Chapter 1

Building Stronger Connections Among Students, Families, and Schools to Promote School Safety

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ABSTRACT

Safe schools help promote positive social, academic, and educational outcomes. Research consistently suggests that students tend to be most successful in schools where they feel safe. For example, prior literature establishes that when students attend safe schools, they are more likely to graduate from high school compared to students who attend schools with behavioral problems or safety concerns. Over the last three decades, school shootings have garnered increased public attention, and the public has a heightened awareness that not all schools are safe environments for students. Drawing from ecological systems theory, this chapter will examine how the bonds between students and their schools are important for creating a school culture that is safe, inclusive, and supports the success of all students. Bridging social capital between families and schools also helps foster a safe school atmosphere, where students can focus on their academic and social development.

INTRODUCTION

Students tend to be most successful in schools where they feel safe (Ewton, 2014). In the United States, there are disparities in both schools' safety and students' perceptions of their schools' environments. According to data collected by the Pew Research Center, many teens in the U.S. report feeling worried that a shooting could happen at their school. Based on surveys conducted in March and April 2018 after the mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, data indicated that 57% of students reported being either "somewhat worried" or "very worried" about a shooting happening at their school. Black and Hispanic students were "somewhat worried" and "very worried" about school shootings more than their white peers, and girls reported being "somewhat worried" and "very worried" more than their male peers.

While there are numerous factors that could influence whether a student feels safe in school, school shootings are one form of violence that have long-term consequences on students' perceptions of safety (Muschert, 2007). School shootings tend to induce the public's concerns about youth, schools, and safety; yet research suggests that schools are one of the safest environments for youth (Muschert, 2007). Even when schools are "safe" as evidenced by low levels of violence and crime, students may perceive their schools as unsafe because s*chool safety* refers to the *real* or *perceived* safety of the school environment. It can be measured objectively through the rate of crime at the school, incidents of verbal and physical bullying, and student disciplinary measures (Radu, Sobba, & McManus, 2017). Or school safety can be measured subjectively through students', principals', teachers', and administrators' self-reports and perceptions of the schools' environments (Radu, Sobba, & McManus, 2017).

Safe and inclusive school environments help students feel accepted, which allows them to develop their sense of self and excel both socially and academically. Studies also suggest that parents (Hamlin, 2020) and educators (Capp, Astor, & Gilreath, 2020) are concerned with school safety. For example, Hamlin (2020) suggests that safety is one reason that parents may seek out a particular school for their children. Research also suggests that a positive school culture is effective in promoting school attendance (Ohlson, 2009). *School culture* refers to the quality of the school environment (Deal & Peterson, 2016). It can include the safety and discipline practices of the school, the organizational structure of the school, the quality of relationships between teachers and students, the perceived fairness of discipline practices and enforcement, and the level of trust among the school community (Deal & Peterson, 2016).

Students who perceive their schools as safe may spend less time and energy concerned about threats to their safety, which allows more focus on the social and

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