

## **Health & Safety: Its role in the effective school**

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The effective school recognizes the relevance and importance of Health & Safety as a necessary ingredient for students to grow and develop as well as learn and achieve at school. This article argues that by understanding and adhering to health and safety standards, a school is best able to support and enable its teachers and students to achieve optimal levels of learning. This article attempts to highlight the significance of safety measures in schools and explains how one school maintains a safe and secure environment for the students and staff.

### **Introduction**

Although concepts of health & safety in schools has been initiated in the early 1850s, it was still inadequate in this ever-changing environment. Various incidents are being reported throughout the world on how children are being targeted by accident or by wilful acts of bullying, vandalism, abuse and violence. Therefore, teaching our new generation to be safe in an ever-changing environment is highly necessary and of prime importance. In our continuing challenges to improve our safe environment in our school, we have been developing a unique perspective of sustaining a safe learning and positive atmosphere in our diversified cultural and traditional environment. We aim to establish relationships of trust and respect among students and staff in order to encourage them to share information not only about any issues or incidents but also to prevent any incident from occurring. We are all responsible for the safety of the school.

Our learning emphasis is on imprinting ideas and messages and enhancing the creativity of the students. Our dream is for them to grow up to be responsible and caring citizens of tomorrow and for building a better place to live and nourish. At our International Private School, we focus on the safety of the students and staff in a way that allows our parents to know their children are in safe hands.

### **Why Safety is Important in Schools?**

School safety is becoming one of the most important issues in education today (Education Queensland, 2017). Proactively identifying where the school facilities could become a hazard or where violence and bullying occurs helps to minimize the threat of escalation and ensures our school is safe and secure. Focusing to prevent bullying at a young age has potential to avoid violence in the later stages. School violence extends and grows beyond bullying to be serious assaults and offences in later life. Taking utmost care during the school years by providing appropriate educational program helps to reduce these violence and misbehaviours significantly (Education Queensland, 2017).

School provide targeted curricula to help students develop their awareness of the external world they live in. Although parents are the first educators of their children, schools also have a

responsibility to educate students on matters of safety. All students should have access to the best educational opportunities and outcomes possible.

Teachers should be encouraged to enhance the curriculum in schools to include the safety lesson of how to keep themselves; and keeping safety of others and to value others while growing up as these will be essential in keeping the environment safe. Though the risks can never be eliminated entirely but can be reduced to an acceptable level by good safety management. The necessary medical first aid capabilities, traffic awareness, hygiene, environmental care, etc. are basic elements which can be taught in schools for all ages.

The safety officers and special trainers can conduct trainings, workshops and competitions to involve students and staff in being a creative learner about safety. The essence of the school safety program includes: being inclusive; providing and engaging curriculum, developing positive interpersonal relationships between staff, students and parents; keep fair and safe practices; use non-discriminatory language and behaviours and reduce possible barriers to learning, especially for those at most risk. Consideration and use of detention, suspension, exclusion and cancellation is used at the Private School only when all other approaches have been exhausted.

### **Investigating the Focal Private School**

As a relatively newly built school in this area, every aspect of safety and precautions were taken to consideration while building, to ensure all the standards of the authorities and governing bodies are met to the optimal levels. However, the school needs to keep up with the ever-changing amendments to rules and regulations.

Since the school opened three years ago (2014), new requirements have seen the need to make improvements to the health & safety aspect of the school. These include: the increase in number of CCTV cameras for monitoring; governing bodies requirement for storage and access to the live and archived recording footages; additional safety precautions (ie ceiling safety net in the indoor play area and the additional cushion covering protections for all obstacles in the Kindergarten play area) and adding noise reducing acoustics for the music room. These are just a few of the major changes which were not originally specified during the initial inspections by the governing authorities.

### **Control Measures**

At our International Private School, we are implementing distinctive progressive control measures to assure that the school is a safe house for the students and staff. Although these measures require a high amount of dedication from each and every member of staff, constant perusal of the school plan is ensuring positive results.

Further staff at this school believe the following brief control components and tasks for creating a safe and secure school site are imperative:

- Constantly evaluating the emotional atmosphere in school. Through constant surveys of students, faculty, parents, and admin staff and board members. Based on the survey

results necessary measures can be developed and implemented for increasing the health and safety inside the school

- Focusing on constant listening in schools, between students and staff to understand various pressure points, hazards and prevent negativity.
- To prevent bullying of all kinds, all staffs are set for constant alert practices and observing the warning signs within students.
- Empowering pupils by involving them in planning, creating and sustaining a culture of safety & respect.
- Ensuring that every student feels they have a trusting relationship with at least one adult in the school. Ensuring that an adult is responsible and aware of what is happening with each student.
- Creating procedures, mechanisms for evolving, developing & sustaining safe culture in school.
- Planning for physical environments, their effects on creating comfort zones and Senior Leadership Team and Administrators considering targeted changes that would permit assignment of teachers to smaller, intersecting and supportive groupings within building zones.
- The ICT usage has been filtered by hardware firewall, and students are being educated to be safe online. All possible problems are being communicated and their best solutions are suggested to be followed for being safe online.
- School transportation safety holding utmost importance in commuting students to and forth and strictly following all safety standards. Every driver is well trained from the department of transport especially for handling the school bus. All precautionary measures are deployed to be careful during weather events including fog and sandstorm.

Having provided an overview of the health and safety aspects and measures, let me now explain the necessary ingredients that has made our International Private School a high performing school in the area of the educational authority's School Inspection: Performance Standard 5: Protection, care, guidance and support of students with a "Very Good" rating. The four key elements are security arrangements, cleaning process, risk assessments and maintenance contracts.

### **A. Security Arrangements**

The security arrangements in the school, is prioritized and reviewed regularly. The major measures our International Private School has implemented are as the follows:

- *Security Guards:* The access to inside or outside the school is guarded by security personnel. Once students are let inside the school, they can leave only a parent, or a guardian verified by the front desk with a handwritten note from the front desk officer. The visitors are only allowed to come inside by confirming the purpose with the concerned personnel. Any maintenance and service activities are only performed after the school hours with supervision of the concerned department personnel.
- *CCTV:* Every exit and entries of the school has been covered by the closed-circuit television monitoring system, whereby any incidents recorded, reviewed

and necessary measures are implemented to avoid similar incidents to happen again.

- *Door Access System:* The school is fundamentally divided into specific zones based on the grouping of the students (ie kindergarten, elementary, high school boys and girls sections). Each of these zones have specific exit procedures and is isolated by corridor door access controllers, which is automatically opened only during emergency evacuations. This helps to have a control measure in the student's movements in school and to create safe comfort zones for each group to be supervised by adults.
- *Student Movement:* Each of the student group movements are monitored and supervised by the adults. Students who need to attend outside classroom facilities (eg. washroom, clinic, libraries or visit senior leadership personnel), can avail the pass from the class with recording showing the in and out timings.
- *Student Whereabouts:* The staff are instructed to intervene any students, to make sure they are, where they are supposed to be and any suspicious activities or events or incidents will be immediately reported the safety officer, who will coordinate with the necessary department heads to staff to ensure the situations are resolved before any possible mishaps.
- *Special Educational Needs Intervention:* The school counselor, special education needs coordinator (SENCo), safety officers and teachers can identify students who are in need of special help. Their family backgrounds, emotional aspects, teacher responses, overall study attitudes are to be considered and to be recommended to the SENCo for intervention.

## **B. Cleaning Process**

The School has dedicated maintenance and service team who are fully in charge of the cleaning and maintenance process. Apart from this, a team has been subcontracted from the prominent cleaning company for additional services and cleaning.

The school maintains a proper log of every maintenance undertaken and the cleaning of each area is supervised and recorded. Only permitted, non-hazardous chemicals are being used for cleaning to ensure the safety of the staff.

The quarterly cleaning of the water tanks, air conditioning, lighting, pest control and room servicing, is completed by an approved external company professionalized and dedicated for the process.

## **C. Risk Assessments**

Key element in maintaining school safety is to be aware of and assess the risks involved in all areas of the school. From the moment the child leaves home, and until they return in the afternoon, the school is responsible for everything in between. For all activities coordinated by the school a risk assessment is undertaken. Risk assessment involves identifying areas of the school and then ranking them for necessary response and to take measures to avoid these in any possible incidents. These assessments help identify possible and potential hazardous situations through which the students may come into

contact with. Such risk assessments include transportation, cafeteria, classroom hazards, play areas, PE and swimming pool.

#### **D. Maintenance Contracts**

Although our International Private School has in house personnel to manage the facilities and implement the policies, it is not adequate enough given the vast nature of health and safety regulations. Consequently, we have agreements with external agencies who are proficient in their field and scope of work to undertake periodic inspections and servicing of some key services. These include cleaning, pest control, water purification, building maintenance and security controls maintenance. These external agencies have both internal and external audit practices ensuing our school is well maintained.

#### **How Our International Private School Maintains High Safety Standards?**

##### *Planning*

In our International Private School, safety planning is one of the most important aspects of school meetings. All levels of staff are involved to ensure everyone has an understanding of the safety standards and procedures.

The Senior Leadership team and the Primary Safety Officer initiate the basic structure of safety in the school. The policy changes, current issues and future events planning are the major focus during these meetings. During scheduled staff meetings and student council meetings, our health and safety practices are reviewed and discussed. Any changes are then ratified and put into place.

A major component of our annual planning includes options to be prepared for when an emergency occurs. Following are items to be considered for the school's emergency action plan (O'Meara, P. Shamus, 2013):

- A safety review to identify crucial issues and improve safety
- A safety response team to analyse the emergency planning
- Local authorities to collaborate on appropriate emergency situation
- Security as integral part of the structural design, construction & remodeling
- Risk assessment based on various "at risk" student individual education plans
- System to clarify the roles and responsibilities of key personnel
- Promote efficient emergency response and adequate safety training
- Conducting of frequent fire drills and evacuation exercises
- Emergency exit plans, layout, equipment and facilities information for response team.
- Preparation of the needs of the special education students in emergency planning

#### **School Procedure & Precautions**

The purpose of our school safety procedures and precautions is the securing of all zones, areas

and facilities in the school with adequate safety measures to ensure no one, (both students and staff) is under any serious potential threat. The safety officer's primary concern is the completion of the extensive risk analysis and ensure that all the necessary steps are taken to avoid any potential incident. Regular school emergency procedure practices (eg, fire drill, lockdown), ensures a quick emergency response and the resolution of the situation with a minimum or no impact on safety of personnel and property.

The school emergency precautions, procedures and response strategies include following key elements:

- Developed an emergency response team to isolate the area of incident, evacuate the area or building and to resolve all basic situations or, escort and clear way for the emergency service agency team to resolve the situation.
- Contracted security service personnel along with the school security in charge to respond to any situations
- Physical security system and technology – These include the security guards, security CCTV cameras, electronic key card system for staff.
- Accessible and easy to follow action plans – All staff are constantly made aware of the safety procedures and emergency exit procedures. All visitors are given a simple easy to follow exit plans.
- Consistent drills and compliance tasks and training for both students and staffs to familiar about the emergency procedures
- Teamed up with the local Civil Defense and Law enforcement, we prepare ourselves to be ready for any incidents

### **Staff Professional Development**

In our International Private School, we facilitate both external and internal professional development training and encourage all our staff to improve their understanding and knowledge of health and safety practices. All primary training (eg. medical first aid and emergency response training) are being constantly made available to the staff and students as we strive for a better and safe environment at our school.

The bus drivers and bus monitors are periodically sent for specialized training and updates for the use of school bus and student safety. Service and maintenance teams are also provided with training by the appropriate external agencies and their safety officers. Internal trainings and inspections by the school supervisors and safety officers ensure that all staff perform at their best should a critical incident occurs.

Through feedback sessions, observations and various discussions about the importance of safety we are continually focusing on the vision of the school. Each staff member is evaluated on their understanding of the rules and regulations, as well as the safety duties and functions assigned to each staff member. Such commitment to continuous professional development enforces our staff to think safety aspects, routinely in their lessons and in their activities during the class and outside the classroom.

In addition to the professional development program, we have introduced various safety correlated activity-based events and trainings like the OSH Day, Civil Defense trainings, Fire drills, cooperated emergency response training with the local fire emergency and ambulance teams. This has encouraged teachers and students to be more aware and to act more safely in their day to day activities both inside the school and wherever they may be.

### **Findings and Future Planning**

Observations and reflections after our school's training events reveal a very positive response from the staff and students in response to these training. Though it is impracticable to eliminate the incidents and risk completely, there was a drastic lowering of the incidents reporting due to extra care is taken by staff and students in the classrooms, play areas and in the transport departments.

Teachers were able to sense and detect the possible unsafe situations ahead of any incidents in a much quicker and better way than before and were able to respond to divert possible situations. As we improve our procedures by focusing and practicing on being safe wherever we are, the more we find ways to avoid risky or possible unstable situations.

Nevertheless, ongoing attention to these new safety expectations are planned and budgeted for. The additional CCTV camera fixing has been initiated and we will commence the civil and cabling work. All major work is coordinated during the summer vacation so as not to disturb the students' learning process. The acoustics for the music room has been initiated and is waiting for the summer vacation to start the implementation.

To ensure optimal safety; additional cleaning staff have been deployed. More staff has been allotted for the bus area to ensure safety. More staff are arranged to micromanage smaller group of students to get individual attention as far as possible in all areas where students are being dispersed.

Our next step is to reach out to the local community to help create a safe environment around us. Though this notion is only in its infancy of planning, we are seeking to increase our green energy solutions and provide eco-friendly lifestyle.

### **Conclusion**

Safety plays an integral role in the everyday operations of the school. As with all other endeavours, there is no 'one-size-fits-all' solution in implementing valid safety strategies. Regardless of the delivery model, the results of the school's effective safety environment have had a noticeable effect on the negative behaviour and a reduction in the incidents being reported. This has led to a positive effect on the students and the school environment. Reflecting on the impact of safety in their day today life the Private School was able to achieve our safety targets and improve students' and staff safety in all aspects.

Educators and administrators should take leadership role in prescribing collective safety development needs and these should not just be made at an institutional level, but at a structural and individual levels too where the learning takes place. Each of us should pursue to drive for



the higher standard based safety in our schools and wherever we are, for a better tomorrow.

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