

PUBLIC RISK

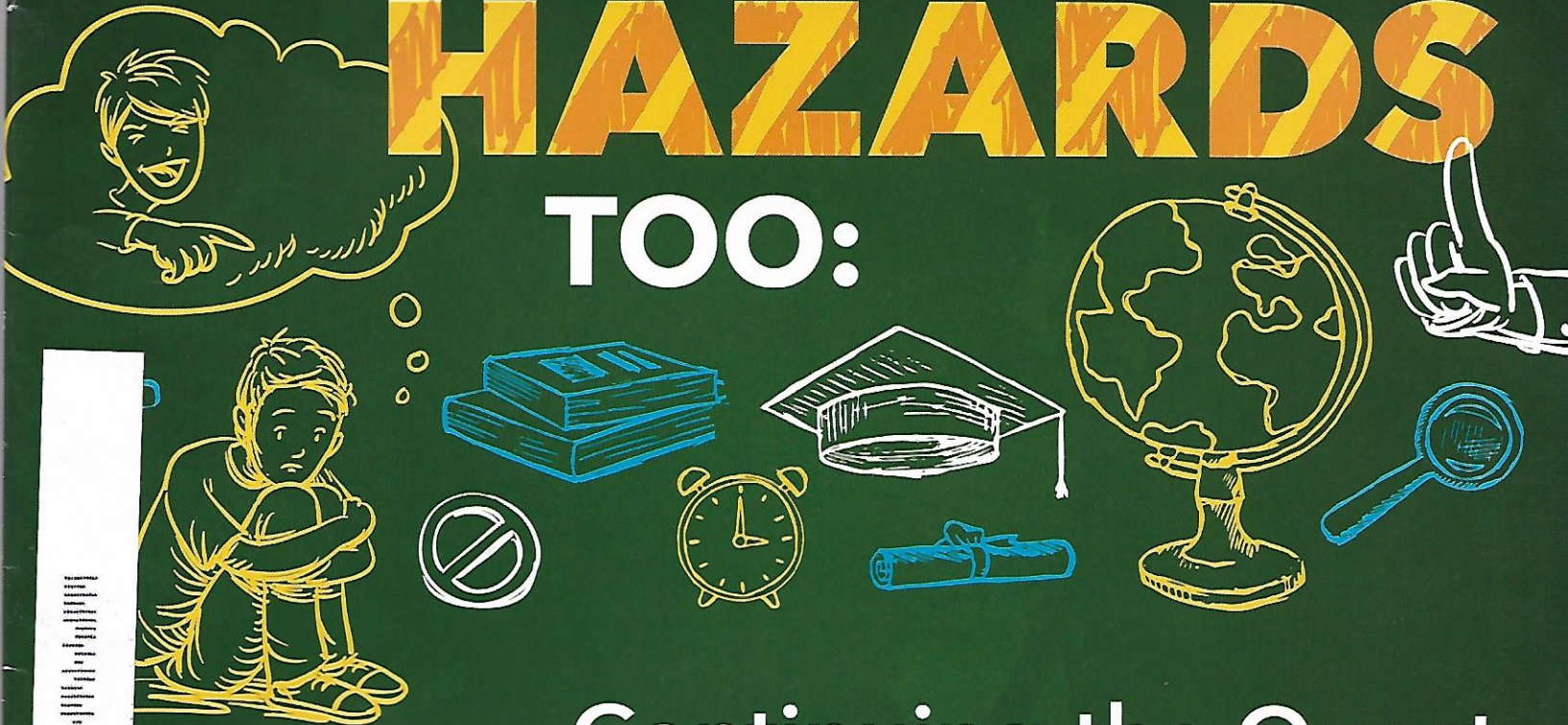


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SCHOOLS HAVE HAZARDS TOO:

CONTINUING THE QUEST TO MAKE SCHOOLS SAFER

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YOU LIKELY REMEMBER THIS: The alarm sounds. Classmates rejoice. You walk, nearly skip, through the halls single-file. You and your classmates gather outside for a glorious break from math... We have all experienced fire drills in school. Safety in primary and secondary schools is vital to protect not only students, but also school leaders, faculty, support staff, and visitors against hazards and violence (**FIGURE I**); nevertheless, there is room for improvement.

WHY IS THERE A NEED FOR IMPROVEMENT?

- Fire drills, active shooter preparations, and other emergency or disaster responses are just one aspect of school safety—schools have hazards beyond emergencies. The physical conditions of facilities and classrooms affect the school environment, and they contain potentially hazardous equipment, chemicals, and activities. Schools also have classes that introduce increased risks (e.g., vocational shop, home economics, chemistry).
- The educational services sector averages 36,000 work-related injuries each year (Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS], 2018a), with that number gradually increasing (**FIGURE II**) (BLS, 2018b, c, d, e). Primary and secondary schools endure most of these work-related injuries and illnesses (**FIGURE III**), but this does not include injuries or illnesses that are student-related, non-occupational, and non-recordable [based on the Occupational Safety and Health Administration’s (OSHA) recordkeeping regulations, 29 CFR 1904], which make these numbers higher than they appear.

- Interviews reveal many schools do not have policies in place to manage safety and health (S&H). When policies do exist, it seems many are ineffective or unenforced. A study performed by Edo, Umanah, & Uzogara (2017) shows principals believe the primary constraint on school S&H is a lack of implementing S&H policies.
- Educator credentials vary greatly, depending on educational background, work experience, and exposure to non-educational work environments. Many times, their credentials do not encompass any level of S&H, meaning a knowledge gap may exist in facilitating a safe and healthful environment. A study shows educators believe the primary constraint to S&H is a lack of sufficient knowledge regarding S&H measures (Edo, Umanah, & Uzogara, 2017).
- The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) (2018) found that “about 93% of public schools reported they provide training on safety procedures” (e.g., how to handle emergencies). The training typically focuses on bullying, violence, and related behaviors (**FIGURE IV**); however, schools can extend training to include hazard identification and risk reduction.

FIGURE I

SCHOOL PERSONNEL

The most recognizable employees within a school are the educators; however, they represent only a portion of the personnel that work within the school. Consider school leaders, faculty, and support staff when applying the strategies in this article.

SCHOOL LEADERS	SCHOOL PERSONNEL
SCHOOL LEADERS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Superintendent • Principal • Athletic Director
FACULTY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educator • Counselor • Special Education • Speech Therapist • Occupational Therapist • Physical Therapist • Alternative Education • Library/Media Specialist • Reading Specialist • Intervention Specialist • Coach
SUPPORT STAFF	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Administrative Assistant • Encumbrance Clerk • School Nutritionist • Educator’s Aide • Paraprofessional • Nurse • Cook • Custodian • Maintenance Technician • Computer Technician

- Interviews with students suggest they do not always portray the level of risk avoidance needed to prevent unsafe acts and conditions (NCES/BJS, 2018).
- There is no national guidance to ensure faculty and support staff have consistent skills and knowledge relative to S&H.

Scholarly evidence, census bureau results, interviews, and observations support the need to make S&H in schools more expansive and effective. Risk management offices and school officials can use the recommendations in this article to evaluate the school environment and identify strategies and initiatives to improve school S&H.

KNOWLEDGE CHECK

Schools can implement several strategies to bridge the identified S&H knowledge gap. Equipping faculty and support staff with S&H knowledge not only increases awareness for hazard identification but gives schools an elevated opportunity to better the S&H culture. Raising awareness allows faculty and support staff to lead by example as students move forward and consider S&H factors in their careers and personal lives.

HAZARD IDENTIFICATION AND RISK CHARACTERIZATION

A comprehensive evaluation of school grounds is necessary to identify hazards

and then characterize risks. Evaluations should assess:

- potential facility issues,
- equipment failures,
- classroom hazards,
- risks of routine activities,
- exposure to chemicals, and
- the impact of active construction zones.

The risk management office may lead the evaluation and use a team of faculty and support staff. The goal of the assessment is to establish a baseline of hazards throughout the school.

Once evaluators compile a list of identified hazards, they can determine a level of risk for

FIGURE II

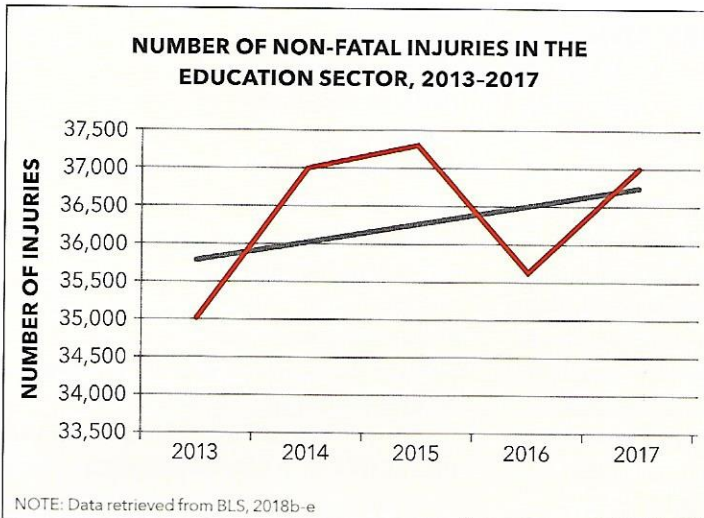


FIGURE III

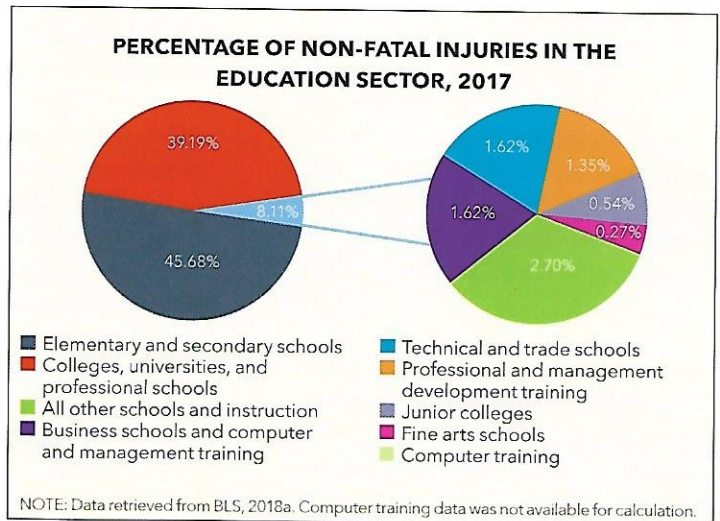


FIGURE IV

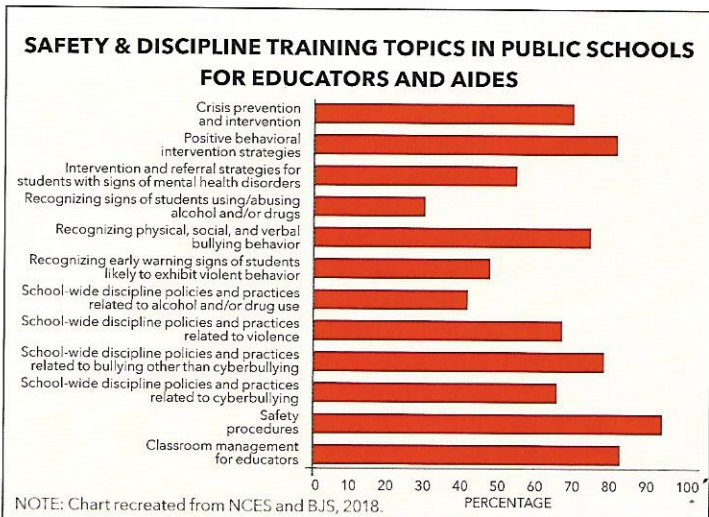


FIGURE V

KNOWLEDGE EVALUATIONS	
Consider integrating S&H questions into interviews. Example questions can revolve around knowledge of:	
WOOD SHOP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Machine guarding • Personal protective equipment
HOME ECONOMICS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knife safety • Kitchen safety • Fire extinguisher use • Ergonomics
PHYSICAL EDUCATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Signs and symptoms of heat stress
CHEMISTRY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safety Data Sheets • Spill response
CUSTODIANS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hazardous energy • Chemical safety • Ergonomics

each. Evaluators can share the results with the school to identify control measures and prioritize required actions or needed improvements. It is good practice to incorporate the results into training for faculty and support staff—helping them understand the hazards and what they can do to foster a safe and healthful school environment.

KNOWLEDGE EVALUATION AND JOB DESCRIPTIONS

Schools can work with a S&H professional to review S&H regulations and identify pertinent topics that faculty and support staff should know and understand, respective to their occupation.

Incorporate S&H knowledge requirements into job descriptions. Defined job descriptions help faculty and support staff understand their S&H expectations and aid schools in holding employees accountable for meeting those expectations.

Consider creating a list of S&H questions to integrate into interviews with prospective faculty and support staff (**FIGURE V**). Schools can also consider making S&H knowledge a recommendation [rather than a requirement], but then use this as a component to rank the best candidates.

NEW HIRE ORIENTATION

The new hire orientation process sets the foundation for workplace S&H. Planning is a critical component of the new hire orientation process. Before any training occurs, identify a timeframe in which to deliver the training to new hires. Ideally, schools should provide new hire orientation before employees begin to actively work in their assigned positions—remember, employees are working untrained and at an increased risk until they receive this training.

Next, envision the information that would most benefit a new hire—schools need to include these topics in the orientation. Think high level—aim the orientation at more general S&H concepts and set the tone for S&H at the school (Burt, 2015). Choose topics that are relevant to the entire workforce (e.g., S&H rules, hazards, hazard controls, hazard reporting process, incident reporting procedures, safe work procedures). New hire orientation provides faculty and support staff

with the information they need to ensure the school is safe and healthful.

DEVELOPMENT AND TRAINING

Schools can also determine if resources are available to fund additional training to support the school's S&H expectations. The OSHA website provides useful information to share with faculty and support staff. OSHA also has the OSHA Training Institute and local OSHA Training Institute Education Centers which offer S&H courses on a range of topics. There are typically vendors and consultants for hire to train faculty and supporting staff on hazard recognition or conducting S&H inspections. Schools may find it best to utilize train-the-trainer courses to bring S&H resources and knowledge directly to the school environment too.

SAFETY STRATEGIES AND INITIATIVES

Schools can employ additional safety strategies and initiatives beyond faculty and support staff knowledge to improve S&H. While schools may perceive several of these ideas as best practices, they assist with continuous identification of hazards, reinforcement of S&H training, and consistent and repetitive S&H communications. Schools need to implement strategies that best fit school needs and available resources, integrating S&H concepts into day-to-day school operations and processes to be the most effective.

POLICY AND PROCEDURES

S&H policies and procedures bring structure and consistency to the school's S&H efforts. Schools can have separate written policies for students and employees, or combine the information into a single document. The state, school district, and/or school board usually governs the information included in a written policy, but it is a good idea to incorporate information on risks identified from hazard assessments and S&H inspections.

The written policy includes high-level information to address anticipated risks (e.g., commitment to S&H from school leaders, emergency response, S&H rules; use of the playground in cold/hot weather). Detailed S&H procedures supplement the written policy, describing steps on how to conduct

inspections, respond to different emergencies, report hazards, and investigate incidents. Periodically review established policies and procedures to ensure they are up-to-date and reflect S&H regulations, school expectations, and current school processes.

HAZARD INSPECTION AND ASSESSMENT

Schools have diverse environments, thus, a range of hazards. Hazard inspection and assessment processes need to be in place to continually identify and abate hazards that arise in the school environment. Use baseline hazard assessment results to pinpoint the more significant risks and dictate the frequency of routine inspections [those with increased risks should have more inspections]. Develop an inspection schedule to show which areas to examine, when, and by who; include all areas of the school grounds in the schedule.

Designate inspectors trained in hazard recognition to execute the inspection process. Create checklists to guide the process, help identify hazards specific to each work area, and facilitate the documentation of findings—do not constrict inspectors to the items on the checklist, asking them to document any possible hazards. Additionally, employ hazard assessment processes for non-routine activities, workplace changes, and construction work.

PREVENTATIVE MAINTENANCE

Unmaintained school equipment may also contribute to injuries and illnesses. Schools should develop a list of equipment throughout the school grounds, identify maintenance needs, and assign someone to oversee implementation of the preventative maintenance process. It is essential schools maintain the facilities (e.g., playgrounds, school vehicles, weight lifting equipment, kitchen equipment) to reduce risks to students, faculty, and support staff. Faculty and support staff should understand the process to report items that need repair or show signs of wear. Maintenance personnel should monitor the execution of the preventative maintenance process, striving to not fall behind on scheduled maintenance. They should also receive S&H training (e.g., control of hazardous energy, tool safety, fall protection) to safely perform maintenance activities.

SAFETY AND HEALTH COMMITTEES

S&H committees bring school leaders, faculty, support staff, students, and community members together in a collaborative effort to elevate S&H at the school. Schools must outline membership composition, membership requirements, frequency of meetings, and mission of the committee, which varies based on school needs. Effective committees meet regularly, publicize agendas prior to meetings, and document and distribute meeting minutes. S&H committees provide an opportunity to assess S&H needs, oversee hazard prevention and control processes, and contribute to the school's overall S&H culture—raising awareness and arriving at resolutions for S&H issues.

SAFETY EVENTS

S&H events show a school is dedicated to S&H. Use S&H committees, school boards, and the community to retrieve ideas that fit the school's needs. Schools can champion S&H days and S&H fairs, providing students, faculty, and/or support staff with training and resources in an informal and eventful manner. Schools can also contact local S&H professionals or risk managers to speak to the faculty and/or students about S&H as a career or a specific S&H topic. Schools can also hold student events (e.g., safety poster contests, essay contests, scholarships) to increase S&H awareness.

SAFETY COORDINATORS

Safety coordinators may be a valuable asset at a school that does not have a designated risk manager or has an understaffed risk management office. Faculty members frequently fulfill the role of 'safety coordinator' as an additional duty, as they are on-site at the school and able to serve as a point-of-contact for hazard reports, incident reports, and other S&H issues. Schools need to define safety coordinator roles and responsibilities (e.g., conducting S&H inspections, communicating S&H information, overseeing emergency drills), allocate resources, and grant them the authority to carry out assigned roles. It is a good idea to write a letter of designation, assigning the additional duty and laying out the expectations of the position.

SAFETY MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

Schools may consider transitioning to a safety management system (SMS) to improve S&H

efforts. Unlike risk management, the SMS moves the reactive emphasis on S&H to a proactive approach, readily identifying hazards and risks before an incident occurs. It also removes the normalcy of S&H professionals and risk managers leading S&H efforts, making the entire workforce [and possibly students] responsible for S&H. Successful SMSs require strong commitment and support from school leadership. Implementing a SMS improves the school's S&H culture, increases hazard awareness and correction, and fine-tunes S&H policies and procedures to move beyond a compliance mindset (Robertson, 2018; Sambasivam, Karuppiyah, Subramaniam, Praveena, & Abidin, 2017).

CONCLUSION

Overall, S&H continues to be an area of emphasis for schools. Many schools have S&H provisions in place, but they are not always effective and there continues to be a knowledge gap regarding S&H information. It is essential for schools to evaluate S&H efforts and identify areas of improvement. Using a combination of training and education, hazard identification and correction processes, and other strategies and initiatives, schools can promote S&H to possibly influence the S&H culture, mitigate risks, and reduce injuries and illnesses. Each school must evaluate their practices and choose strategies and initiatives that work best based on school needs, the school environment and risks, and training needs of the faculty and supporting staff. ■

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