Guide to K-12 Student Wellbeing:

Strategies to Recognize, Document, and Support Students in Distress

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Foreword
Lessons Learned Through the Years

In 2021, the Surgeon General issued the _Youth Mental Health Advisory_ shedding light on the unprecedented challenges today's young people face and the devastating impact these challenges have on our students' mental health and wellbeing. While the Surgeon General's Advisory confirms what educators have known for quite some time, it also adds validity that we must focus our resources on effectively supporting students so they feel safe.

What does it mean to feel safe? If we look at history, we can see that we often modify our definition of safety in reaction to tragic events. For instance, following the _Collinwood School disaster in 1908_, fire safety protocols were modified to make it easier to evacuate schools and other public buildings.

Following the tragedy at Sandy Hook, we realized there is more we should do to keep school buildings from being breached. Safety meant fences, bullet-proof glass and windows, impenetrable classroom doors and locks, and methods of managing school visitors.
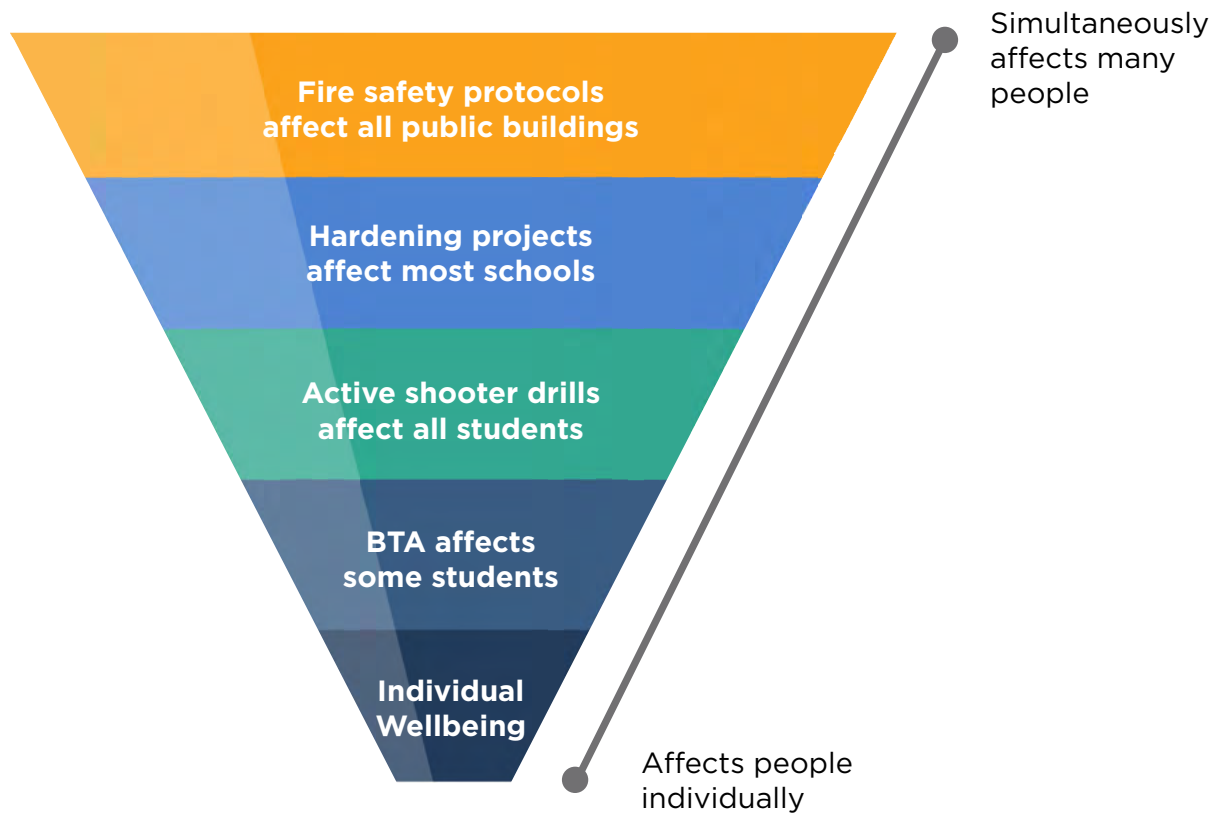
The State of U.S. Youth Mental Health

Our students are in crisis. Mentors can help recognize students who are struggling and make sure they receive the right level of support to help them cope and navigate challenges. Early intervention and support is key to prevent issues to escalating into self-harm, suicide, or violence. According to _Mental Health America_:

2.5 Million youth have severe major depression	**60%** do not receive mental health support	**Only 27%** of those who receive support receive it consistently

Fire safety protocols affect all public buildings

Hardening projects affect most schools

Active shooter drills affect all students

BTA affects some students

Individual Wellbeing

Simultaneously affects many people

Affects people individually

As we've experienced tragedies, we have redefined what it means to be safe. We began with an all-encompassing structural perspective and have now narrowed our approach to be highly-individualized. As such, we are more likely now to get to the root cause of problems and proactively address them before they manifest into tragedy.

Columbine taught us that the threat can already be in the building in the form of students themselves, so safety meant adding the active shooter drill to our protocols. It also spawned a study of this rare form of violence. ***Can active shooter situations be prevented?***

Yes, but we still endured the tragedy at Parkland. Afterward, the U.S. Secret Service published the *2021 Averting Targeted School Violence analysis*. This discussed how schools can operationalize behavioral threat assessments (BTA) and move students off the path of violence. Now several states mandate schools have BTA teams and processes and provide certain types of reporting.

Today, amid the youth mental health crisis and following the global pandemic, our students are struggling in countless ways. A one-size-fits-all approach will not suffice.

This guide will teach you how to create a proactive, nurturing, student-centered approach that maximizes your resources and helps each student feel safe so they can learn, grow, and thrive.

Chapter 1
The High Value of Low-Level Concerns

Educators and staff know when something isn't right with a student. It could be the bus driver noticing a third-grader wincing when her stepdad hugs her goodbye at the bus stop. It could be the lunch monitor noticing the seventh-grader pulling food scraps from other kids' trays or the trash bin. There are dozens and potentially hundreds of these and many other low-level concerns happening in school districts every day.

What is a Low-Level Concern?

Low-level concerns are observances or behaviors that typically seem benign—especially in isolation—but give us pause and elicit a twinge of concern for a student's wellbeing. We often jot down such concerns in a notebook for future reference. We may make a mental note or discuss the concern with colleagues to gauge their level of concern.

Low-level concerns are *as varied as the problems that cause them*. They also display differently in elementary children than in middle school or high school students.

Examples of Low-Level Behaviors
Here are behaviors students may exhibit if they experienced or are experiencing a traumatic event.

Elementary Students	Middle and High School Students
Overreaction to minor problems	Withdrawing from friends or activities
Stomachaches, headaches	Irregular attendance
Regression behaviors (e.g., sucking thumb, baby talk, clinging to trusted adult)	Self-harm (e.g., cutting) or changes in weight
Hiding	Displaying bruises
Startle easily	Sudden change in grades
Difficulty concentrating	Excessively tired, unkempt or hungry
Poor eating habits	Becoming secretive

It can be difficult for staff to know whether a fourth-grader's meltdown over a broken pencil or a ninth-grader no longer hanging out with his best friend are growing pains or something else. Regardless, it's likely one or more staff members noted the behaviors.

Our First Opportunity To Help
Low-level concerns are our first sign that a student may be in distress and are struggling with a problem they are unequipped to handle.

When we put a couple of these low-level concerns together, we can gain a more holistic view to determine whether a student may need help. When we can provide early help to a student, the solution is likely to be simpler and more manageable.

In situations where the problem is significant, we can anticipate that our early intervention will likely help the student and their family obtain the resources to build a safer path together before the situation escalates and becomes more complex.

Of course, it's not as easy as it sounds. We have more students needing help than ever before, school staff are stretched thin and struggling themselves, and the stressors show no signs of waning. Yet, there are paths forward.

As we frequent these paths and add resources, they can become roads and highways, paving the way for more support, better solutions, and better outcomes. Let's break down a few of the challenges and uncover the ways we can advance our effort.

Left unchecked, low-level concerns can escalate into more aggressive behaviors that may lead to violence against self or others.

Read the Blog →

Shortage of Mental Health Staff

When we consider creating a student-centered, individualized approach to keeping students safe, we need to identify the gaps and challenges as well as the tools and resources needed to accomplish our goals. *Unfortunately, one of our most important resources—mental health staff—is woefully lacking.*

As shown in *America's School Mental Health Report Card*, produced by The Hopeful Futures Campaign, these ratios are significantly larger. Only two states, Idaho and the District of Columbia, outperform the ratio of students to school psychologists at 1:479 and 1:410, respectively. The median is Arizona at 1:1,593 and the highest ratio is 1:6,390 found in Georgia.

The ratio of students to social workers has even higher spans. No states are currently outperforming the recommended ratio. The median is 1:2,511. The highest ratio exists in West Virginia, a whopping 1:15,433.

Our best efforts are shown in the ratio of students to counselors. Both Vermont at 1:191 and New Hampshire at 1:219 outperform the recommended ratio of 1:250. Arizona has the highest ratio of 1:905 and the median is Alaska with 1:417.

It seems many schools are capitalizing on the strong ratios of students to school counselors. We're seeing a shift in school counselor roles from a heavy academic focus to a mental health and wellbeing focus. Counselors are quite adept at recognizing earlier signs of distress and addressing low-level concerns. What's more, they're typically one of the primary conduits to external resources, such as community agencies offering support for food insecurity, homelessness, spousal and child abuse, drug and alcohol abuse, financial distress, and more. It is critical to maximize the value our counselors offer when it comes to recognizing low-level concerns and managing early help for students.

According to their respective national associations, the following are the recommended ratios of students to mental health staff:

→ **1 : 500**
students to psychologists

→ **1 : 250**
students to social workers

→ **1 : 250**
students to counselors

Learn more about working together to address student mental health on *School Safety Today.*

Listen to the Podcast ➔

Silos of Information

Typically, these bits of information about low-level concerns reside in a teacher's notebook, a counselor's file folder, an email, the bus driver's head, an external reporting portal, and a host of other disparate and potentially unsecured places. *Silos of information make it nearly impossible to piece together a holistic view of a student who may need help.*

Some schools may use a Google spreadsheet to catalog low-level concerns, but these are typically done by a single school or two within a district or perhaps within a certain grade level. Other schools may use their student information system (SIS), which offers a more secure and structured approach, but it's an after-thought use of existing technology rather than a solution created for a specific purpose. That purpose, of course, is cataloging and managing low-level concerns.

OBSERVATIONS ABOUT DYLAN

1. Dylan's mom vents to secretary about getting divorced, so secretary makes a mental note

2. Lunch monitor sees other students bullying Dylan and talks to Dylan about the situation

3. School counselor makes a note in Dylan's file after she learns he skipped lunch

4. Track coach makes a note in her notebook that Dylan seemed withdrawn at practice

The good news is that staff are already documenting concerns. The bad news? There is no way to see what's really happening. If we could bring these individual concerns together, a counselor or other qualified staff member could see that a meeting with Dylan and his parents would be beneficial. Perhaps Dylan could get support from other students whose parents are divorced and meet with a counselor to learn coping skills.

Following any tragedy, large or small, is when we learn about all the individual, low-level concerns that people had along the way. *Let's shift our focus, bringing those low-level concerns to the foreground, and address them first.*

Chapter 2
A Student-Centered, Holistic Approach

Learning from the past—where our responses to tragedies were typically reactive—we have an opportunity to change our approach. Identifying and cataloging low-level concerns is decidedly proactive and puts us in a position to be far more successful. Being proactive also requires more involvement from our school community.

4 Components of an Integrated Approach

Child-Centered

Ensure that the child's voice is heard. Decisions are made in the child's best interest, are rooted in child development, are age-appropriate, and are informed by evidence.

Proactive

Identify risks and warning signs to the safety and welfare of children. Focused on action and outcomes for the child. Build on strengths as well as identifying difficulties.

Holistic

Integrated approach with multi-agency and multi-disciplinary involvement. Addresses the child's needs within the family and wider community. Ensures equality of opportunity.

Action-Oriented

A continuing process, not an event. Leads to action, including the provision of services. Review services on an ongoing basis. Transparent and open to challenge.

5 Considerations for Comprehensive Chronologies

Purpose
The purpose of safeguarding chronology is to record concerns, events, or incidents that impact a child's health, safety, and/or wellbeing.

Content
A chronology should provide a clear account, based on fact, of any events that are likely to effect a child's life experiences.

Recording
A chronology should be clearly timestamped with each person adding to it, clearly displayed.

Maintaining
Once an entry is made to a chronology, it should not be removed unless factually inaccurate.

Supporting
The chronology may be used in court as evidence where appropriate.

It's Everyone's Responsibility

The phrase, "If You See Something, Say Something®" was coined following the attack on the twin towers. Anonymous tip lines became prevalent in our schools and communities. The ability to submit a tip about suspicious behavior within our communities is credited with thwarting terrorist attacks and saving countless lives. Colorado's Safe2Tell™ program focuses only on the safety of students and schools. It lists its top reporting categories during the 2020-2021 school year as suicide threats, welfare checks, drugs, self-harm, and bullying.

Building upon this mindset, we can see the value of empowering staff to record low-level concerns in a central, secure database that is managed within the district. With the eyes and ears of custodial staff, food services personnel, bus drivers, coaches, and teachers, we vastly improve our ability to catalog concerns, see the whole picture, and ultimately support individual student wellbeing.

Creating Student Chronologies

As we catalog our concerns over time, counselors and relevant administrators can see patterns and opportunities to intervene. The content must be based on fact and provide a clear account of what has happened. It needs to allude to any events that are likely to affect a child's life. Additionally, the entries/submissions must be timestamped to create an accurate chronology. Entries should not be removed unless deemed factually inaccurate. Utilizing such a well-documented policy with fidelity enables a student chronology to be used in court as evidence where appropriate.

Student chronologies should follow the student throughout the school district as well as when transferring to another district. Knowing the concerns of school staff and interventions used in the past can be highly informative as the student progresses through their education.

Staying Focused on the Student

When we identify low-level concerns, we can intervene at an early stage of a problem. The behaviors we see are a student's way of indicating they are struggling with a problem they are unable to solve. Low-level concerns rarely prompt us to consider disciplinary action, so our approach is naturally more inquisitive, supportive, and nurturing.

In a well-documented case in the United Kingdom, a young girl was severely abused and neglected by her great aunt. Upon the child's death, it was discovered that neither hospital staff, social workers nor school personnel ever asked the child what was happening. They all relied upon the word of the caregiver. Ensuring that the student's voice is heard, and decisions are made in their best interest is essential to a child-centered approach. The student needs to feel heard and supported to begin to feel safe.

"We cannot wait until a small problem has grown into a crisis before we take action. With a comprehensive, wraparound approach, our school counselors, nurses, psychologists, and social workers are better equipped to identify needs for services and support. They can *take a truly proactive approach* to student safety and well-being."

Dewey G. Cornell, Ph.D., Principal developer of the Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines and forensic clinical psychologist. University of Virginia.

What is at the Core of the Student's Situation?

Is it a situation at home or with friends? Was there a death in the family? Once the school safety team understands the root cause, they can then make sure the student receives the appropriate help to resolve the issue.

Mental health services and the school should work together. "In reality, it takes both [SROs and mental health professionals] working hand-in-hand to really get to the bottom of what's happening with our students and being able to keep them safe," Dr. Amy Grosso, Director of Behavioral Health at Round Rock ISD in Texas says. Watch our on-demand webinar to learn more.

Watch the Webinar →

Wraparound Services

A widely practiced service delivery model, wraparound initiatives put the student and their family at the center. The goal is to keep them in their homes, schools, and communities, or should a crisis occur, to be in out-of-home placements for only short periods. Whether a school defines its network of services and delivery method as "wraparound" or something else, the key is having a team of people (e.g., family members, social support network, service providers, and agency representatives) working together to plan, support, and monitor the student's progress.

Not only does a multi-agency, multi-disciplinary team provide a holistic approach, but they also help spread the load. This helps maximize our resources while providing the most appropriate levels and types of support for the student. Each team member brings their perspective, experience, and expertise, helping to ensure equality of opportunity and successful outcomes for the student.

Wraparound Principles

- Family Voice and Choice
- Team Based
- Natural Supports
- Collaboration
- Culturally Competent
- Individualized
- Stength Based
- Unconditional Care
- Outcomes Based
- Community Based

3 Ways to Enhance Your Support Structure

FOLLOW MTSS APPROACH

Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) is a universal framework that helps schools identify and assist students who are struggling, academically. Schools can use this framework as a model to also recognize and assist students who are struggling emotionally.

INCLUDE BTA

Behavioral threat assessment is an *evidence-based approach that helps schools* identify students who may pose a threat, intervene with the right resources, and ultimately stop threats from becoming reality. Below we discuss the four step process.

PROVIDE TRAINING

The school community must consistently monitor students, working together to ensure students receive help early. This can only happen if everyone is trained to recognize signs of distress and in the response and documentation process.

It's a Journey, Not a Destination

Equally important to proactively identifying and cataloging low-level concerns is the ability to monitor the progress of the safety plan. Too often the good work and effort to get the student early help can be derailed by not following up and ensuring the plan is being followed. Counselors and qualified staff must have a means of managing cases, including alerts, task assignments, follow-up reminders, and such. This level of secure documentation will support the school in any legal matters demonstrating adherence to policies and procedures.

Depending on the type of support a student may need, the school may refer the student to an outside agency. With the volume of students and adults requiring mental health support, it is important to develop relationships with multiple agencies and resources for sufficient backup as needed.

Chapter 3
The Role of Technology and Maintaining School Safety

School staff are typically the first to notice when a student is in distress. Many staff jot down their concerns in their notebooks or make a mental note to talk to the school counselor or the student's guardian. Without a standardized reporting process, however, it can be difficult to see the whole picture and recognize patterns.

Digitally Tracking Concerns

To take a proactive approach and better recognize, document, support, and manage the wellbeing of individual students, schools need trusted software to help them every step of the way. The software should have an emphasis on cataloging low-level concerns so your teams can see a student in need of support at the very earliest signs of distress.

The most powerful software includes robust behavioral threat assessment workflows and case management features, including the Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines (CSTAG) methodology and the Federal or National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC) model as well as custom configurations.

Empower your staff to see the whole story of the child—from what's happened in the past to what's happening now—so they can intervene early.

Watch the Video →

The Right Safety Partners

You want a knowledgeable and proactive partner involved every step of the way. You should also seek partners already aligned with some of the best practices discussed here. In addition to looking for the best software and seeing how different products align with your needs, consider technology in terms of a relationship with the software provider. They have to be more than just a software vendor. They should be a true collaborator with know-how and empathy who puts your goals first.

Successful implementation is just one of the many pillars that define true success. The right partner will demonstrate a commitment to your success from the outset. For example, look for someone who asks you questions to tailor your emergency management implementation and solution rather than simply presents a menu of their products.

Beyond implementation, you need a partner that makes themselves available and provides resources to encourage your continued success for years to come. This may include opportunities for development sessions, data analysis and business reviews, webinars, and other events.

Chances are your own school or district may encounter changes to staff, protocols, requirements, and expectations once your emergency management solution is in place, so you need a partner dedicated to your continued success, from strategy to implementation to maintenance and updates.

About the Author

Raptor is driven by our mission to **protect every child, every school, every day.**

Founded in 2002, Raptor provides *integrated school safety software* enabling schools to safeguard students and staff, screen visitors, track volunteers, report on drills, respond to emergencies, and reunite families.

Raptor is trusted by *over 50,000 schools worldwide* to keep staff and children safe.

"We have Raptor Visitor Management, Raptor Volunteer Management, and Raptor Emergency Management. Raptor really is priceless. Honestly, it has given us freedom, peace of mind, and the ability to communicate more accurately with one another. Raptor is part of our everyday operations."

West Aurora School District 129, IL

Learn more about Raptor's school safety software solutions on our website, or visit: *raptortech.com*

Request a demo and see why Raptor is the leading provider in integrated school safety software solutions, or visit: *raptortech.com/request*

To speak with a school safety specialist, please give us a call.

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