



Opportunity Through Education

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## Memo

**TO:** Brian Schroeder, Superintendent of Public Instruction  
**FROM:** Chad Auer, Deputy Superintendent of Public Instruction  
**DATE:** August 18, 2022  
**SUBJECT:** School Safety & Security in Wyoming

Superintendent Schroeder,

I am pleased to report that school safety and security in Wyoming's K-12 public schools is very strong, and we have opportunities to make it even stronger.

Over the course of the last several months, I have researched the current status of school safety and security in Wyoming. This research included virtual meetings, as well as traveling to various districts around the state to visit with superintendents, teachers, school administrators, parents, school board members, legislators and students. Additionally, I have read applicable Wyoming statutes/regulations, and a number of school safety plans. More broadly, I have read articles, reports and books (and listened to podcasts) published by experts in law enforcement, national security, health care, emergency response and educators regarding various elements of school safety and security across the country. Although I have only scratched the surface, I am confident that my research to date is sufficient to provide you with a timely and informed summary of the status of school safety and security in Wyoming, as well as suggest recommendations as we move forward.

This short memorandum begins with seven themes from my research on the status of school safety and security in Wyoming, followed by opportunities for the WDE to thoughtfully contribute to the issue. Before jumping into the themes, I want to be very clear that Wyoming is vigilantly engaged in an ongoing effort to keep our schools safe for students and staff. In fact, I have been invited to visit a number of schools this fall, where I will continue to engage with school communities about safety and security. I am eager to roll up my sleeves and participate in the never-ending effort to keep our students and teachers safe. I will continue to update you on this evolving issue.

**1. Wyoming school districts have been working diligently, for decades, to ensure that schools are safe and secure.**

- The issue of school safety and security has been a top priority for educational leaders, and Wyoming generally, for decades.
- Arguably, the Cokeville incident of 1986 elevated Wyoming's attention on school safety and security. In Cokeville, a husband and wife took hostage teachers and nearly 100 students. As the hostage situation advanced, the wife triggered a homemade bomb while the husband was out of the room where the hostages were detained. Upon returning, the husband shot his injured wife, a teacher and himself. Numerous children suffered injuries.
- Additionally, a homicide/suicide incident at Casper College in 2012 further elevated Wyoming's attention to safety and security. Here, a young person came on campus with a high-powered bow and shot his father (who was a professor) before inflicting fatal wounds on himself. No other students or faculty were harmed.
- School safety has been addressed in various statutes. For example, Wyoming Statute requires school districts to conduct fire and safety drills according to the following schedule:

§ 35-9-505. Applicability; fire and safety drills required in schools; supervision of drills.

(a) This chapter shall apply to the trustees of school districts in this state.

(b) In every public and private school in Wyoming, there shall be a fire drill at least once every month. Safety drills may be used in lieu of fire drills if approved by and coordinated with the local fire department provided fire drills are conducted at each school not less than four (4) times during any one (1) academic year and further provided the school's fire alarm is tested at each fire or safety drill. A safety drill includes any organized response to a potential threat to the health and safety of the student population. The school administration shall supervise and administer this subsection and shall determine the types of safety drills appropriate for each school. In localities where a paid fire department is maintained, a fire department member shall be requested to be in attendance at each fire or safety drill conducted within a school for the purpose of instruction and constructive criticism.

- School districts are required to submit a school safety plan as a part of the accreditation process.
- Schools conduct numerous training and professional development programs on school safety and security. In many cases, these training sessions are conducted by local law enforcement agencies.
- Wyoming statute addresses various behaviors (bullying, harassment, intimidation...) that could escalate into threats to overall school safety and security. (§ 21-4-314)

## **2. Wyoming schools have access to a wide range of resources to address school safety and security.**

- The U.S. Department of Homeland Security office in Wyoming offers site evaluations, free of charge, to identify opportunities to strengthen school security.
- The Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency will provide districts with resources to ensure safety and security in various school based systems.
- Local law enforcement agencies are eager to continue working with school leaders on safety plans as well as collaborate on various drills.
- Through Region 5 BOCES, school districts have access to a Comprehensive School Threat Assessment program that provides educators with tools to identify threats and address them before a violence situation occurs.
- Wyoming has access to resources funded by the Positive School Climate grant.
- Many of the resources available to schools are underutilized.

## **3. Stakeholders overwhelmingly report that addressing the mental health needs of students and staff is key to combating threats to school safety and security.**

- Many districts are reaching out to local healthcare professionals and mental health professionals in an effort to meet the mental health needs of students and staff, however, not all districts have access to such resources.
- As Wyoming has the highest suicide rate in the nation, there are numerous efforts underway to address student well-being and suicide prevention.
- Many districts report a shortage of school counselors, social workers and/or mental health professionals available to support students and staff in their schools

## **4. Wyoming stakeholders strongly support School Resource Officers (SROs) on all school campuses.**

- Overall, SROs have proven to be an important element of school safety in Wyoming.
- Many law enforcement agencies are experiencing a shortage of law enforcement officers, particularly officers uniquely qualified for deployment as an SRO.
- Districts and law enforcement agencies recognize that an effective SRO requires a certain suite of aptitudes and skills in addition to law enforcement training.
- Without exception, stakeholders emphasize the importance of law enforcement presence on school campuses.

## **5. There is concern, particularly in rural districts, about response times.**

- District leaders and law enforcement agree that long response times are a concern for rural schools.
- Rural communities have established a variety of procedures to reduce response times, but more work needs to be done in this area.

**6. School Districts are working collaboratively with local police departments, sheriff's departments, fire departments, search and rescue, federal agencies, park service and others on coordinated response plans.**

- In the vast majority of cases, school districts have been the drivers of developing school safety and security plans, policies and procedures. That being said, district leaders often feel unequipped to be the catalyst of these important collaborative efforts.
- School boards are actively involved in school safety and security, and are effective partners in creating policies that support safe and secure schools.

**7. Wyoming's older school buildings present unique challenges to school safety and security.**

- Many older school buildings were designed with the administrative office in the center of the school building, far from any 'front door' or other entrance where they can effectively screen visitors.
- Antiquated architectural designs often require expensive retrofitting projects.
- Many districts face difficult budgetary constraints that limit their ability to fully address school safety issues.

**8. Districts across the state are leveraging a wide array of technologies to enhance school safety and security.**

- Visitor screening tools such as RAPTOR are used to verify and monitor campus visits.
- Schools have installed security cameras and other devices in an effort to effectively monitor campuses.
- Automatic locking doors, bulletproof windows and other structural measures are in place across the state.

## **Opportunities for the Wyoming Department of Education (WDE) to Strengthen School Safety and Security**

- Advocate for the allocation of state funds to adequately address aging school facilities, prioritizing those facilities that pose safety and security challenges due to age.
- Convene a cross agency task force (education, law enforcement, homeland security etc...) to identify weaknesses in current interagency communication systems and create an action plan to address those weaknesses.
- Designate a staff position at the WDE specifically tasked with coordinating school safety and security efforts across the state. This position would collaborate with various agencies (law enforcement, Homeland Security etc...) to deliver resources to school districts in a coordinated manner. Further, the position would acquire grants for school safety, coordinate site assessments and host an annual conference on school safety and security in Wyoming.

- Investigate opportunities to leverage economies of scale through statewide purchasing of various school safety technologies/solutions and make those resources available to all districts.

Respectfully,  
/s/ Chad Auer  
Deputy Superintendent of Public Instruction