

KEEPING TENNESSEE SCHOOLS SAFE



In 2008, a tragic, fatal shooting at a Tennessee high school prompted a legislative request for the Comptroller's Offices of Research and Education Accountability (OREA) to examine and evaluate what Tennessee is doing to ensure that its schools are safe. For this report, OREA compared state-level laws, policies, and requirements against accepted best practices for keeping schools safe from violence.

Conclusions

Tennessee's statewide statutes, policies, and requirements for violence prevention and intervention are comprehensive and address most of the identified best practices for safe and secure learning environments. The Schools Against Violence in Education (SAVE) Act, passed in 2007, established state-level comprehensive planning and accountability requirements to ensure school districts are addressing school safety and violence prevention efforts.

Staff and funding to implement the requirements of the SAVE Act are limited and decreasing. Proposals to further reduce both federal and state funds for school safety for FY 2009-10 are pending, as of August 2009.

Current Tennessee data on school violence is limited, but measurement is improving. TDOE is expanding its data collection to provide better and more precise measures of incidents of school violence.

State level guidance related to school building security (e.g., school resource officers, metal detectors, and video surveillance systems) is lacking. Many school administrators have directed substantial funds toward ensuring the security of their schools over preventive measures (e.g. staff training on violence prevention and counseling services). Although it is intuitive that such efforts enhance building security, OREA analysts found little research evaluating security measures as a means to deter or prevent violent incidents. The state requires districts to report on school security strategies and procedures in place, but does not currently require districts to assess their appropriateness or effectiveness.

Legislative Policy Considerations

- Consider changing the allocation method for the limited designated state funds for school safety
- Require statewide school climate assessments to better guide the state's safety policies and programs

Administrative Policy Considerations

- Monitor, evaluate, and report on the SAVE Act's effectiveness, including how the accountability and technical assistance components of the act are being met given staff and funding reductions
- Develop additional requirements within the SAVE Act framework to address other accepted best practices in violence prevention
- Research and evaluate the appropriate use and effectiveness of school building security measures. Provide guidance to schools on the optimum balance between security and prevention methods
- Reexamine Tennessee's criteria for designating schools as dangerous