HIB of students in the school;
- Reviewing and strengthening school climate and the policies of the school in order to prevent HIB of students;
- Educating the community, including students, teachers, administrative staff and parents, to prevent and address HIB of students;
- Participating in training.[80]

In its January 2014 report, the state's Anti-Bullying Task Force[81] called for refinement of the SST's role, so that it is more clearly focused on school climate. The task force, consisting of representatives of the education and legal communities, was created through a 2012 amendment[82] to the Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights, and reviews implementation of the law, provides guidance to school districts, and recommends changes in state policy on HIB.

> … the ABTF identified an existing confusion over the role of the SST. The primary charge for this team is "to develop, foster and maintain a positive school climate by focusing on the on-going, systemic process and practices in the school to address school climate issues such as HIB" (*N.J.S.A.* 18A:37-21)…. Unfortunately, the "Safety Team" title has caused confusion, because the major role of this team is to improve school climate, not to focus on school security.[83]

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[79] New Jersey Department of Education, *Guidance for Schools on Implementing the Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights Act, (P.L.2010, c.122)*, by Christopher Cerf, David Hespe, Barbara Gantwerk, Susan Martz, and Gary Vermeire. (Trenton, N.J., December 2011), 10. (http://www.nj.gov/education/students/safety/behavior/hib/guidance.pdf, accessed Sept. 10, 2014)

A school safety team (SST) must be formed in each school in the school district. The team must be called either the school safety team or the school anti-bullying team to ensure ease of identification by parents, students and staff throughout the state. The purposes of the team is to develop, foster and maintain a positive school climate by focusing on the ongoing, systematic operational procedures and educational practices in the school and to address issues, such as HIB, that affect school climate and culture.

[80] *Ibid*, 10.

[81] New Jersey Anti-Bullying Task Force, *Annual Report*, by Patricia Wright, Philip Hoyt Meisner, Joseph L. Ricca, Jr., Bradford C. Lerman, Toni Pergolin, Jessica de Koninck, and Luanne Peterpaul. (Trenton, N.J., January 26, 2014), 35. (http://www.state.nj.us/education/students/safety/behavior/hib/task/AnnualReport14.pdf, accessed Sept. 10, 2014)

[82] *P.L.* 2012, ch.1 (http://www.njleg.state.nj.us/2012/Bills/PL12/1_.HTM); *N.J.S.A.* 18A:37-28.

[83] New Jersey Anti-Bullying Task Force, 33.

To clarify the role of the SST, the Anti-Bullying Task Force recommended that the State Board of Education amend state administrative code (*N.J.A.C.* 6A:16) to rename the body, the "school safety/*climate* team." Another proposed code amendment emphasizes the advisory role of the SST in district HIB and related policies. The proposal would require the local board of education to review annually its "harassment, intimidation, and bullying policy and any reports and/or findings of the school safety/climate team(s) and make any necessary revisions."[84]

The January 2014 report stresses that the SST should focus on school climate, not school security, an important consideration. Nonetheless, the two factors—climate and security—are inextricably linked, according to the school climate experts who spoke to the NJSBA task force.

Dr. Maurice Elias believes that local school boards should ensure that the SSTs have a positive impact on school climate by requiring them to meet more often than the statutorily required minimum of twice a year, proposing that the teams conduct bi-monthly meetings.[85]

School Climate Assessment

What steps should local school boards take—beyond those required under statute, such as the Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights, and state regulation—to build a healthy school climate?

Through discussion with experts and additional research, the NJSBA task force identified school climate assessment or analysis.

Federal agencies, for example, recognize the importance of school climate assessment as a security strategy. In a guide on school emergency operation plans, the U.S. Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, Homeland Security, and Justice stress the connection between school climate and safety.

> School communities are complex systems that include multiple stakeholders and interconnecting environmental factors that influence student health and safety. As such, comprehensive needs assessments of school climate including school engagement, school safety, and the school environment as elements to be evaluated can provide schools with the data support needed to pursue comprehensive approaches to improving school climate. A comprehensive picture of school health and safety can be created by utilizing needs assessments that include student perceptions and, where appropriate, parent and staff perceptions, to help schools identify key issues in need of attention.[86]

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[84] *Ibid*, 35.

[85] Maurice J. Elias, Ph.D., email message to report authors, May 11, 2014.

[86] U.S. Department of Education, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Federal Emergency Management Agency, *Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans*, by Arne Duncan, Deborah S. Delisle, and David Esquith. (Washington, D.C., June 2013), 55. (http://rems.ed.gov/docs/REMS_K-12_Guide_508.pdf, accessed Sept. 10, 2014)

In a 2004 publication on school safety, the U.S. Secret Service and Department of Education listed "assessment of the school's emotional climate" as the first component of creating a safe and connected school climate.[87]

Dr. Elias of Rutgers University recommended a "Climate and Culture Assessment," which involves students, staff and parents, as part of a systemic, comprehensive and effective approach to building social, emotional and character development. The analysis should measure perceptions on factors related to HIB, as well as the degree of caring, empathy, manners, consideration, leadership and respect present in the school.[88]

In a 2012 statement to a Congressional briefing, Dr. Elias placed school climate assessment on par with academic assessment.

> We have to be unafraid of assessing the climate of our schools. School climate assessment should be as much a priority as academic assessment. It is probably more important from a public health point of view. This has to be done in a supportive, understanding and non-critical way. We have to do it in a spirit of continuous improvement, and we have to involve the kids in looking at the results…[89]

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[87] U.S. Secret Service and U.S. Department of Education, *Threat Assessment in Schools: A Guide to Managing Threat Assessment in Schools and to Creating Safe School Climates*, by Robert A. Fein, Ph.D., Bryan Vossekuil, Randy Borum, Psy.D., William Modzeleski, and Marisa Reddy, Ph.D. (Washington, D.C., July 2004), 13. (http://rems.ed.gov/docs/ThreatAssessmentinSchools.pdf, accessed Sept. 10, 2014)

[88] Elias, "Proven and Practical Approaches," July 18, 2013. In his presentation, Dr. Elias provided the NJSBA Task Force with sample queries, such as "Students are often bullied or teased in my school" or "In my school, students learn how to deal with bullying and teasing." Respondents would rate each query on a five-point scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree."

According to Dr. Elias, the parameters of the climate analysis should include—
- Overall composite scores for students, staff, parents
- Subgroup analysis, based on gender, ethnicity, staff position, and grade level
- Comparisons of staff, student and parent perceptions
- Comparisons over time
- Special indicators and mandate/goal or intervention-linked items (e.g., Harassment, Intimidation, and Bullying; Closing Achievement Gaps)

Questions that should guide the review of the results address the following: the school's strengths; steps that the school is taking to make these areas strong; surprises from the survey; practices that led to the results; patterns that stand out (e.g., grade level, ethnicity, gender); the school's challenges; and what the school is doing systematically to build student attachment/contributions/engagement, positive recognition, social emotional character development and skill development, and classroom climate improvement.

[89] Elias, "The Essential Connection," January 18, 2013.

Climate Assessment Resources

In its research, the NJSBA Task Force identified the following agencies, which can provide assistance in school climate assessment:

United Way of Northern New Jersey—Through a partnership with the College of Saint Elizabeth, the UWNNJ offers a School Culture and Climate Initiative "that delivers a data-driven process to guide schools in improving their culture and climate. We are recognized as national leaders in the field of social and emotional learning."[90] The School Climate and Culture Initiative offers assessment, data analysis and three years of sustained support to participating school districts. The program has been expanded through a grant from the Atlantic Health System.

INFORMATION: Liz Warner, United Way of Northern New Jersey, 222 Ridgedale Ave., 3rd Floor, Cedar Knolls, NJ 07927 (973) 993-1160. (www.unitedwaynnj.org/ourwork/ed_youthempowercommunity.php)

The National School Climate Center—A non-profit organization founded by Teachers College at Columbia University in 1996, but now independent of the university, the Center helps schools integrate social and emotional learning with academic instruction.[91] The organization offers a "**Comprehensive School Climate Inventory"** that provides an in-depth profile of strengths and needs.

INFORMATION: National School Climate Center, 341 West 38th Street, 9th Floor, New York, NY 10018 (212) 707-8799. (http://www.schoolclimate.org/programs/csci.php)

The New Jersey School Climate Survey—Developed by the New Jersey Department of Education, in collaboration with the Bloustein Center for Survey Research at Rutgers, this program provides a variety of tools "to collect and analyze objective information from diverse school populations (i.e., students, staff and parents) for reinforcing positive conditions for learning and addressing vulnerabilities in local learning conditions."

INFORMATION: http://www.state.nj.us/education/students/safety/behavior/njscs/

National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments—Coordinated by the U.S. Department of Education, this online resource provides a collection of school climate surveys and other tools to measure school culture.

INFORMATION: http://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/topic-research/school-climate-measurement/school-climate-survey-compendium

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[90] United Way of Northern New Jersey, *Report to Our Leaders*. (Morristown, N.J., November 30, 2013) 5, (http://www.unitedwaynnj.org/give/camp_documents14/13UWNNJ_ReportLeaders_SinglePage.pdf). Accessed Sept. 8, 2014.

[91] "About Us," National School Climate Center, http://www.schoolclimate.org/about/. Accessed Sept. 8, 2014.

Relationships and Programs

Relationships Built on Trust

The 2013 federal *Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans* describes the results of a healthy school culture: "In schools with positive climates, students are more likely to feel connected to adults and their peers. This fosters a nurturing environment where students are more likely to succeed, feel safe, and report threats."[92]

In fact, trusting relationships with adults was consistently cited as a component of a secure school during the NJSBA task force's consultation with experts and its additional research.

New Jersey's *School Safety and Security Manual: Best Practices Guidelines*, published in 2006, focuses on prevention and intervention, including culture, curriculum, behavior, and environment. It stresses the importance of trusting relationships between students and adults.

> A safe school environment offers positive personal role models among its faculty. It provides a place for open discussion, where diversity and differences are respected, communication between adults and students is encouraged and supported and conflict is constructively managed and mediated.

> Cultures and climates of safety support environments in which teachers and administrators pay attention to students' social and emotional needs, as well as their academic needs.

> In a climate of safety, students have a positive connection to at least one adult in authority. Each student knows that there is an adult to whom he or she can turn for support and advice if things get tough and with whom that student can share his or her concerns openly and without fear of shame or reprisal.[93]

The 2004 federal report, *Threat Assessment in Schools: A Guide to Managing Threat Assessment in School and to Creating Safe School Climates*, lists seven components of a safe school climate, including "…trusting relationships between each student and at least one adult…"[94]

New Jersey's Developing Safe and Civil Schools Initiative,[95] directed by Dr. Maurice Elias, has explored the academic, character education, violence prevention, service learning, and community-involvement programs at 250 schools. During his July 18, 2013 presentation to the NJSBA task force, Dr. Elias cited one of the project's findings: Students find HIB prevention and intervention

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[92] *Guide for Developing High Quality School Emergency Operations Plans*, 9.

[93] *School Safety and Security Manual: Best Practices Guidelines*, 72.

[94] *Threat Assessment in Schools*, 13.

[95] "Developing Safe and Civil Schools (DSACA): A Social and Emotional Learning Initiative," Rutgers Social and Emotional Learning Laboratory (http://www.rci.rutgers.edu/~melias/safeandcivil_details.html, accessed Sept. 8, 2014).

messages valuable when staff members are seen as genuinely caring and supportive and when students are engaged in shaping their school environment in positive ways.[96]

In his January 2013 presentation at NJSBA's Safe and Secure Schools Forum, Dr. Elias noted that his research in the area of social-emotional learning points to the need for the connection with caring adults.

> When our children walk into the school, the most fundamental thing they want is to have a relationship with a caring adult, who will listen to them. They need those relationships; that's the gateway to all of our learning. And, of course, when our kids are filled with that sense of warmth, we have to ask ourselves, how likely are they later on to commit acts of violence. There's an essential connection between the kind of atmosphere we provide for our kids and the kind of atmosphere that they take with them out into the world as citizens.[97]

In addition to their positive impact on school climate, trusting relationships encourage students to provide school officials with information on potential threats. In his presentation to the NJSBA study group, Brian Klimakowski, Manchester Township chief of police and a member of the Governor's School Security Task Force, made the following points:

- Faculty and staff must develop trusting relationships in order to receive critical information.
- Faculty and staff must be educated on the importance of receiving and vetting **ALL** information.[98]

Social and Emotional Learning

For students, the strong and positive relationships that they forge with adults—and that they observe among the adults in the school setting—are critical to developing social competencies that enable them to confront challenges and learn. Research points to the benefit of programs that encourage social-emotional learning.

> Social and emotional learning is important to enable individuals to learn to understand and manage their emotions and relationships, and to make good decisions. Social-emotional learning can help individuals stop and think before they react, control their response to stress, develop supportive and caring relationships, persist through challenge, seek help, and pay attention to theirs and others' needs and feelings. These and other social and emotional competencies can help individuals prepare for and respond to emergencies. Students are more likely to develop such competencies when they have good relationships with adults, and when the adults model these competencies.[99]

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[96] Elias, "Proven and Practical Approaches," July 18, 2013.

"The extent to which students feel they are truly learning strategies to cope with HIB in their schools is most strongly related to the:
- Extent to which they perceive teachers as being *caring and supportive to students and to one-another*, and
- Secondarily, to the extent to which students feel they are *involved in shaping their school environment in positive ways*."

[97] Elias, "The Essential Connection," January 18, 2013.

[98] Brian Klimakowski, "School Security: 2013 and Beyond" (presentation to the NJSBA School Security Task Force, Trenton, N.J., August 12, 2013).

[99] *Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans*, 56.

Dr. Elias' research shows that a systemic framework that links academics with service learning, character education and violence prevention has a positive impact on students, including—

- Improved attitudes about self, others, and school,
- Positive classroom behavior,
- Higher achievement test scores, and
- Less aggressive behavior and emotional distress.[100]

At NJSBA's January 2013 Safe and Secure Schools Forum, Dr. Elias explained that the Developing Safe and Civil Schools initiative found a relationship between climate and the incidence of violence, vandalism and substance abuse in high schools.

> "The more positive the school ranked in five measures of a healthy school climate—overall climate; meaningful student involvement; teacher approval; student pride; and support and care by and among school staff—the lower the incidence of violence, vandalism and/or substance abuse.[101]

The prevalence of bullying in a school is strongly related to the degree of respect that students feel among their peers. In a respectful school climate, bullying is less likely. To build such a respectful school climate, Dr. Elias recommends—

- Integrating social emotional and character development skills into academic instruction; and
- Increasing students' voice through engagement and genuine participation in the school community.[102]

Practices that engage students and contribute to social emotional character development include the following:

- Meaningful, participatory student government
- Service learning
- Opportunities for students, staff and the community to provide feedback
- Open forums for school problem-solving
- Student input to staff committees
- Engagement of students of all backgrounds in leadership and school activities[103]

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[100] Elias, "Proven and Practical Approaches," July 18, 2013.

[101] Elias, "The Essential Connection," January 18, 2013.

[102] *Ibid.*

[103] Elias, "Proven and Practical Approaches," July 18, 2013.

<u>*Authoritative Structure*</u>

> *"School climate is as powerful a predictor [of academic success] as the demographics of the school. Unlike demographics, school climate can be changed."*[104]

In her presentation to the NJSBA task force, Dr. Anne Gregory of the Rutgers University Graduate School of Applied and Professional Psychology stressed the need for positive relationships among students, teachers, administrators and parents. She advocated an "authoritative structure" that provides consistency in supervision and rules, adult monitoring and limit-setting, along with strong support for students through warmth, acceptance, and the involvement of adults.[105]

Dr. Gregory shared findings of a study of 276 Virginia high schools, which showed that "the presence of teasing and bullying as perceived by both 9th-grade students and teachers was predictive of dropout rates…"[106]

An earlier study supported the theory that the structure and support involved in authoritative discipline are important for adolescents' safety in school.

> … consistent enforcement of school discipline (structure) and availability of caring adults (support) were associated with school safety. Structure and support were associated with less bullying and victimization after we controlled for the size of school enrollment and the proportion of ethnic minority and low-income students. These findings suggest that discipline practices should not be polarized into a 'get tough' versus 'give support' debate because both structure and support contribute to school safety for adolescents.[107]

The following were among the concluding points that Dr. Gregory made to the task force:

- Not all student groups experience school safety and the school climate in the same manner.

- Approaches to school security need not be only reactive (in the face of unsafe events) but also be proactive. Consider *both* structure and support.

- There are whole school initiatives that aim to change the school climate and improve safety.

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[104] Anne Gregory, Ph.D., "Fostering a Sense of Community in High Schools" (presentation to the NJSBA School Security Task Force, Trenton, N.J., July 18, 2013).

[105] *Ibid.*

[106] Dewey Cornell, Francis Huang, Anne Gregory, Xitao Fan, "Perceived Prevalence of Teasing and Bullying Predicts High School Dropout Rate," *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 105(1), (February 2013): 138-149. ©2012 American Psychological Association, Washington, D.C.

[107] Anne Gregory, Dewey Cornell, Xitao Fan, Peter Sheras, Tse-Hua Shih, and Francis Huang, "Authoritative School Discipline: High School Practices Associated with Lower Bullying and Victimization," *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 102 (2), (May 2010): 483-496. ©2010 American Psychological Association, Washington, D.C.

- School security should not just be reactive but also proactive in <u>preventing</u> unsafe conditions.
  - We should not limit how we think about school security to surveillance and safety officers.
  - School security needs to be considered in terms of how schools build community and supportive relationships.
  - Improving school security <u>includes</u> efforts to develop authoritative school climates.[108]

Supportive Practices

Dr. Elias cites three key practices that should result from local school district policies on school policy regarding school climate:

- Every school should undertake a systematic assessment of staff and student perceptions of school climate, including school safety/bullying and student engagement/participation/voice, at least once every two years. They should use that feedback in a staff-wide data review aimed at improvement of social-emotional character development (SECD) competencies and climate… (In middle and high schools, students should be involved in the data review and planning process.)

- Each student should receive a minimum of one-half hour of explicit instruction per week in skills related to SECD as part of a comprehensive preK-12 scope and sequence.

- Every teacher, student support services provider, and administrator should have demonstrated competence in implementing evidence-based SECD programming and positive climate promotion at the classroom and/or school level (as appropriate).[109]

Building a Healthy School Climate: Resources

The following publication and organizations are resources on social-emotional learning, character development, and service learning:

- *School Climate: Building Safe, Supportive and Engaging Classrooms & Schools* by Jonathan Cohen, Ph.D. and Maurice J. Elias, Ph.D. This four-page reference guide for teachers, principals, superintendents and school board members provides information on planning, preparing and implementing strategies to create a positive school and classroom climate.

  INFORMATION: National Professional Resources, Inc., 25 South Regent Street, Port Chester, NY 10573, 1-800-453-7461, www.NPRinc.com.

- The **Center for Supportive Schools** provides training and programs to engage students in learning and enable them to develop positive social, emotional, and health behaviors.

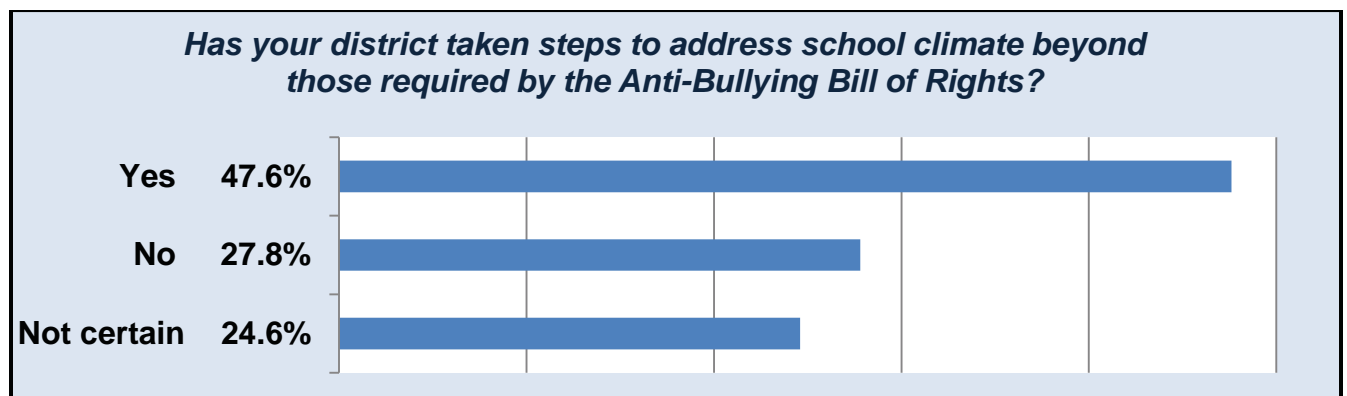 INFORMATION: Center for Supportive Schools, 911 Commons Way, Princeton, NJ 08540, (609) 252-9300, http://supportiveschools.org.

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[108] Gregory, "Fostering a Sense of Community in High Schools," July 18, 2013.

[109] Elias, "The Essential Connection," January 18, 2013.

- **Lions Quest** provides programs on service learning, social-emotional learning, character education, and the prevention of bullying, violence and substance abuse.

  INFORMATION: Lions Clubs International Foundation, 300 West 22nd Street, Oak Brook, IL 60523-8842, (630) 571-5466, www.lions-quest.org.

- The **National Youth Leadership Council** provides resources on service learning programs.

  INFORMATION: National Youth Leadership Council, 1667 Snelling Avenue North, Suite D300, Saint Paul, MN 55108, (651) 631-3672, www.nylc.org.

Building a Healthy School Climate: Current Practices

Many boards of education understand the connection between a healthy climate and safe schools and have taken action, according to results of the NJSBA Task Force survey[110] of school officials.

Has your district taken steps to address school climate beyond those required by the Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights?

Yes	**47.6%**
No	**27.8%**
Not certain	**24.6%**

Respondents most frequently cited staff training as a security-related climate enhancement implemented by their school districts. (Section **V**, "Security Training," pages 61-69 includes a compilation of training resources available to school districts.)

Additional School Climate Efforts
…beyond Anti-Bullying Law Requirements
(FREQUENCY OF RESPONSE)

	1. **Staff training/development**	
	2. **Student Counseling**	
	3. **Character Education**	

Other steps included creation of school climate committees, surveys/assessments of school climate, and review/adoption of policies related to school climate.

Respondents were also asked if the school climate enhancements involved training *specifically for their security personnel*. Nearly half (47.4%) responded "no" to the question. Just over three-tenths (31.6%) answered affirmatively. The remainder responded "not certain."

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[110] NJSBA administered the electronic survey to the state's school board presidents and school business administrators on July 25 and July 29, respectively. Responses were collected through September 26. Duplicate responses from the same district were eliminated prior to calculation. The survey instrument appears as Appendix C of this report.

Building a Healthy School Climate: District Programs

Survey respondents were also asked to provide examples of local school district programs designed to enhance school climate. They cited the following examples:

Lyndhurst Public Schools – The Drop-In Center provides students, their families and staff members with comprehensive services, including employment resources, academic tutoring, psycho-educational materials and counseling. (http://www.lyndhurstschools.net/; select "Drop In Center" from the left-hand column)

Manchester Regional High School District – The "Falcons Lounge," a collaborative project of Manchester Regional High School and Care Plus NJ, Inc., is funded with the help of a state grant. The program provides a comprehensive support system to the district's students, their families and the larger school community through recreational, therapeutic and educational opportunities. (http://www.mrhs.net/index.php/student-services/falcons-lounge)

Oxford School District – In June 2013, two character education programs, "Talk It, Walk It, Pass It On!" and "Working Together for Social Awareness Skills" won the Character Education Partnership's "Promising Practice Award" (http://www.oxfordcentral.org/)

Bordentown Regional School District –"Bordentown Is on Point" is a comprehensive high school-level guidance program that integrates the academic curriculum with a positive "pro-social" climate. It is part of a series of school climate/anti-bullying programs that include two gender-specific efforts, "Mentoring Men" and "Girls on the Run," aimed at building students' self-images as valuable and contributing members of the community. (http://www.bordentown.k12.nj.us/webpages/guidance/bordentownisonpoint.cfm; select "Principal's Desk" and/or "Student Code of Conduct" in the left-hand column)

In addition, school officials cited programs conducted with the support of the following organizations and resources:

- **CarePlus,** a non-profit organization that provides comprehensive recovery-focused mental health care and substance abuse treatment. (www.careplusnj.org)

- **Challenge Day,** a non-profit organization that offers programs and activities "to build connection and empathy" so that students "feel safe, loved, and celebrated." (www.challengeday.org)

- **Character Counts**, which provides services and materials aimed at the following: helping teachers create a "culture of kindness" to advance student learning; training administrators to focus on growth, and encouraging school districts to manage employees through values-based ethics. (http://charactercounts.org)

- The **Character Education Partnership**, a coalition that serves as a resource for integrating character education into schools and communities. (www.character.org)

- **New Jersey Positive Behavior Support in Schools,** a federally funded collaboration between the New Jersey Department of Education and the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey-Robert Wood Johnson Medical School. It provides school staff with training and technical assistance to create environments that encourage and support "pro-social" student behavior. (www.njpbs.org)

- **No Place for Hate,** an initiative of the Anti-Defamation League, aims to reduce bias and bullying, increase appreciation for diversity, and build "communities of respect." (http://philadelphia.adl.org/noplaceforhate/)

- **Rachel's Challenge**, an initiative comprising "student empowering" programs and strategies, designed to combat bullying, allay feelings of isolation and despair, and create a "culture of kindness and compassion." (www.rachelschallenge.org)

- **Responsive Classroom** provides a "research- and evidenced-based approach" to improving teacher effectiveness, student achievement and school climate. (www.responsiveclassroom.org)

- **StopBullying.gov**, a program of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, which offers information and guidance from various government agencies about bullying, cyberbullying, children at-risk, and violence prevention. (www.stopbullying.gov)

- **The Roots Program from Princeton University**, a research and intervention program designed to address peer conflict and create a school climate conducive to learning. (http://njroots.princeton.edu/schools.shtml)

- **Traumatic Loss Coalition for Youth**, a program based at the Rutgers University Behavioral Health Care-Behavioral Research and Training Institute. It offers collaboration and support in areas such as suicide prevention and trauma response following severe losses and tragedies in the school community. (http://ubhc.rutgers.edu/tlc/)

SCHOOL CLIMATE: RECOMMENDATIONS

The NJSBA School Security Task Force makes the following recommendations in the area of school climate:

Local School District/Community

9. Local school districts should engage in school climate assessments and develop and implement plans to ensure that students have safe, secure and supportive learning environments that provide meaningful communication and involvement with caring adults on the school staff. (A list of climate assessment resources is found on page 25 of this report.)

10. Not all student groups experience school safety and the school climate in the same manner. To enable students to learn in supportive environments at each grade level, local school boards should adopt policies that recognize the importance of social-emotional learning, character development, restorative practices and community building. In addition, the Task Force recommends that school boards review the information on social-emotional learning, supportive practices, and authoritative disciplinary structures on pages 26 through 30 of this report.

11. To build a respectful school climate that enables the advancement of student achievement, local boards of education and school administrators should ensure that the principles of social-emotional learning and character development skill-building are infused into academic instruction in a coordinated manner and that there is a consistent application of discipline.

12. Local boards of education should ensure that the School Safety Teams, required by the Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights, are not only reviewing reports of harassment, intimidation and bullying, but are also focusing on practices and processes related to school climate, so as to inform the school boards in their periodic review of HIB and related policies.

13. To ensure their School Safety Teams have a positive impact on school climate, local boards of education should consider requiring the teams to meet more than the twice-yearly minimum.

State

14. As recommended by the NJ SAFE task force, the state should form an "interagency working group" comprised of various departments, including education, law and public safety, and health and human services, to address policy and programs on early intervention and mental health services at the community level. A similar state-level approach (the Education-Law Enforcement Working Group) has had a positive impact on local policy and procedures through the state's Uniform Memorandum of Agreement. (See pages 46 through 48.)

15. To clarify the role of the School Safety Teams in improving school climate, the New Jersey State Board of Education should amend administrative code (*N.J.A.C.* 6A:16) to rename these bodies "School Safety/Climate Teams," as recommended by the state's Anti-Bullying Task Force.