

TxA School Safety Workgroup...An Introduction

Alarmed by the terrible tragedies that have occurred just this year in Parkland (FL) and Santa Fe (TX), the Texas Society of Architects has undertaken a strategic initiative, through Texas School Safety Workgroup to provide policy considerations and best practice recommendations to improve efforts to make schools safer for students and teachers. To date, a lot has been learned about the nature of the problem and potential solutions. Our group has put considerable research into studies concerning the nature of school violence across the country and potential remedies, various state (Texas) laws, and regulations, including discussions with state officials, amassing a substantial volume of materials on the subject.

Yet the deeper we dive, the more we get into the topic, the list of plausible causes for the problems seem to grow, and the potential for quick, simple remedies diminishes. At first, we sought articles and explored ideas focused solely on ‘hardening’ school facilities to protect students and faculty. But we repeatedly encountered volumes about how the environment for individual students and teachers is shaped by instructional methods and materials. As we worked, we found remedies with the potential to help in one area...but that exacerbated problems in another—in short, no single ideal option.

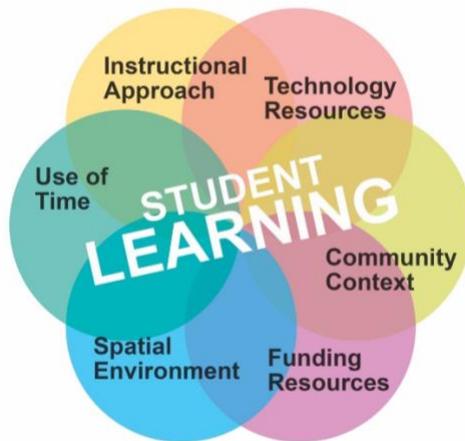
Some fundamental realities were universally accepted:

- Needs differ by community, so responses must be determined locally. There is no single, right answer, no “simple quick fix” for Texas—or education generally.
- The broadest possible community input is critical when those decisions are being made. Those providing direction should include, at a minimum: students, parents; teachers; administrators, staff; security professionals, first responders; mental health professionals; and, architects and other, designers/planners.
- Whatever choices are made, additional resources will be required. And today’s fixes may not meet tomorrow’s needs adequately so adaptability built in now will be a plus later.

We’ve drafted some initial recommendations that we believe should be incorporated in the State’s overall response. We’ve also initiated dialogue with Texas School Safety Center personnel to see how we can use data TSSC has already gathered, and possibly offer facility-focused refinements to the current security survey. We’re giving additional assignments to our workgroup members to provide state leaders and the education community helpful tools they can use to make informed decisions within appropriate schedules.

To help everyone seeking to address these issues, we offer the diagram below to explain the unique nature of our schools and all the issues they entail. The **elements of schooling** are integrally related—we cannot understand or make changes in any one of them without considering and impacting, and in turn, be impacted by, all the others. As architects, facilities are our area of particular interest, but we clearly recognize our role in working with others to shape the environments students and teachers experience in our schools.

The Elements of Schooling



Given the implications of safety and security for every element of our schools, we've outlined below two groups of suggestions—one focused on safety related to the **(1) physical school environment** and one focused on safety related to the **(2) teaching and learning environment** shared by teachers and students.

1 Suggestions for the Physical School Environment

- A. **Broad-based Community Participation** to determine Campus Safety and Security Priorities. (Among those identified as critical participants were: Students and Parents; Faculty, Administration and Staff; First Responders; Law Enforcement and other safety consultants; Security Technicians; Mental Health Professionals; Facilities personnel, architect, etc.);
- B. **Controlled/Secure/Single Point of Entry**. This suggestion was listed with the various adjectives to show that while the concept was generally accepted there were significant differences about which was best, if even possible. Regardless the adjective describing the point-of-entry, all would require monitoring systems (metal detectors, X-ray machines, CCTV, etc.) and personnel to operate them.

- C. **Unobstructed Observation Sightlines.** This includes both “active observation” by way of CCTV (particularly to keep eyes on blind spots/unseen areas) and “passive” observation monitoring the approach of individuals or vehicles toward the point(s) of entry.
- D. **Administrative Staff Locations.** Consider the location of administrative offices within the building to support passive supervision of students. Disperse staff throughout the building so presence is noted/felt in all areas of the structure.
- E. **Interior Locking Hardware.** Inside auto-locking mechanisms for individual classrooms.
- F. **Designated Shelter Areas.** Specifically designated, enhanced secure areas available to those not choosing to flee an attacker.
- G. **Campus compartmentalization with Remote Lock-Down Capability.**
- H. **Perform Regular Safety/Security Audits.** Annual and biennial audits were recommended; a consistent frequency of assessment should be established.
- I. **Emergency Notification Capability** including (if not especially) Social Media Apps.
- J. **Secured, Observable Perimeter Areas, including Parking Lots and Student Drop Zones.**
- K. **Ensure Private, Secure Spaces for Counseling, Student-Adult Conferences.**

2 **Suggestions for the Teaching and Learning Environment**

Architects whose practice is primarily K-12 school design occupy a unique place as the facilitator of programming conversations with educators and their communities on each individual campus design. School facilities are then designed by architects to reflect the program, curriculum, and teaching practices that emerge from those sessions, identifying the most important goals of those communities of parents and students, educators and staff, administrators...everyone with a stake in its success.

While some of these best practices are outside the expertise of the architect, they are frequently identified as important goals in the design and use of space, according to architects with practices focused exclusively on the K-12 market.

- A. **Transform/redesign schools’ circulation and instruction spaces to be visually alive, colorful, transparent, with constantly changing information relevant to students and their interests/studies.** There should be no blank,

dull walls. School spaces should be designed to inform students about the world that is their future. Schools should be linked to other institutions and businesses in their communities and display info of interest to the students. Corridors should be visually open to help students see/experience the interesting things occurring in their school. The open vistas should expose more/conceal less—make schools safer. Spaces in schools should be designed to excite kids, not create the feeling that they are being controlled.

- B. **Provide space for interaction and socialization by rethinking social spaces—create an enjoyable atmosphere for students.** Like the corridors above, gathering places should be alive with displays. Wherever possible, cafeterias should open to an outdoor dining space, and with flexible use times, provide Food & Beverage service throughout the school day. Other social spaces such as libraries, smaller collaborative learning areas or a ‘stage’ for live performances from the performing arts students also need a colorful, creative and enjoyable environment.
- C. **Provide each student a personal place to work.** Provide a personal desk or station for each student where they can do the work of learning and store their belongings. Perhaps, each student’s ‘adult’ (see “E”, below) should be located near the student’s work station.

In addition, according to Texas’ K-12 architectural specialists, while the following are ancillary to specific design solutions, they are typically identified among programming goals as critical components for student success.

- D. **Engage all parents in monitoring and supporting their student’s progress.** KIPP requires parents to sign an agreement with the school that they will support the school in efforts to help their student succeed. Engage *all* parents in some comparable manner—and hold them to that commitment of support to guarantee their student’s success.
- E. **Assure that every student is well-known by at least one adult throughout his or her time on the campus.** This is a decades-old idea thwarted by the current bell schedule and classrooms. If every student had an advisor/’adult friend,’ schools might help students with personal problems, thereby avoiding dangerous reactions to difficulties and succeeding as learners. Allow flexible, individualized schedules to provide students the time needed to access additional tutoring and guidance. Assign advisors who are responsible for knowing what is impacting their charges—helping to ensure that no one ‘slips through the cracks’—to each student.

F. **Personalize teaching and learning for all students.** Accepting that each student has different interests and abilities, work with individual students to create a 'success plan' for all to stay on track with their classmates.
