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Safety in the Educational Environment: Rural District Administrator Perceptions of School Safety in Northeast Tennessee Public Schools

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by

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ABSTRACT

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A qualitative research study was conducted to identify, describe, and understand the perceptions of administrators of public school districts in northeast Tennessee regarding school safety. Using a semi-structured interview process, the researcher identified emerging themes regarding the factors most associated with safe school districts, the factors most associated with unsafe school districts, the items identified as needed to improve safety, and the topics identified as future safety issues at the school and district level. Through such study, the researcher was able to develop an understanding regarding the overall safety of school districts in northeast Tennessee and the specific components that lead to the existence of safe school environments.

Public school administrators in northeast Tennessee have positive perceptions regarding the overall safety of school districts, indicate a high level of awareness and a climate of safety preparedness, and believe that safety has improved due to the presence of increased funding. They perceive the factors most associated with safe school districts are the presence of law enforcement in the school environment, adequate preparation and safety-related professional development, and adequate financial resources for safety-related measures. Factors associated with unsafe environments include inconsistent adherence to safety-related processes and procedures, lack of appropriate physical security and access control, and the age, design, and

current condition of physical facilities. Administrators cite the need for additional training, professional development, and resources for safety improvements, as well as identifying increasing mental health concerns and technology security as the most pressing needs facing school districts.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to those important individuals that provided the unyielding love that sustained me and made the completion of this work possible. My ability to pursue and obtain a doctoral degree could never have been accomplished without the sacrifices and support of those that mean the most to me.

To my parents Richard and Sheila True, you have provided a life-long model of support and love that has guided me at every step of my personal life and professional career. Thank you so much for being such wonderful parents. Your encouragement of my educational journey has made it possible to not only dream of what my career could become, but also provided the supports to turn those dreams into realities.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1. Introduction

School safety and the perception that students and staff members face an unparalleled level of risk to their health and well-being while in American schools is of primary concern when considering the most significant education-related issues at the national, state, and local level. The shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, FL served to heighten tensions and increase scrutiny of school and community safety measures across America. Not surprisingly, the dialogue has also included varying viewpoints regarding how such tragic occurrences can be addressed and potentially avoided in the future.

Solutions to these occurrences come from a variety of sources and philosophical viewpoints, including many in the political and policy-making arena. The Federal Commission on School Safety (Devos et al., 2018) has gathered and analyzed information from a broad base of stakeholders to inform and guide best practices. Such work has typically focused on three key outcomes: how schools can prevent violence, how students and staff can be protected against potential threats, and how educational communities can best respond when incidents occur. To ensure progress toward these outcomes, it is critical to identify the key indicators of safety in each area, reach understanding as to the current state of safety on both a local and national level, and recognize how such information should impact the implementation of elements that can ensure student safety (Musu, et al., 2018).

However, such discussions often fail to address the full scope of issues related to school safety and how educators seek to take a prioritized, multi-hazard approach to ensure that students and staff operate in a secure environment. To address this issue, the Tennessee Department of Safety and Homeland Security and the Office of Homeland Security have developed processes to support educators in analyzing current local conditions regarding safety from a broader

perspective (Tennessee Department of Safety and Homeland Security, 2019). The utilization of these processes by those in positions of decision-making authority helps to develop the most comprehensive and effective approach possible. The effective implementation of such measures serves as a foundation for the development of a perception of the school environment in regard to safety.

The major sources of vulnerability in school settings, which includes the design, use, and supervision of space, administrative practices, nature of the population served, and characteristic of the student population, serve to create a holistic perception of whether or not a school is considered safe. Safe schools are perceived to be nurturing, caring environments that are effective and where individuals are free from physical and psychological harm. Unsafe schools are perceived to be disorganized, poorly structured places where behavioral expectations are unclear, the safety risk is high, and violent incidents may occur (Sprague & Walker, 2010). The role of the safety administrator is to utilize both art and science to apply knowledge to solve problems (Hoy & Miskel, 2013). Such solutions should reflect an understanding of the specific elements that key school stakeholders utilize to draw personal conclusions regarding school safety. Administrators should apply focused decision making, strategic resource allocation, and targeted policy development when considering best-practice measures to be implemented in the academic setting.

Statement of the Problem

Considering its perceived level of importance in today's society and its placement on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943), it can be argued that no item is more critical in today's schools than the issue of safety. The topic is passionately discussed in communities

across America and elicits a wide range of opinions related to its cause, effects, and potential solutions. Those that have the ability to affect change are faced with the task of analyzing the issue and making decisions that can directly impact the safety of children and adults that expect to arrive at school each day to find a safe, welcoming learning environment.

A preponderance of school safety efforts have been focused upon the prevention and mediation of active shooter events. Since 1970, the Department of Homeland Defense and Security has documented over 1,300 school shooting incidents: school shooting incidents have been defined as, "a gun is brandished, is fired, or a bullet hits school property for any reason, regardless of the number of victims (including zero), time, day of the week…" (Riedman & O'Neill, 2019, para. 10). As a result, the focus of educators and school stakeholders related to security has often centered solely on active shooting incidents.

However, statistics reflect other safety-related situations are much more likely to occur. Data compiled from 1998-2012 can be utilized to support a position that the risk of death via a transportation incident in or near a United States K-12 school is nine times more likely than from an active shooter incident (Satterly, 2014). Satterly stated the risk of a homicide is eight times more likely, and death by suicide is over twice as likely as death by an active shooter in a school (2014).

It is vital to focus on the implementation of a comprehensive safety plan that addresses all areas of potential concern while not ignoring physical barriers and operational procedures necessary to reduce the threat of school shootings. The development of the full awareness of all components by school administrators can serve to facilitate the safest possible environment for all educational stakeholders. Through the collection and measurement of the perceptions of school administrators regarding school safety, a more informed perspective can be gained

regarding the implementation of key safety measures, their effect on the school environment, and the factors and components that lead to feelings of safety within the school environment.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of the study was to identify, describe, and understand the perceptions of administrators of public school districts in northeast Tennessee regarding school safety. Perceptions of safety were defined as the observations, thoughts, and emotions experienced by district administrators regarding the overall sense of school security. An additional variable that impacts individual perceptions of school safety was the presence of components that contribute to a perceived sense of security. Administrators described how they understand school environments in their district from a perspective of school safety.

Research Questions

The research questions central to this study are:

1. What are district-level administrator perceptions of safety in a school district?
2. What factors do district-level administrators associate with a safe school district?
3. What factors do district-level administrators most associate with an unsafe school district?
4. What do district-level administrators identify as needs for the improvement of safety?
5. What do district-level administrators perceive as future safety issues at the school and district level?

Limitations and Delimitations

The study was limited by certain factors outside the control of the researcher, which served to impact results. Though all study participants were district administrators of public school districts in the First Tennessee region in northeast Tennessee, no consistent scope of job responsibilities existed for all participants. The scope of administrator decision-making and operational authority also varied among participants, depending on the organizational structure of the individual district selected for study. Length of service regarding safety oversight varied among selected participants, with differing backgrounds and depth of experience limiting the perspectives that were described during the data gathering process.

Individuals selected as participants served in a district administrative position in September, 2020. No requirement was utilized regarding participants' administrative history, whether or not they had administrative experience in another school district, or whether or not they held an administrative position other than the one in which they were currently employed. The interview questions and guide were created utilizing information gathered throughout the review of literature and through the researcher's personal experience and historical perspective as a school and district administrator, as well as through direct experience with issues of school safety. To best minimize the limitations and potential for bias that such personal knowledge and experience may create, the interview guide was piloted with a district-level administrator from a school district not selected for study during the formal information gathering process. Information gathered from this process resulted in minor revisions to the phrasing and ordering of the research instrument, in an effort to provide a higher level of credibility and dependability to the data gathered during the study.

The findings of this study on school safety were limited to the opinions, feelings, experiences, and perceptions of district administrators in public schools in northeast Tennessee. It is not assumed that findings from this study are to be generalized to other educational staff or stakeholders either inside or outside the First Tennessee region, or to other educational administrators in geographic areas outside of northeast Tennessee. The results and analysis of the study findings may provide insights to all educators, policy makers, and educational stakeholders that have interest in understanding and developing the components of safe educational environments. The information gathered and resulting potential knowledge gained served to benefit all students and educators seeking to develop and operate within the safest possible school setting, maximizing the level of positive security perceptions that allows for the highest possible student achievement.

Definition of Terms

To provide the greatest possible understanding of this study, the following terms and definitions are to be utilized:

1. Active shooter incident: An occurrence where one or more individuals participate in an ongoing, random, or systematic shooting spree with the objective of multiple or mass murders (Mitchell E., 2013, p. 3).
2. Bullying: Negative behaviors that occur repeatedly over time, involving a real or perceived imbalance of power, with the more powerful child or group attacking those that are less powerful (Ericson, 2001, p. 1).

3. Safe climate: An atmosphere where individuals are connected and demonstrate care and concern and where potential trouble is identified and addressed with respect at early stages before escalation can occur (Bonanno & Levenson, 2014).
4. School Crisis: An event that is perceived to be extremely negative, uncontrollable, and unpredictable (Brock et al., 2016, p. 15).
5. School Safety: A total school climate (that) allows students, teachers, administrators, staff, and visitors to interact in a positive, nonthreatening manners that reflects the educational mission of the school while fostering positive relationships and personal growth (Bucher & Manning, 2005, p. 56).

Significance of Study

The purpose of the study was to identify, describe, and understand the perceptions of administrators of public school districts in northeast Tennessee regarding school safety. The collection and analysis of data regarding the factors associated with school safety served to build a comprehensive understanding regarding how district-level administrators perceive the safety of their learning environments. Through qualitative interviewing of district-level administrators, the researcher identified elements that significantly impacted educator beliefs regarding school safety.

A broader operational knowledge of school security was obtained by collecting and identifying administrator perceptions. The knowledge gained can serve to aid school and safety personnel in understanding how the implementation of recent safety improvements are being operationalized, as well as to identify unforeseen gaps in safety needs. Understanding school safety perceptions of administrators will be valuable for refining school safety actions plans as

well as for improvement efforts to enhance the perceptions of safety for educational stakeholders.

The body of knowledge regarding school safety is ever-growing due to increased research and communication of real-world experiences of students and educators. An analysis of such events provides best-practice recommendations for district administrators. Implementation of these recommendations can improve safety when implemented in ways specific to each school setting. Doing so can reduce or prevent the opportunity for harm to the health and wellness of children and adults. Findings may be utilized by administrators to enhance and refine safety preparedness protocols. This study sought to provide increased awareness of the factors that support school safety, the factors that make schools unsafe, and how awareness of such perceptions can lead to safer educational environments.

Summary of Study

Given the number of incidents related to school safety, safety in the educational environment is a topic that has generated both attention and concern in recent years. These incidents have become a part of the discourse in the American educational culture. Heightening the awareness of school safety issues is central to attempts to increase the perception that students and staff are as safe as possible.

The school environment should reflect a climate of safety and security. Slade and Griffith (2013) indicate that students in unsafe environments will not reach their full social and academic potential. Obtaining a full understanding of administrator perceptions of school safety can lead to a better awareness of the operational and structural components necessary to ensure a safe environment for all students and staff.

Overview of Study

This qualitative study is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 includes an introduction to the study, the statement of the problem, the study research questions, limitations and delimitations related to the study, definition of relevant terms, the significance of the study, and an overview of the study. Chapter 2 serves to provide an in-depth review of the current literature, research, and understandings related to school safety. Chapter 3 describes the research methodology utilized in the study, including the research questions, research procedures, information related to participant selection, data collection procedures, how data was analyzed and interpreted, how credibility and dependability were ensured, the role of the researcher, how participant safety was ensured, a review of study truthfulness and credibility, and ethical considerations that were taken into account during the study. Chapter 4 provides an analysis of the survey data, including an introduction, how participants were selected, what process was utilized during participant interviews, a review of the interview data that was collected, a review of questions that were utilized during the interview process, and a summary of the collected data. Chapter 5 provides a summary of the study, conclusions, and recommendations for practice and implications for further research.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

Introduction

The fundamental understanding of school security is constantly evolving as the body of research and human understanding grows. Crisis events across the United States that impact schools continue to occur. These events contribute to a growing body of evidence related to school safety and elements that impact perceptions of school safety. Best practices for the development of emergency operation plans have been created by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (U.S. Department of Education et at., 2013). Government officials have sought to localize knowledge by requiring an annual school security assessment that utilizes a comprehensive guide developed by the Tennessee Department of Safety and Homeland Security. This resource outlines the physical elements necessary for effective school safety (Tennessee Department of Safety and Homeland Security, 2019). Establishing a comprehensive awareness of the information and recommendations provided by safety experts was a necessary component of the process for developing foundational understanding of safety-related decisions occurring within school districts.

Abraham Maslow (1943) began to establish the connection between safe environments and psychological understanding of adolescent development. Based on this foundational concept, developing a greater understanding of the research regarding the human perception and need for safety was also critical throughout the qualitative study. Safety is a fundamental human need, and establishing safe school environments serves to form a foundational component necessary for student learning and success (Thapa et al., 2013). A review of the psychological foundation and ongoing research regarding adolescent development and the need for safe environments was warranted. This included an examination of the components of a healthy

school climate, an exploration of the interconnected aspects of stakeholder engagement, and how safety concerns are best addressed (Bradshaw & Lindsey, 2014).

Reviewing the role of the political, financial, and administrative impact on school safety comprised central elements of the literature review. The review also included information on how stakeholders seek to ensure children and adults have the safest possible environment in which to learn and work (DeWitt, 2018), which provided greater context as to how safety-related decisions are made. While policy decisions have often been influenced by those in authority to drive societal change based on a social or political ideology, such decisions have real-world impact on the administrators tasked with leading the work (Spring, 2011). Awareness of this influence served to inform the study of the current safety climate.

The growing body of research around school safety includes the establishment of best practice recommendations. The U.S. Department of Education has published such recommendations for schools and communities (Vossekuil et al., 2002). Focus areas have been categorized into three major categories: the management of the school, the physical school environment, and safety instruction of students, staff, and community (Volokh & Snell, 1998). Researchers note each school environment is unique and presents its own set of challenges and potential solutions (U.S. Department of Education et al., 2013). Communities must take comprehensive integrated approaches to most adequately address school safety, as no single solution will solve the issue (Devos et at., 2018).

Historical Perspective of School Safety

The review of research on school safety reveals the perception of safety of United States schools does not often align with what is actually taking place in schools. While tragic active

shooter events at locations such as Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado and Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida can shape attitudes and perceptions on a national scale, a review of data indicates schools are exceptionally safe when compared to other public locations (Mayer & Jimerson, 2019). Mayer and Jimerson cite that multiple-casualty homicides occur more frequently in restaurants than in schools, but do not receive the same amount of attention or scrutiny as those in educational settings (2019). Mathematically, it is estimated that an individual school will have a shooting occur once every 6,000 years on average (Borum et al., 2010). However, over the previous 25 years, the United States has been the site of more mass shootings than the rest of the world combined (Rogers, 2019), which can often serve to shape public perceptions.

While incidents of school violence in America goes back many decades, the modern era of safety incidents is often traced to a 1979 school shooting at Grover Cleveland Elementary School in San Diego, CA. In that incident, a 16-year-old female killed two adults while wounding eight students and one police officer (Devos et al., 2018). Since that time, highly publicized shootings at Columbine, Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newton, Connecticut, and in Parkland, Florida have resulted in a wide range of study, analysis, and best-practice planning. The shooting and subsequent media coverage at Columbine, where 13 students were killed and 21 students were wounded (Devos et al., 2018), renewed discussions regarding components of school safety, perceptions of fear, and how to best ensure students are protected while they are in school (Altheide, 2009).

Research on school safety has most often focused on active shooting incidents (Astor et al., 2010). However, these are only one example on the full continuum of school safety concerns. School safety includes schooling, academic efficacy, and community risk factors.

Safety extends beyond misbehaviors and physical aggression to include school climate, academic engagement, and meeting student and family needs (Mayer & Cornell, 2010). In addition to physical safety, intellectual and emotional safety are key components in establishing a safe school environment. The combination of all factors leads to a definition of school safety as a "total school climate (that) allows students, teachers, administrators, staff, and visitors to interact in a positive, nonthreatening manner that reflects the educational mission of the school while fostering positive relationships and personal growth" (Bucher & Manning, 2005, p. 56).

A sense of safety and the ability of students and staff to have a positive perception of their environment impacts the ability of administrators to successfully achieve their organizational mission. Students that have concerns about the safety of their school environment are more likely to be absent from school and those attending are more likely to experience fear while present (Furlong & Morrison, 2000). The Youth Risk Behavior Survey indicates nearly five percent of secondary students have missed a day of school in the previous month due to safety concerns (Kann et al., 1998). A growing number of students aged 12 to 19 fear being attacked or harmed while at school (Furlong & Morrison, 2000).

The 1978 report *Violent Schools-Safe Schools: The Safe School Study Report to Congress*, has been referenced as an early effort to include school violence as a broader topic in American modern society (Mayer & Furlong, 2010). Mayer and Furlong suggest news coverage of school shootings in the 1990's have impacted public perception, stating that a lack of shared understanding as to the definitions of school violence led to an inability to "accurately and reliably (gauge) the overall safety status of American Schools" (How safe are our schools?, 2010, p. 16). Media coverage of traumatic events, which is now consumable via traditional and social media in real-time, has impacted perceptions to the point where the general public fears

that children's lives in their own community are at risk on a daily basis (May, 2018). Regardless of the fact that data does not support the conclusion, over half of parents with school-age children and three-fourths of secondary students have the belief that a school shooting could take place in their own educational environment (Juvonen, 2001).

Studies by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Department of Justice, and the U.S. Department of Education Research have identified the difference between safety components that are perceived to positively impact school safety and those that actually have an identifiable impact (U.S. Departments of Justice and Education, 1999). These efforts can lead to recommended action steps that communities and school districts may implement. The Federal Commission on School Safety's final report (Devos et al., 2018) included multiple recommendations to prevent, protect, and mitigate against safety threats, as well as how to be respond and recover when incidents do occur. The commission cited issues related to bullying, mental health, communication, discipline, and firearms as key prevention strategies. Crisis training and response, the use of law enforcement, physical building security, and crisis mitigation were also identified as necessary to ensure the safest possible environment (Devos et al., 2018).

The Federal Commission on School Safety's study aligned with a growing body of research being conducted by private and educational researchers. This information is being used by educational administrators who recognize the increasing awareness that students and parents have regarding safety and who seek to implement safety improvements (Sprague & Walker, 2010). Sprague and Walker indicate that though schools remain among the safest public environments in America, no location is immune from the potential for an incident to occur (2010). Schools are able to reduce risk when key protective factors are utilized, such as positive

school climate, inclusionary values and practices, high levels of student participation and parent involvement, and school-wide conflict resolution strategies (Sprague & Walker, 2010). However, school safety efforts generally fail when three factors are not recognized: the interrelationship between academic achievement, learning difficulties, and antisocial behavior; focusing on the behaviors of individual students, rather than known issues regarding antisocial behavior and under achievement; and not understanding that school climate is a causal factor that should be taken into account in safety planning (McEvoy & Welker, 2000). Understanding these issues when designing and implementing safety strategies can result in a positive impact that benefits students, adults, and communities (Sprague & Walker, 2010).

Perceptions of Other Major Stakeholder Groups

While violent incidents in U.S. public schools have declined since the early 1990's, the public has not become less fearful that a harmful occurrence will take place in schools (Bachman et al., 2011). Stakeholder opinions are a critical factor in the assessment of whether a school is considered safe. Schools that are labeled as unsafe are perceived to lack structure, have unclear behavioral expectations and consequences, are poorly supervised, and are not well designed or maintained (Sprague & Walker, 2010). Sprague and Walker also note that schools considered to be safe are viewed as nurturing, have clear and high expectations, reflect a high level of connection between students and staff, and are physically well maintained (2010). Lacoe (2016) indicates there is a strong relationship between schools that are perceived as safe and higher levels of student achievement and attendance.

Perceptions of Students

Modern research on school safety perceptions began with the 1995 National Crime Victimization Survey, where almost 7,000 students age 12-19 were polled as to their attitudes on the safety of their educational environment (Garofalo, 1979). Results indicated that systems of law in the school setting, such as the implementation of known and consistent rules and consequences, resulted in lower perceived disorder. However, more recent research on the presence of physical building security measures, such as metal detectors, locked doors, and the presence of security guards, led to more perceived stress and disorder (Bachman et al., 2011; Mayer & Leone, 1999). Borren, et.al. (2011) indicated that students may feel less safe in schools that implemented extensive hardening strategies.

Recent research on perceptions of school safety confirms a shift in attitudes regarding visible safety measures. Such measures have previously been associated with unsafe perceptions, but their increased frequency in schools today are now seen as making schools safer (Connell, 2018). Researchers indicate the public visibility of violent events magnified by media coverage (Altheide, 2009) has resulted in over half of students in the United States expressing concern about safety (Rogers, 2019). Increased visibility of measures that directly address such concerns have now resulted in heightened awareness regarding school safety (Connell, 2018)

Consistencies regarding safety perceptions have been identified in research. Previous experiences where a student has been the victim of a violent act serve to influence safety perceptions for all student ages and genders (Borren et al., 2011; Connell, 2018; Garofalo, 1979). A higher perception of safety results when trust exists between student and adults within the school (Mitchell et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2018). Researchers have also noted that frequent

disruptions or minor misbehaviors, such as bullying, are critical factors for students when considering perceptions of school safety (Skiba et al., 2006).

Perceptions of Educators

Researchers have found educators hold a higher level of confidence in the safety of schools than students (Rogers, 2019). Administrators, teachers, and other adults that work in the educational environment are in a position to form unique opinions about school safety. These individuals often spend the greatest amount of time within the school setting. As such, they are the individuals tasked with considering the potential for school violence and assuming primary responsible for ensuring safety (Rogers, 2019). The results of multiple research studies indicate this is a factor why educators often rate their school as being safer than their students do, due to the fact that the adults are charged with oversight of student behavior (Borren et al., 2011).

Educator attitudes regarding perceptions of school safety have evolved in the previous two decades due to highly publicized school violence events. Prior to the 1999 school shooting at Columbine, a study indicated that only 20.5 percent of educators felt that violence in schools was a big or very big problem (Astor et al., 1997). Results of recent educator studies indicated the threat of a school shooting is the greatest perceived threat to student safety, even though other in-school safety incidents such as physical education accidents are just as likely to occur (Ewton, 2014). To best address safety concerns, educators feel attention must be given to school climate in addition to simply focusing on building or technological improvements (Rogers, 2019). This focus can provide a more inclusive approach beyond hardening of the physical

environment. Such approaches include the need for increased visibility and connection with students, which provides the best cultural environment to reduce poor behavior (Lindle, 2008).

Tennessee educators indicated high satisfaction rates regarding perceptions of safety in the 2019 Tennessee Educator Survey. Ninety-four percent of Tennessee educators felt they were safe at school (Tennessee Department of Education, 2019). No district in the First Tennessee CORE Region recorded a perception of safety level under 90 percent. On average, 94.86 percent of educators across the First Tennessee CORE Region stated they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement they felt safe at school (Tennessee Department of Education, 2019).

Ongoing research indicated that though educators feel relatively safe in their schools, improvements should be pursued. Improved building security has been identified as a critical safety need, as well as increased attention to the mental health and psychological needs of both students and adults (Sprague et al., 2002). While addressing gun violence is often seen as a key focus and a primary cause of concern (Rogers, 2019), educators indicated overall school culture change as the primary vehicle to accomplish safer schools. Sprague et al. (2002) indicated educators believe lack of resources is the primary barrier to improved safety.

Perceptions of the Public

Public perception regarding safety is often derived from communication from media sources (Altheide, 2009). Ongoing media attention following the 1999 Columbine High School shooting in Littleton, Colorado served to create an impression that schools were dangerous places for children and adults. This resulted in a cultural fear that all schools were unsafe (Altheide, 2009). Subsequent anxiety led to long-term perceptions that were not based the on statistical reality of what was actually occurring inside America's schools. It drove communities

and decision-making bodies to enact policies with unintended consequences that actually worsened the safety environment (Kohn, 2004). Researchers have referred to this phenomenon as creating a moral panic, where sensationalism of any ongoing school safety incident is used to further a political aim or create a perceptual narrative that is not necessarily aligned with reality (Lindle, 2008).

Results from a 2014 study reinforced this perception, as parents identified a school shooting as the biggest perceived threat to student safety (Ewton, 2014). The same study indicated that parents felt less confident in the safety of their child's school than did school administrators. Ewton identified the likelihood of disease and theft as other major perceived threats to safety (2014). Parent concerns regarding weapons on campus were also identified as a major concern in a 2019 survey of school administrators. Half of those surveyed indicated fear regarding the threat of gun violence taking place in their school or surrounding community (Rogers, 2019). Additional research has been suggested to determine if such a perception is potentially based on a rise in youth violence over the past 40 years, regardless of the fact that such an increase has not occurred in the school environment (Lindle, 2008).

Components Contributing to School Safety

Multiple components have been identified as impacting perceptions of school safety. The effective presence and implementation of these items have served as benchmarks in assessing the safety of schools. These elements can be categorized in the following subsets: school climate; student-focused issues; psychological; preparation; education/knowledge-building; environmental (physical); technology; policy development; weapons; law enforcement; effective leadership, and health and wellness.

School Climate

Researchers have identified the ability to develop and foster a positive school climate as a significant contributor to the establishment of safety. Such a climate can result in lower levels of safety incidents due to increased acceptance and improved relationships between students and adults (National Association of School Psychologists, 2015). Beyond simply reducing or preventing incidents from taking place, cultivating a positive climate requires a long-term commitment to a sense of connectedness between all school stakeholders. Bucher and Manning (2005) define a positive school climate as one that, "allows students, teachers, administrators, staff, and visitors to interact in a positive, nonthreatening manner that reflects the educational mission of the school while fostering positive relationships and personal growth" (p. 56). This whole-school focus prioritizes educational and social goals and fosters the understanding that all stakeholders must be involved to fully meet the needs of the entire population.

Specific focus areas have been identified that indicate the existence of a positive climate and sense of safety. Positive indicators, such as students enjoying school and feeling like students and teachers respect each other, have been shown to make students feel safer (Kitsantas et al., 2004). Authoritarian components, such as setting clear expectations and enforcing them with predetermined consequences, are seen as beneficial (Fisher et al., 2017). Safe climates are ones in which individuals are connected and demonstrate care and concern. Potential trouble in such climates is identified and addressed with respect at early stages, before escalation can occur. An awareness exists that violence does not productively resolve situations of conflict and a safe and open flow of communication between students and adults will lead to the full meeting of social-emotional needs (Bonanno & Levenson, 2014).

Administrative and school improvement strategies can help in developing a positive school climate where culture and respect are fostered. Communication can best occur between students and adults that are fully connected. Major components of such strategies include accurately assessing the current climate, placing an emphasis on effective communication by both students and adults, preventing and intervening when bullying occurs, and involving the entire school community in, "…planning, creating, and sustaining a … culture of safety and respect" (Fein et al., 2004, p. 13). Partnerships focusing on climate are a critical feature in educational environments perceived to be safe (National Association of School Psychologists, 2015). Partnerships between students, educators, and community can then lead to the implementation of vital safety components such as effective needs assessments, crisis response plans, and approaches to physical and psychological safety (National Association of School Psychologists, 2015).

Facilitating a safe school environment is a key protective factor for administrators and all educational stakeholders due to the fact that almost 25 percent of students have felt unsafe at school in the past month, (Williams et al., 2018). Safe school environments are ones where all students have a voice, build trust, and emphasize effective two-way communication. In such environments, issues do not escalate and can be prevented from occurring. This supports student well-being and allows for higher levels of achievement to be realized (Benbenishty & Astor, 2018).

Student-Focused Issues

Contemporary research on the perceptions of school safety has frequently focused on the specific issues facing public school students in modern society. The ways these issues manifest

themselves in student behavior can greatly impact the school climate. Recognizing and identifying the effect these issues have on individual students and the larger educational culture can have significant influence in determining the perception of school safety.

Bullying has been identified as a key component in determining the relative safety of the school environment. Increased levels of bullying result in lower perceptions of safety (Williams et al., 2018). Depending on the student grade level, between one-quarter to one-half of students have been bullied in the school setting (Williams et al., 2018) and 15 percent of students indicated they have been cyberbullied in the past 12 months (Mayer & Jimerson, 2019). Bullying is often categorized in four distinct subtypes: physical, verbal, relational, and cyber (May, 2018). Bullying is generally defined as negative behaviors that occur repeatedly over time, involving a "real or perceived imbalance of power, with the more powerful child or group attacking those that are less powerful" (Ericson, 2001, p. 1). While often perceived as a type of common childhood play behavior, it can result in a culture of fear and lack of safety if left unaddressed. Bullying has led to more significant and prolonged violent behaviors (Arnette & Walsleben, 1998) while increasing the fear of crime and the likelihood that a student will bring a weapon to school (Keith, 2018). Schools that take an integrated approach to addressing bullying issues have the greatest likelihood to positively impact the school culture for both bullying students and those that are bullied (Juvonen, 2001). Juvonen indicates the most effective improvement efforts to combat bullying include physical surveillance, policies that outline school response and consequences, the implementation of instruction-based anti-bullying programs, and counseling that involves conflict mediation and resolution (2001).

Understanding the background, influences, and experiences of children has been identified as a key component in addressing safety and security in schools. Singular or

rudimentary solutions to address such issues are problematic at best (Cornell & Mayer, 2010). Cornell and Mayer indicate youth identified as high-risk are likely to experience multiple conditions that cannot be sufficiently addressed with such an approach (2010). Developing a deeper understanding of the range of negative effects that may cause undesirable behaviors in children, such as exposure to adverse childhood experiences, will allow educators to formulate the multi-disciplinary approach necessary to address physical, emotional, and psychological needs (Bethell et al., 2017). Such an approach toward student well-being is necessary to best address the needs of at-risk youth that often initiate unsafe behaviors in schools.

Appropriately addressing student discipline issues has also been cited as a key factor in creating safe school environments. This is especially challenging for school teachers and administrators, given the disciplinary issues occurring in schools today. Teachers in the 1940's listed issues such as talking out of turn, chewing gum, and making noise as their top disciplinary problems (Volokh & Snell, 1998). Volokh and Snell indicate today's educators identify student drug and alcohol abuse, pregnancy, rape, and assault among their most significant items to address (1998). School stakeholders often advocate for the use of stricter discipline to address such issues in an effort to increase school safety and decrease school violence (Volokh & Snell, 1998).

Strategies such as zero-tolerance suspension policies have been utilized with mixed results as it relates to perceptions of safety and climate. Schools with high rates of suspensions and expulsions have been perceived as having lower levels of climate satisfaction (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). The implementation of zero-tolerance policies, though commonly adopted by the majority of schools in the United States, has failed to directly result in a reduction in school violence (Borum et al., 2010). Such policies have

faced legal challenges and have resulted in public concerns regarding racially disproportionate application (Gregory et al., 2010). In contrast, discipline measures and school personnel observed to be fair and caring have been found to have the most positive affect on safety perceptions (Hyman & Perone, 1998). Hyman and Perone found that discipline perceived to be overly punitive and unfair has led to a climate that is deemed to be disruptive and may result in increased rates of violence (1998).

Psychological/Mental Health Components

The ability of school administrators and staff to support a climate of positive mental health has been shown to be a critical component of a safe school environment. Schools that establish effective policies and practices that address issues regarding the emotional well-being of students are commonly considered safe and supporting (National School Boards Association, 2018). Such schools ensure psychological issues are identified and treated prior to causing larger problems. Fostering this climate requires administrators to look beyond simply implementing physical improvements or punitive measures and instead take a whole-child approach to social-emotional development. Successful schools utilize a variety of stakeholders, including on-staff and community resources, to provide a range of mental health services that serve to improve student well-being and school safety (Osher et al., Kendziora, 2014). Such services incorporate a multi-tiered problem-solving model that involves a preventative approach "…for all students as well as targeted, intensive supports for students with the greatest needs" (Larson & Mark, 2014, p. 232). Implementing such an approach allows students with identified needs to receive necessary treatment. Other students also benefit due to the inclusive and supportive nature of the overall environment.

School-based psychology professionals are vital in supporting a safe school environment. A culture that focuses on providing evidence-based comprehensive mental health services for students in need has been recommended to improve school safety (NASP, 2018). Creating a fortress-like environment rather than focusing on mental health can serve to decrease the awareness of safety needs and may not guarantee actual safety for students and staff. It is not possible for school administrators to implement physical measures that prevent all possible violence. Attempting to do so has proven to be counterproductive to fostering a sense of student well-being (National Association of School Psychologists, 2015). Supporting and addressing the psychological needs of children positively impacts behavior, climate, relationships, and academic achievement (Demaria, 2013).

Effective implementation of psychological services requires schools to utilize a long-term approach that incorporates a range of emotional, mental, and behavioral supports. Studies indicated less than one-third of students that need psychological supports actually receive such services (Lamberg, 1998). Providing such supports requires a comprehensive strategy that includes prevention, early intervention, and treatment focused on specific student situations (Bruns et al., 2004). It is critical that supports include the development of "pro-social" behaviors such as self-regulation and psychological flexibility. These are present in nurturing environments and necessary for children to internalize so that violent or harmful behaviors do not take place (Biglan et al., 2012). Educators and mental health personnel should note the behavioral characteristics that may forecast potential youth violence. Researchers have identified key categories of risk factors for potential violent acts by youth (Crepeau-Hobson et al., 2005). These include individual acts of violence or substance abuse, family issues such as child abuse, school and peer issues such as bullying, and certain societal-environmental factors

related to violent cultures and norms (Crepeau-Hobson et al., 2005). A comprehensive and integrated methodology to identify and address these risk factors serves to support healthy climates where children and adults feel a sense of safety and security.

The presence of the psychological professional is vital to ensure services are provided in a manner that addresses risk factors and focuses on long-term mental health goals. An ongoing collaboration between experts such as school psychologists, school counselors, and community stakeholders serve to best support the goal of a positive mental health climate in the school setting (Pires et al., 2008). Ongoing focus by school system personnel and outside service providers is needed to improving relationships. Pires et al. (2018) indicate such relationships allow for shared goals and the establishment of structures to provide student services. These supports are necessary to respond to crisis events and should be embedded within the school culture at all times. Doing so allows for the identification of potential threats and facilitates the meeting of student needs (Rappaport, 2013). It is imperative that counselors receive professional development in both individual and group crisis intervention to support this work (Daniels et al., 2007). Such professional learning may be financed through the use of Title II funds provided through the Every Student Succeeds Act (NASP, 2018). This learning will best prepare educators to provide a range of services such as individual and group counseling, training in social interactions, peer mediation, and crisis response (Crepeau-Hobson et al., 2005). A safety net of support can be created by establishing a continual connection with a trained and qualified adult within the school rather than outsourcing treatment away from the educational setting (Lamberg, 1998).

The lack of access to the psychological professionals that play a key role in supporting a unified strategy for appropriate and effective mental health services is problematic for many

school districts in the United States. Correcting this deficiency will necessitate a long-term focus by school districts to plan for and implement programs of service. Issues to be considered include staffing, financial allocations, and student enrollment and needs (NASP, 2018). The addition of services should be approached utilizing a systematic method to engage available community partners, identifying the most critical student needs, and strategically directing financial resources at those issues. Doing so will provide mental health interventions that create an environment where students are more capable of effectively dealing with potential stressors and are able to avoid participation in unsafe behaviors (Armstrong, 2019).

Collaborative Focus

The ability to establish and foster an environment where communities collaborate with the school is a key component of schools that are perceived to be safe and secure. Students are more likely to feel safe in cultures where wellness and community are emphasized and a focus on positive social relationships and humane learning environments exist (Noguera, 1995). Positive relationships are critical and serve to define school connectedness, were students and educators focus on the presence and quality of interactions between all stakeholders (Volungis, 2016).

The psychological well-being of students increased when connections occur between adults and students that result in the development of hope and personal strengths (Volungis, Preventing school violence through establishing school connectedness, 2008). Connectedness and caring relationships between student and adults served as a contributing factor to students making positive behavioral decisions (Resnick et al., 1997). With American school-age children spending approximate one-third of their waking hours in school (Hofferth & Sandberg, 2001),

forging these relationships in the school setting is a critical component to positive self-development. Such relationships lead to the development of more effective coping strategies and reduced occurrence of violent acts (Brookmeyer et al., 2006). The level of connectedness within the school setting reflects the amount of communication between students and adults. Brookmeyer et al. (2006) indicated such communication serves to impact the overall climate, especially related to student aggression and behavior.

Administrator approaches to safety have continued to evolve with additional study, awareness, and reaction to violent events. Extending the focus on connectedness beyond the school walls and prioritizing the relationship between the school and local community partners has become more frequent. A cooperative approach is necessary to address the full scope of components needed to adequately address safety needs (Lewis et al., 2000). Collaborative communities will take the approach that school safety is not solely the responsibility of educational staff. Lewis indicated for safe environments to occur, a partnership of agencies must exist (2000). This partnership often includes law enforcement, government, civic and faith-based groups, and parents. Officials with the National Association of School Psychologists recommended systematic planning involving multiple stakeholder groups to best address violence prevention (2015). By including all stakeholders in aspects of school management, concerns can be readily expressed and an inclusive approach to problem solving, program development, and policy development can be utilized (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2001).

It is vital to engage with parents, who often hold the key to ensuring positive behaviors by students. Parents may unknowingly train their children to behave aggressively. The behavior of at-risk students may be improved by engaging with and providing social learning and

management supports to parents (Larson & Mark, 2014). Larson and Mark indicated collaborative efforts that mirror the supports provided in school provide the best chance for safe behaviors (2014). Though continual access to parents can be problematic for school staff, effective parent partnerships aligned to school and student goals provide the best opportunity for healthy and safe school environments. Such engagement reflects the belief that parents are critical partners in the safety of students (NASP, 2018).

Knowledge-Building on Prevention Programs

The ability of a school community to establish and maintain an ongoing professional focus on safety education is a key component of a safe school environment. Developmentally appropriate programs grounded in evidence-based practices that target risk behaviors over an extended period of time have proven to be most successful (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2001). Strategic data-driven program selection is critical to ensure success. Research on commonly implemented programs such as the Drug Abuse Resistance Education (D.A.R.E.) has revealed a statistical insignificance when it comes to improving student behaviors (Gottfredson et al., 2003). Efforts that have been proven to be most effective in maintaining safe school environments include those that focus on comprehensive social skill developments, effective communication, and sustained implementation. Given the unique nature of each school environment, it is imperative that school officials recognize no individual professional learning program will be universally successful. The success of education-based violence prevention programs depends on the ability of school personnel to align school goals and guiding tenets with the programs available and to sustain efforts necessary to impact behavioral root causes (Volokh & Snell, 1998).

In addition to focusing on the continuing education of students, the professional development of school staff is a critical aspect of maintaining a safe school. The United States Government has provided Title II federal funds to school districts to finance professional development efforts (Birman & Porter, 2002). A national coalition of educational mental health professionals, school administrators, school resource officers, and parent organizations developed *A Framework for Safe and Successful Schools* in 2013 (NASP, 2018). Key recommendations in this framework suggested the use of such federal funds were vital to provide "targeted and relevant professional development for school staff and community partners addressing school climate and safety, positive behavior, and crisis prevention, preparedness, and response" (NASP, 2018, p. 8). The U.S. Department of Education has also recommended ongoing staff training in crisis response and the use of tabletop exercises (Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2007). Such training allows staff members to learn and implement best-practices in establishing safe and orderly environments, as well as how to best support and lead students should a safety incident occur. A staff continually educated on techniques for preventing violence and fostering safe learning environments is more likely to positively affect students (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2001) and contribute to the overall safety of the school environment.

To maintain a safe school environment, it is critical to develop an understanding of previous local and national safety incidents and the growing body of evidence-related violence prevention programs. School stakeholders must be able to access such information and apply that knowledge in the school setting. This will best allow for the prevention of unsafe incidents, as well as knowing how to best respond should an incident take place (Greene, 2005). As research has continued to evolve regarding school safety, an emphasis on the development of

evidence-based prevention programs has emerged. Such programs include ones that focus on equipment and policies, peer-led programs, and threat assessment and crisis response. However, as Greene indicated, the most effective areas of focus are in programs emphasizing psychosocial programs, school discipline, and school climate strategies (2005). Ensuring that students and staff are fully informed on these high-impact strategies can provide the opportunity for the most inclusive and informed approach to school safety.

The ability to identify early warning signs in student behavior is a key component to effective prevention. The U.S. Department of Education indicated that while it is not always possible to foresee unsafe acts before they occur, developing a close relationship throughout the educational community places stakeholders in the best possible position to observe potential indicators (U.S. Department of Education et al., 2013). Indicators may include social withdrawal, excessive feelings of isolation and/or rejection, being a victim of violence, feeling picked on, having low interest in school or low school performance, expressing violence in writing or artwork, having uncontrolled anger, exhibiting patterns of impulsive and chronic hitting and bullying, having a history of discipline problems or violent behaviors, being intolerant to differences, having prejudicial attitudes, abusing drugs and alcohol, being affiliated with a gang, possessing or having access to firearms, and making a serious threat of violence (Dwyer et al., 1998).

Identifying indicators at an early age has been noted as a key prevention component. Such indicators can be recognized and addressed as early as elementary-age (Thakore et al., 2015). Longitudinal research studies have indicated students identified as being isolated and also exhibiting aggressive behaviors in first grade are statistically more likely to display violent behaviors when they reach adolescence (Flannery et al., 2003). It is necessary for schools to

develop a systematic approach for comprehensive program implementation to most effectively plan for identification and intervention. The prevention plan that provides the most positive impact includes a clear identification of the problem, identifies the intermediate goals to be reached, specifies the steps necessary to reach such goals, and identifies the resources necessary to move forward (Larson & Busse, 2012).

Over four percent of United States students in grades 9-12 have brought a weapon to school at least once in the past 30 days (Snyder et al., 2019). With the understanding that weapons are being brought into schools, it is vital for school stakeholders to prioritize prevention education that will keep violent events from taking place. A proactive approach by school administrators that focuses on preventing a violent act from occurring is preferable to one where punishments take place after the fact. A study of over 200 violence prevention programs found that programs classified as universal, selected/indicated, and comprehensive were most effective in reducing unsafe actions such as fighting, intimidation, and negative interpersonal behaviors among high-risk students (Wilson & Lipsey, 2005). Understanding such research and embedding that knowledge throughout the school culture builds necessary organizational capacity. Without this capacity, effective implementation of safety strategies will be difficult (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 2002). Increasing stakeholder knowledge regarding prevention strategies allows for an understanding of the comprehensive deterrence strategy needed for implementation. When present, this culture serves to reduce the number of students exhibiting problem behaviors and improves the overall climate of the school (Sprague & Walker, 2007).

Preparation

The capacity and commitment of all school stakeholders to adequately prepare for potential safety issues is a necessary school safety component. Schools that pursue a comprehensive strategy focusing on planning, completion of safety audits and analysis, threat and risk assessment, and using data to make critical safety decisions are best able to establish a sense of preparedness (Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2007). One such area includes establishing appropriate and effective communication platforms and strategies that allow educators to best provide timely and targeted information during a time of crisis. Though it is impossible to predict exactly when or where an incident may take place, addressing aspects of safety planning and preparation can best inform staff and students regarding decision making about time, resources, and areas of focus (Landrum et al., 2019). A fully integrated and comprehensive approach that includes attention to preparedness is required for the most effective level of crisis planning and response (Reeves et al., 2008).

The development of an appropriate comprehensive response plan is a necessary safety component for school districts and individual schools. Engaging a wide range of stakeholders in this process at the classroom, school, and district level allows for an inclusive community-wide approach to planning (Furlong et al., 2005). As Furlong et al. (2005) stated, developing a problem-solving approach that includes problem identification, analysis, response, implementation, and evaluation will allow this team to systematically address the safety climate and maximize the potential for success.

Assessing and responding to a crisis in a timely manner, engaging with the correct needed emergency personnel, and quickly securing school sites in times of emergency should be a part of any effective response plan (Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2007). Needed

resources should be accessible, as well as the ability to communicate to various stakeholder groups such as staff, students, parents, and the community. Plans should be designed with the understanding that every situation is unique and should presume that students and staff will require flexibility in response (Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2007). Experts also noted that it is critical to have a regular plan review and evaluation process by all stakeholders to achieve long-term implementation success (NASP, 2018). Creating a process involving educators, emergency personnel, physical and mental health experts, and custodians allows for input from multiple areas of expertise. Doing so will allow for all aspects of the response plan to be expert-reviewed and improved (Brunner & Lewis, 2005).

Developing a plan that includes an assessment of the current environment is a critical step in the safety preparation process. The Tennessee Department of Safety and Homeland Security developed a physical security assessment guide that serves as a yearly component of safety planning for all Tennessee schools (Tennessee Department of Safety and Homeland Security, 2019). The assessment focuses primarily on the physical elements of schools and their surrounding property, such as building components, HVAC, and facility entry. Its completion is required to receive annual state safety funds available to all Tennessee Schools (Tennessee Department of Education, 2020). Using such an evaluation provides a shared understanding of potential strengths and vulnerabilities of school facilities and a structure for personnel to better comprehend the role physical structures can play in determining the safety of the school. The crime prevention through environmental design philosophy further reinforces this concept, emphasizing the role analyzing school design plays in effecting school safety (Walker & Eaton-Walker, 2000).

Safety assessments should evaluate the physical condition of the school, technology, and security infrastructure. This will serve to identify needed security improvements and minimize potential liabilities that may exist (Gillens, 2005). An audit of safety-related policies and operational administrative protocols will assist in measuring if proper consideration has been given to establishing clear procedures that support safety. In addition to identifying potential administrative improvements by policy makers, this will help ensure all stakeholders are prepared to appropriately respond should an incident occur (Schwartz, 2013). Such assessments are required for schools to receive Title IV funding from the federal government and serve to identify measurable goals for improvement through evidenced-based interventions (Sprague & Walker, 2010).

Components of effective preparation also include analysis of prior safety-related events that have occurred in similar educational environments. This approach emerged in the American education culture following the 1999 shooting at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado (Birkland & Lawrence, 2009). Birkland and Lawrence cited extensive media coverage of the event and its aftermath, in which 12 students, one teacher, and both shooters were killed, as a key factor in how Americans view the scope and severity of school violence (Birkland & Lawrence, 2009). Since that time, a growing body of evidence and analysis of other school incidents has emerged to inform school staff and policy-makers as to procedures and policies necessary to increase school safety (Altheide, 2009).

The U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Secret Service have led efforts regarding safety event analysis, providing expertise related to previous shooting events such as the one at Columbine. Such analysis attempted to identify trends that can inform decision making by educational stakeholders (Bonanno & Levenson, 2014). Resulting data indicated over 70 percent

of individuals that commit an attack in the school setting report being threatened by another prior to committing their own violent act, and the majority of attackers experienced prior mental health issues, including depression or suicidal tendencies (Vossekuil et al., 2002). For local school personnel, this is critical information for decision making and proving appropriate resources for proactive safety strategies.

Preventative interventions by have been implemented to support safe school environments, resulting in a positive impact on student behavior and the avoidance of violent incidents. A qualitative research study of schools where shooting incidents were averted indicated that preventative efforts were found to be the most frequently instituted of all safety measures (Daniels et al., 2010). Daniels et al. (2010) indicated programs such as anti-bullying curriculums had significant positive impact on climate and culture. The proactive implementation of positive behavioral interventions for students who chronically misbehave can result in sustained positive impact (Gagnon & Leone, 2001). The implementation of preventative efforts has resulted in other positive environmental impacts. A review of efforts by the Cleveland Metropolitan School District led to improved learning conditions and attendance and a reduction in behavior incidents such as fighting, harassment, and disruptive behavior (Osher et al., 2014). Such efforts included the implementation of social-emotional learning programs, student support teams, and student planning centers.

The coordination of efforts of all school stakeholders is vital to ensure the greatest potential impact on safety. Involving teachers, mental health professionals, and administrators allows for the most systematic and integrated approach to comprehensive discipline programs (Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2007). The engagement of all individuals in identifying the early warning signs of violent behavior by students allows for preventative interventions to

occur. While educators may utilize a variety of preventative interventions, including strategies such as behavioral support plans, anger management training, and positive reward systems, it is critical to understand that no one system will work universally in all situations. The collaboration of the stakeholder team ensures the most effective preventative strategy can be determined. This occurs through the identification of root cause, the required level of intervention needed to be successful, and the individual characteristics of the child (Dwyer & Osher, 2000).

A collaborative approach provides the platform for effective risk assessment of behavioral and physical factors. The presence of an all-inclusive method in identifying and assessing potential risks serves as an indicator to the school community regarding the commitment to and emphasis on maintaining a safe school environment. This improves security and establishes the school as a safe place, which can lead to increased commitment and resources by policy makers and higher levels of perception and confidence (MacGregor, 2004). The involvement of all stakeholders also allows for the most holistic review of risks, identifying all potential liabilities and vulnerabilities to set priorities for improvement (Bomber, 2013).

The assessment of behavioral risk seeks to identify the potential for threats so that appropriate interventions and supports may be provided. Researchers have sought to categorize risk factors so that such interventions can support educators in directing resources to the appropriate students or groups (Crepeau-Hobson et al., 2005). Crepeau-Hobson et al. (2005) have categorized four major risk factors through the assessment process: individual, family, school and peers, and societal-environmental. The greater frequency with which these risks occur, the more likely an individual is to exhibit violent behaviors. The implementation of a risk

assessment process allows educators to more effectively understand the individual student's experiences when developing and implementing interventions.

The evaluative processes frequently utilized in the schools involves student profiling, the use of guided professional judgement, and the implementation of automated decision making (Reddy et al., 2001). Reddy et al. (2001) defined profiling as attempts to identify students likely to commit a violent act based on behaviors exhibited by those that have committed unsafe acts in the past. Individuals assessing such students will utilize items such as checklists or governmental resources to guide decision-making on when to intervene (Dwyer et al., 1998). Formulas and pre-determined standardized criteria, including discipline data and event frequency, are used to develop thresholds for response with automated decision making. In each such case, the risk assessment utilizes a framework to assist stakeholders in making data-driven decisions, such as knowing when to intervene and when to provide student supports.

Ongoing risk assessment of the physical school environment is also identified as a centerpiece of comprehensive school safety. Three of the most critical areas identified for analysis are access control, video surveillance, and communications (Marcella, 2019). Such analysis should address who has access to the school environment, how that environment is being monitored for risk and dangerous behaviors, and how critical information is shared with stakeholders throughout the school community. Key support organizations such as the Partner Alliance for Safe Schools and the Secure School Alliance have been developed to provide guidance and assessment tools for schools to examine their physical environment (Grace, 2019).

The Federal Emergency Management Agency has developed a framework for schools and communities to utilize when assessing potential risks. The multi-hazard risk assessment process assists schools in recognizing the most potentially impactful threats to the school

environment, providing the information necessary for an effective and comprehensive emergency operations plan (Federal Emergency Management Agency, 2013). Utilizing a hazard and risk assessment document and process, school safety stakeholders identify the types of possible incidents that could occur and categorize them based on probability, the potential negative consequences should the event occur, and the amount of time for potential warning and preparation (Tennessee Department of Safety and Homeland Security, 2010). This guide provides a systematic process for safety teams to utilize in assessing the risks found in each school environment. The process results in a customized approach to addressing current and anticipated safety needs.

In addition to assessing potential risks to the school setting, safety experts indicated the need for threat assessments as a vital part of all comprehensive safety preparation. The goal of such assessment is to "…determine whether a particular student poses a threat of targeted school violence" (Fein et al., 2004, p. 44). This requires school personnel and law enforcement to establish a strategic partnership that leverages multiple perspectives and areas of expertise. A multi-disciplinary team approach to threat assessment allows for potential issues to be identified, evidence to be investigated and analyzed, and informed opinion determined as to the likelihood that the threat will manifest itself into action (Cornell et al., 2009).

The Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Office of the United States Attorney General have provided resources necessary for schools and communities to develop threat assessment procedures and to intervene when potential danger is identified. The School Shooter: A Threat Assessment Perspective (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2000) and Threat Assessment in Schools: A Guide to Managing Threatening Situations and to Creating Safe School Climates (Fein et al., 2004) have provided relevant research and best-practice steps for educators seeking

to improve school safety. This information assists personnel in identifying threats, understanding the potential risks that are present with these threats, and creating an effective action plan to mitigate potential violence.

Experts in threat assessment have consistently stressed the need for clear and effective communication among all stakeholders throughout the assessment process (Grace, 2019). Grace (2019) identified the ability of all stakeholders to observe and contribute as a key component in identifying potential issues and addressing them before they occur. The sharing and overlapping of information from various perspectives, such as teacher, parent, friends, and staff, creates the most complete picture of a potential threat. Post-event examinations of actual incidents indicates that information was likely available to predict the incident may occur (Fein et al., 2004). Having effective and functioning communication pathways among all agencies provides the platform necessary for collaboration to occur, potentially preventing such tragedies (Helibrun et al., 2009).

Developing and implementing an effective safety drill strategy serves as a key component of school safety preparation. While guidelines for minimum compliance are established through state agencies and legal code, the ability of school administration and students to conduct such drills in an effective and meaningful way will largely determine if safety is improved (National Association of School Psychologists, 2013). School administration and safety stakeholders should systematically identify which incidents are most likely to occur and develop strategies to prepare students and staff to react. The use of discussion-based drills such as workshops and tabletop exercises, and operations-based exercises like emergency and full-scale drills, can provide students and staff the information they need to properly respond to incidents. Such drill events also serve to decrease stress regarding school safety (Zhe & Nickerson, 2007).

The need for data-driven planning and implementation is critical to best ensure development of a climate where continual safety improvement is prioritized. In the late-1990's, concerns were raised by researchers and those involved with school security that appropriate data was not being systematically collected regarding safety events. This lack of data led to a lack of quality analysis and informed policy development and implementation (O'Reilly & Verdugo, 1999). Addressing this lack of comprehensive data has become a priority for safety stakeholders in the following decades. The development of a deeper understating of violence, the behaviors involved, and how policies and practices have impacted rates of violence have become a focal point for researchers seeking to better understand why incidents occur. Though such an information-base is increasing, concerns regarding research credibility indicates the need for continued study and data collection (Astor et al., 2010). This is especially true regarding evidence based prevention programs. National educational organizations representing mental health, school administrators, and parent-teacher organizations have supported this conclusion, understanding the need for safety decisions "…that are rooted in data and include the systematic examination of best practices research…" (NASP, 2018, p. 1).

Environmental/Physical Components

Efforts to address the physical school environment are a priority for both policy makers and school stakeholders. Millions of dollars in grants from the United States government and individual state governments have been provided for addressing physical facility characteristics that contribute to overall safety (MacGregor, 2004). The ability of educators to maintain and make strategic improvements that increase physical safety improves the overall climate (Demaria, 2013). In contrast, physical environments hardened to the point of discomfort may

actually create the opposite desired effect, resulting in increased levels of disorder and unsafe behavior (Mayer & Leone, 1999). A strategic approach regarding facilities and the use of resources is necessary to ensure the safest possible environment can be established and maintained.

The protection of students through physical infrastructure and maintenance of schools has become a focus for administrators and policy makers during the last two decades (Gillens, 2005). These improvements often present challenges related to existing architecture and improvement funding. Older facilities currently in use were not designed with modern-day safety measures in mind. Funding to make such improvements is often limited for local communities. The ability of school administrators to assess such facility limitations and implement strategic, cost-effective solutions is critical to ensure the safest possible environment. Such solutions may involve low or no-cost custodial or maintenance priorities (Bomber, 2013). Bomber identified items such as ensuring landscaping is properly maintained to allow high visibility or if lighting is operational in areas where personnel may be present (2013). Ensuring Occupational Safety and Health Administration policies are being followed has allowed schools to safeguard against hazards while providing a needed layer of protection for students and staff (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2001).

State agencies have supported schools through financial and guidance resources as the awareness of facility needs improvement has increased. This has often resulted in the linking of grant funding to facility assessments. The Tennessee Department of Safety and Homeland Security has initiated a Physical Security Assessment protocol that requires all schools to complete a yearly physical assessment of all facilities (Tennessee Department of Safety and Homeland Security, 2019). This assessment is a prerequisite to receiving Safe Schools grant

funding. School personnel are required to assess physical priority areas, including how the design of the facility should limit pedestrian access, how the perimeter of the campus should be controlled through buffers such as walls or fences, and how signage should identify restricted areas and properly direct individuals to desired pathways (Tennessee Department of Safety and Homeland Security, 2019). Other physical components are designated for ongoing review and improvement such as HVAC controls, windows, and protection of resources such as power and water. Based on the use of this assessment to guide, the State of Tennessee has allocated 20 million dollars for distribution to school districts in FY 2019-20 for facility improvements through the Safe Schools Act (Tennessee Department of Education, n.d.).

Access control is a top priority for United States schools, ensuring the school has limited campus access by automobiles, control of vehicle parking, internal camera surveillance, and detection of intrusions to the school facility (Gillens, 2005). Data compiled by the U.S. Department of Education, U.S. Department of Justice, and the Office of Justice Programs indicated controlled access to buildings during school hours using locked or monitored doors was present in 94.1 percent of United States public schools during the 2015-16 school year (Musu et al., 2018). This represents a 26 percent increase since 1999-2000 and remains the most frequent security measure implemented in U.S. public schools. The Office of Homeland Security also recommended access control, limiting external visitor access to a single monitored entry point and locking interior access points, restricting access to students and staff (Kennedy, 2012). By providing physical barriers such as locked exterior doors requiring staff to monitor, assess, and grant access to the school facility, students and staff can operate in a more secure environment where visitors do not have unapproved entry access.

Technology

The evolution of safety technology since the incident at Columbine High School has provided educational stakeholders a variety of methodologies to address school safety. Physical and operational school technology processes have been implemented to enhance security and reduce the likelihood of unsafe behaviors from occurring. Studies of such technologies have focused on five most-often utilized systems: entry control, alarms, weapon detection, cameras, and recording devices (Garcia, 2003). Other key technologies with extensive implementation in schools include communications systems, motion detectors, and visitor management systems (Grace, 2019).

The use of video cameras is the most frequently utilized technology in United States public schools due to increases in quality and improved pricing (Addington, 2009; Garcia, 2003). Addington identified two major purposes of such systems: to provide a record of events that take place within or near the school and to act as a deterrent to potentially dangerous behavior (2009). Active monitoring of video systems has been found to be limited in scope, as school districts often lack the resources necessary to provide staffing for continual viewing (Volokh & Snell, 1998). However, the presence itself of cameras in schools has been found to have a deterrent effect as well as increasing the perception of security by students and staff. Garcia indicated the presence of cameras is perceived as the most impactful use of technology the in school setting (2003). A recent study by the National Institute of Justice indicates over two-thirds of sampled school districts considered camera systems to be effective or very effective, while 64 percent of districts perceived camera recording systems as effective at preventing on-campus crime (Garcia, 2003).

As safety technology continues to evolve, administrators and policy-making bodies have continued to assess available measures, their costs, and the potential level of effectiveness. The emphasis on controlling access to facilities has been identified as a key best practice by experts such as the Partner Alliance for Safer Schools (Grace, 2019). The ability to control access through the use of technology is seen by stakeholders as a proactive and effective way to secure the school environment. Such technologies include magnetic locking door systems, keycard entry systems, and visitor management systems that scan personal identifications for comparison against sex offender databases. The addition of electronic control devices is a top priority for future spending by school administrators (Garcia, 2003). School are placing increasing significance on the ability of technology to secure the school environment by denying access by unauthorized individuals that could bring harm to students or staff (Green, 1999).

Communication

The ability of all individuals throughout the school community to effectively communicate is vital to ensuring the overall safety of the educational environment. This involves the development of collaborative structures, implementation of preventative measures utilized by students and community, and clear information sharing among all stakeholders during times of crisis. The development and use of a comprehensive communication plan ensures that individuals have the deepest possible level of information while maintaining two-way structures that truly engage participants in the safety process. Key identified benefits to such an approach include shared agreement on safety planning, broader input into the current reality and needed improvements, and the ability to vest all stakeholders in safety efforts (Buckner & Flanary, 1996).

The capacity for all stakeholders to collaborate in the development of a safe educational culture is rooted in the facilitation of sound communication practices and philosophies. The ability of the entire school community to connect and communicate in a purposeful and effective way is central to the establishment of a safe environment. Leaders should consider multiple contributors in doing so, which include components such as the use of common vocabulary, the identification of multiple communication strategies to share information, the creation of a communications plan, and the identification of the individuals who are to lead the work (Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2007). By focusing on these key issues, stakeholders are able to trust the availability of information and fully understand items of importance. The establishment of trustworthiness ensures the highest level of collaboration with parents and the community, leading to safer schools (Sprague & Walker, 2010).

Extending trusting communications pathways to the student-level is also critical, as students indicate they are more willing to provide information about safety when they feel that information will be handled confidentially (Stone & Isaacs, 2002). The use of anonymous reporting platforms is an effective way for administrators and staff to learn about issues regarding crime, bullying, and potential threats. Anonymous tip lines have become a top need for school administrators who indicate that providing students an accessible online platform or toll-free phone number to report issues is an essential tool for school safety and security (Brunner & Lewis, 2005). For these to be truly effective, students must have confidence in the anonymity of the platform (Barras & Lyman, 2000) and trust that shared information will not be used in retaliation. Involving students in the design and implementation of anonymous reporting solutions has shown to increase buy-in and improve the frequency of use of such systems (Dwyer et al., 1998).

The ability to effectively facilitate a communications plan during an incident is also recognized as a key safety component. Doing so informs school stakeholders of vital in-the-moment information and helps to ensure the community has confidence the situation will be handled with competence. Though the vast presence of communications devices in the possession of students and community members makes it unlikely that an initial crisis communication will arrive through formal school channels, providing timely, accurate, and frequent information can help to minimize fear and establish calm (Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2007). Utilizing a variety of traditional, social media, and electronic call/email/texting platforms allows various stakeholders to receive information using their preferred methodologies. This ensures the greatest possible absorption of information throughout the school community (Grace, 2019).

Media management is also seen as a key feature of an effective communications plan. How school safety is perceived will largely be shaped by how the media interacts and reports on school issues (Lewis et al., 2000). By developing effective media relationships and providing timely and accurate information, schools can best inform stakeholders and ensure the school's commitment to transparency and communication is maximized.

Policy Development

Administrators, policy makers, and schools play a key role in the establishment of a culture of safety through the development, approval, and implementation of safety policies. As no set of policies are considered effective in all settings, procedures that address the individual needs of a school or community are recommended (Volokh & Snell, 1998). Such policies are likely to originate from two main sources: governmental policy makers such as federal or state

legislatures and local school boards of education, and district school administration. Strategic data-driven decision-making processes are recommended to determine priorities, with consideration of the resources necessary for successful implementation (NASP, 2018). Alignment of priorities provides the greatest opportunity for both governmental and school policies to positively affect perceptions of safety.

Elected officials play a key role in safety policy development at the federal, state, and local level. This often occurs through the creation of specific laws designed to address areas of focus. The 1994 Gun-Free Schools Act addressed the issue of weapons in schools (Act, G. F. S., 1994). The act required individual states to pass laws expelling students for no less than one year for bringing or possessing a firearm on school property. This act is often considered as the initial legislative mandate for zero-tolerance policies in schools (Borum et al., 2010). More recent federal regulations have primarily focused on policies that provide funding for violence prevention in schools. Such acts include the Safe Schools Act (Tennessee Department of Education, n.d.) and the 2018 Students, Teachers, and Officers Preventing School Violence Act (Devos et al., 2018). These grant-based funding programs require local schools to focus on federal priorities such as physical school improvements, mental health services, and evidence-based violence prevention programs.

State legislators have great influence on school safety operations through allocation of funding and the passage of laws that directly impact the operation of schools. Codes in Tennessee address a broad range of safety-related issues, including attendance, bus safety, possession of drugs on school property, and zero tolerance policies (Tennessee Code Annotated: Free public access, n.d.). As high-profile gun-related school safety incidents have taken place, state legislatures have reacted with new legislation. Laws related to weapons occurred following

the tragedy at Columbine. This reflected a desire by state legislators to seek code-driven solutions to the problem of school violence (Birkland & Lawrence, 2009). These solutions have included a range of proposed legislation, such as data-driven laws enhancing suspensions for zero-tolerance behaviors, and the unproven theory of arming school teachers, which has little research-base to support and which a majority of parents oppose (Rajan & Branas, 2018).

Though federal and state legislatures may enact law, the most direct influence on individual schools lies with local school boards of education. These bodies possess the ability to impact school priorities through the setting of a budget and by passing specific board policies to be executed by schools (NASP, 2018). Boards of education enact policies that reflect required state and federal laws and bring a local perspective to the decision-making process. School boards review local safety situations and data and apply that information to specific identified problems (Birkland & Lawrence, 2009). As a result, solutions customized to the specific safety needs of a school or community can be identified and implemented with the support of a broad community stakeholder base.

The ability of administrators and staff to implement policies and procedures that reflect a culture of order and discipline at the school level is critical to maintaining a culture of safety. These may include policies regarding discipline and behavior, as well as procedures for school operations. The most effective school-based strategies are those identified as having a high level of clarity, are clearly communicated, and are implemented in a manner that is consistent among all students (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2001). Care should be exercised to ensure that safety procedures are not over-emphasized, resulting in potentially unintended consequences. Over-implementation and focus on safety procedures such as active-shooter drills, use of metal detectors, and police presence can unintentionally reflect an unsafe culture of

disorder (Addington, 2009). Fostering such a culture may actually lead to incidents of violence that such measures seek to minimize (Mayer & Leone, 1999). In contrast, by consistently and uniformly enforcing behavioral polices regarding bullying and fighting, school administrators can implement a positive multi-disciplinary approach that most effectively intervenes and supports the positive development of students (NASP, 2018). Doing so allows all stakeholders to contribute to the facilitation of a concerned culture that focuses on trust and positive behaviors (National Association of School Psychologists, 2015).

The implementation of zero-tolerance policies have impacted school culture. School administrators seek to deter other serious incidents by issuing aggressive consequences such as automatic long-term suspensions and expulsions for incidents such as drug possession, gun possession, or weapon offenses (Borum et al., 2010). Lawmakers and educational governing bodies have advocated for and legislated such measures, providing a structure for school personnel to aggressively react to unsafe actions. The National School Boards Association advocated for such policies, stating zero-tolerance punishments will cause students to "…realize that violence is not acceptable within the schools" (Lewis et al., 2000, p. 14). However, as these punishments have been implemented, researchers have found unintended consequences due to the link between increased suspensions/expulsions and higher school drop-out rates. A higher overall risk may be created due to a lower level of structure and lack of supervision when students are removed from the school setting and placed in the general community (Juvonen, 2001). Juvonen found that such actions place students in greater contact with other similarly suspended students, (2001). It is for this reason some behavioral experts recommend a level of flexibility for school administrators in implementing zero-tolerance policies, due to their knowledge of individual students and situations. This local expertise provides the best

opportunity for each school community to address situations in a way that follows state and local code and reflects the desired safety culture (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008).

Response to Weapons

Attitudes toward violence and weapons in the school setting, as well as the response to such incidents, are perceived as more serious and stringent than a generation ago (Astor et al., 1997). An act that may not have previously been considered dangerous due its level or lack of frequency may now be considered actionable, given the current climate and emphasis on school safety. Even persistent occurrences of low-level misbehaviors can contribute to a negative perception of safety (Cornell & Mayer, 2010), leading to the need for decisive action. This is especially true regarding the presence of weapons on campus. Though students indicate the primary reasons for having a weapon at school are for self-esteem, acceptance by peers, and protection (Volokh & Snell, 1998), the administrative response to such an act in the current educational environment is likely to ignore student motives. Such a response will likely focus on definitively establishing and enforcing the expectation of a weapon-free school environment.

With almost 200 school shootings having taken place in the last two decades (Cox & Rich, 2018), the threat of gun violence is the top safety concern among school administrators (Rogers, 2019). While less than one percent of student homicides or suicides take place at school (Brener et al., 1999; National Association of School Psychologists, 2013), the prioritization of ensuring schools are weapon-free is consistently identified as a primary recommendation in ensuring overall safety (Benbenishty & Astor, 2018). For school stakeholders, establishing, communicating, and enforcing policies and procedures related to this

issue serves to increase feelings of safety and best ensure the academic and social success of students.

Though legislators and locally elected policy makers have influenced the issue of weapons in schools with new laws and policies, school administrators and staff have been identified as the key individuals in addressing the school environment. This is accomplished by "…responding to immediate threats; managing the problem by alleviating stress and communicating with the public; and creating conditions to prevent and respond to school" incidents (Rogers, 2019, p. 25). An understanding of the physical and psychological impact of a threat of a weapon on a school campus is critical. The communication of the mere threat among the school community is enough to cause damage to the perception of safety, regardless of whether or not the threat is credible or if a weapon is actually brought into the school environment. (Benbenishty & Astor, 2018). Schools that utilize a cross-disciplinary approach to the threat of or the appearance of weapons in schools can positively impact culture. This can be accomplished by involving all stakeholders in the development of policies, communication strategies, and shared commitment to ensuring the school environment remains void of weapons and that situations are decisively addressed should they occur.

Involvement of Law Enforcement

Since the occurrence of highly visible safety incidents such as the 1999 shooting at Columbine High School, educational policy makers have sought solutions to address the fear exacerbated by the extensive media coverage that infers schools are unsafe for students and staff. When studies immediately following the shooting at Columbine indicated over half of parents felt their children were unsafe at school (Carroll, 2007), the inclusion of uniformed law

enforcement officers into the school setting was seen as an immediate and appropriate response. A 25 percent increase in the number of schools with an officer present occurred in the four years following the shooting at Columbine High School (Addington, 2009). The number of police officers in schools has continued to rise in the years since, with as many as 30,000 officers currently estimated to be patrolling schools in the United States (Javdani, 2019).

School administrators and law enforcement have worked during the past two decades to formulate the appropriate roles and responsibilities for the school resource officer position that will produce the greatest positive impact on school safety. These responsibilities have concentrated on three primary focus areas: law enforcement, providing law-related education, and mentoring students and stakeholders (Myrstol, 2011). Law enforcement activities have concentrated on monitoring and enforcing legal code while providing deterrence to criminal acts such as violence and drug activity. Myrstol indicated the continual presence of law enforcement also reduces response time should a violent act occur on the school campus and allows for ongoing investigation of criminal occurrences (2011). Officers have also served as the prime source of legal education related to drug abuse and emergency response and preparedness (Javdani, 2019). This role as a keeper of order, content expert, and educator has positioned the resource officer to serve as a counselor to students and staff, maintaining stability within the school and acting as a key mentor and model of positive behavior (McDevitt & Panniello, 2005).

A full understanding of the needs and climate of the school has been identified as a key component in successfully implementing a school resource officer program. An effective partnership between school district stakeholders and the local law enforcement agency provides the best opportunity for shared agreement on issues such as the scope and expectations of the officer, required training, purpose, reporting, and evaluation (National School Boards

Association, 2018). The ability of all parties to understand the risks and potential negative consequences are critical. Educational researchers have noted a natural conflict that could exist when integrating the more rigid closed structure of law enforcement with the open and complex structure of education (Jackson, 2002). Recognizing and addressing this dichotomy and the potential for students and staff to interpret the presence of the school resource officer as an indicator of increased criminality is needed throughout the implementation process (Theriot, 2009).

The relatively low rate of violent incidents in schools has made it difficult to accurately measure the success of school resource officer programs. This has often created difficulties for policy-makers who seek empirical data to justify budgetary and staffing decisions, but are often left to utilize perception and anecdotal observations of school resource officers themselves as a justification for such allocations (McDevitt & Panniello, 2005). As the volume of SRO programs has increased on a national level, evaluators of such programs have begun to seek additional metrics. Such metrics often attempt to measure more rare safety incidents such as school shootings and routine daily occurrences such as bullying, drugs, and assault (Addington, 2009).

Current research on the true effectiveness of school resource officers is inconclusive. Though their presence in schools has resulted in increased perceptions of safety, the infrequency of major safety incidents and the lack of extensive scientific research have resulted in incomplete conclusions in determining if placing officers in schools reduces violence (Addington, 2009; Maskaly et al., 2011; Theriot, 2009;). Studies have produced conflicting results. Some researchers have found no correlation between resource officers and reduction in criminal incidents (Javdani, 2019). Other researchers indicate a connection between school resource

officers and decreased assault and violence (Jackson, 2002; Larson & Mark, 2014). While studies generally indicate support for SRO programs by adults, students are often less supportive, citing increased mistrust between peers and law enforcement (Juvonen, 2001; Larson & Mark, 2014) and the increased fear that criminal activity will take place (Maskaly et al., 2011).

Crisis Response

The ability of an educational community to respond to crisis events is a factor in the perception of a school's safety. Individuals at the National Association of School Psychologists, the United States Department of Education, and the Department of Homeland Security have established protocols for schools to use in the development of crisis response plans (Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2007; Reeves et al., 2008; Tennessee Department of Safety and Homeland Security, 2010). When developed by multi-disciplinary teams and integrated community partnerships, such plans ensure that physical and psychological issues can be addressed when a crisis occurs (National Association of School Psychologists, 2015). Having these plans in place projects a high sense of preparedness to stakeholders and allows school personnel to more appropriately respond should an event occur.

Safety experts such as those at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommended key response plan components to appropriately respond to the wide range of potential incidents (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2001). A written plan of action must be developed that assigns roles and responsibilities, anticipates potential scenarios, and addresses needed channels of communication. The Centers for Disease Control recommended that appropriate preparation to implement the plan occur, including securing of needed supplies, establishment of procedures for reunification, and anticipation for communication needs (2001).

Short and long-term responses and access to services should be identified, especially focusing on mental health needs. Potential barriers to an adequate response should also be taken into consideration, including issues such as lack of access to needed supplies, lack of appropriate response preparation, and impacts outside the control of response participants (Reeves et al., 2008).

Effective crisis preparation requires a structured approach to planning and implementation. Such an approach results in clearly understood and accessible processes and procedures when an event occurs (Schwartz, 2013). By involving a wide range of stakeholders such as law enforcement, school administrators, mental health professionals, parents, and first responders, it is possible to adequately plan a response to the widest potential range of events. This team must implement procedures for issues dealing with physical health, security, and assessing and serving mental health needs. Procedures should also include adequate opportunities for practice and review of protocols. Doing so will provide response clarity and the necessary levels of support needed for appropriate decision making in a time of crisis (Brock et al., 2016).

Best-practice recommendations regarding crisis response have evolved as incidents have occurred and been added to the knowledge-base regarding school safety. Key advancements include a growing reliance on a multi-level organizational approach to crisis response, which includes multiple stakeholder groups such as parents and social service agencies (Greene, 2005). The type of response utilized in the shooting at Columbine High School and Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, which focused primarily on a shelter-and-hide reaction, is being replaced with more proactive response paradigms, such as the aLICE model (Rogers, 2019). This approach provides teachers and students a variety of response options depending on the

individual situation, including alerting other students and staff as to the crisis occurring, locking down, informing others as to the changing nature of the event, aggressively countering against the physical threat, or evacuating the scene if safe to do so.

Safety experts emphasized the need for clearly defined and understood roles to ensure the best possible crisis response communication and implementation. By establishing distinct roles and responsibilities with a clear chain of command, mission-critical outcomes can best be accomplished (Reeves et al., 2008). Reeves et al. (2008) suggested responsibilities include: an incident commander to coordinate the overall response; an official to evaluate and implement safety matters through coordination with appropriate agencies; a mental health coordinator to manage psychological issues; and a public information officer to oversee all communications-related issues, such as coordinating with first responders, communicating updated information with all stakeholders, and interacting with media. Meeting the communication need is especially crucial, providing the necessary links between educators, safety officials, and community (Sprague & Walker, 2010).

Effective Leadership

Researchers and content experts pointed to the critical need for effective leadership structures to ensure the safest possible educational environment. The establishment of strong leadership provides clarity regarding planning and facilitation of safety operations and serves as an indicator to the community that maintaining a safe and orderly climate is a priority. The use of representative multi-disciplinary leadership teams provide the best structure to identify and respond to safety needs (Larson & Mark, 2014). A collaborative leadership structure featuring a high level of expertise and engagement can be facilitated by involving a variety of stakeholders

groups with knowledge in necessary areas such as mental health and law enforcement. Such a structure also allows for multiple perspectives from groups like parents, students, and staff, (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2001).

The ability to define and articulate the leadership structure is vital to ensuring the school community has confidence that prevention and response to safety concerns will occur. The development and communication of such a structure provides clarity to stakeholders regarding the individual levels of responsibility for various facets of the safety plan, including operations, logistics, finance, and information (Reeves et al., 2008). Officials with the Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools have identified key elements of these structures, which include the need for defined safety leadership at levels from state government to local leadership (2007). School leaders are encouraged to involve appropriate stakeholders in planning, developing the resources and frameworks necessary to facilitate the plan, and working to ensure the entire school community knows, understands, and commits to the plan (Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2007). School leaders have the greatest opportunity to establish and facilitate safe environments through the utilization of such a strategic leadership approach.

Physical Health and Wellness

Maintaining the health and wellness of students and staff within the educational environment has been a continual focus for administrators and policy makers, as such an environment is vital to the overall success of the school. A climate of good health ensures the continual operation of the school due to adequate staff attendance. The ability of students to achieve socially and academically is predicated on a foundation of good physical health (Maslow, 1943). Health efforts by educators and students have traditionally focused on topics

such as adequate physical activity, food and nutrition, and drug and alcohol education (Wechsler et al., 2000). With students and staff spending 1,300 hours per year in the school environment, policy makers have focused on the developed of procedures that emphasize health, safety, and welfare within the school setting to maximize student success (Jones et al., 2003).

Addressing and mitigating for the effects of influenza has become an area of recent focus for school administrators, as increased student and staff absenteeism impacts the achievement of students and the ability of the school to function most effectively. Extended student absences due to illness has been linked to lower achievement in core subject areas, with study results indicating reducing absenteeism by ten instructional days would lead to gains of 5.5 percent in mathematics and 2.9 percent in reading (Aucejo & Romano, 2016). Staff absenteeism due to illness may result in school closures, if districts lack the adults to safely operate services such as transportation, school nutrition, and academic classrooms. Tennessee Code Annotated authorizes school district directors to initiate such closures based on the recommendation of local health authorities or after a review of relevant absenteeism data (Tennessee Code Annotated: Free public access, n.d.; Office of School Safety and Learning Support, 2009). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has developed guidance to assist school administrators and staff in maintaining clean environments that may reduce absenteeism by reducing the spread of influenza. Such guidance recommends that school staff focus on correct and frequent disinfecting of frequently touched surfaces, safely use cleaning products, and dispose of waste properly (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018).

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020 introduced a new health and safety concern to administrators, students, and families. Initial reaction by educators to the emergence of the virus included increased education, behavior protocols, and cleaning processes

within the school setting (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). On March 16, 2020, Tennessee Governor Bill Lee requested that all schools in Tennessee close as soon as possible in response to the growing health crisis (Tennessee Office of the Governor, 2020). This order was extended by Governor Lee for the duration of the 2019-20 school year on April 15, 2020 (Tennessee Office of the Governor, 2020). The lack of direct student contact resulted in widespread efforts by educators to provide a continuity of services related to remote academic instruction, mental health supports, and nutrition during the closure period (Tennessee Department of Education, 2020). School administrators and staff have placed an increased emphasis on the development of processes and protocols to ensure the safest possible environment when students and staff return to school for in-person instruction in fall 2020, understanding the level of concern regarding lost instruction, school cleanliness, and general unease felt by students and families (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020).

Other Major Influences Impacting School Safety

Multiple additional issues, individuals, and factors impact the perception of safety in the educational environment. These factors, which are often outside the control of the school administration or students, can serve to enhance or adversely limit the ability of a community to create and maintain schools that are perceived to be safe. It is necessary for all stakeholder groups, including school staff, students, parents, community, law enforcement, and first responders, to work collaboratively to ensure the safest possible environment while mitigating such factors (International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2009).

Policies enacted by elected officials, funding, and legal factors can greatly impact the collective efforts of stakeholders. The ability of state legislators and local school boards to effect

school safety is significant, given the statutory power held by elected officials tasked with the legal authority to development and pass policies that control school operations (Beckham et al., 2011). Officials with the National School Boards Association stressed the need for legislative priorities that focus on students' physical, social, and emotional well-being while taking into account best practices, legal, and liability considerations (National School Boards Association, 2018). This included a recent focus on policy development regarding issues of mental health, character education, and crisis intervention. Such policies serve to prioritize the collaborative efforts of communities and school staff to address the concerns of the rule-making bodies.

The ability of elected officials to allocate funding to areas of priority can greatly impact school safety. The power over financial distributions allows elected officials to align resources with legislative priorities, often outside the control or expertise of the individuals tasked with the day-to-day implementation of such measures. Officials with the National Association of School Psychologists stressed the need for data-driven funding decisions made in consultation with school district directors, administrators, and stakeholder groups (2018). Such collaboration can ensure those ultimately responsible for safety implementation have the ability to successfully meet the needs of each school environment. The level to which this collaboration occurs will impact the individualized response necessary in successfully addressing each unique safety situation utilizing whatever funding is available (NASP, 2018).

In addition to financial allocation decisions made by policy-makers, the mere presence or lack of funding itself can have significant impact on the ability to maintain safe school environments. The ability to provide a level of financial resource that aligns with capital improvement and safety plans is a key factor when considering facility maintenance costs and opportunities for operational safety improvements (Gillens, 2005). The use and implementation

of support processes such as the Department of Homeland Security's Physical Security Assessment and the Federal Emergency Hazard Association's Hazard and Risk Assessment Worksheet allows for data-driven assessments of the physical and operational safety setting (Tennessee Department of Safety and Homeland Security, 2010; Tennessee Department of Safety and Homeland Security, 2019). Analysis of this information provides all safety stakeholders an opportunity to create a realistic understanding of the funding necessary to maintain the safest possible environment.

The availability of funding provides the opportunity to impact safety through increased innovation with the purchase of emerging items such as technology. The current school safety product marketplace is an approximately 2.7 billion dollar industry (Cox & Rich, 2018) and represents a variety of evolving options from which schools can meet individual needs. Cox and Rich identified a range of available products, including ballistic whiteboards and classroom doors, as well as facial recognition software and metal detectors (2018). The most effective use of local, state, and federal funding can be determined by using a cost/benefit analysis rather than investing in such measures based on fear, political influence, or incomplete information (Addington, 2009; Gillens, 2005). However, such an analysis and impact strategy becomes immaterial should funds to purchase such improvements be unavailable to local school community.

Issues of legal protections and policy implementation must also be taken into account when considering safety policy and its impact on safety perception. Regardless of best intent or desired outcomes, school administrators and policy makers must understand that certain legal statutes exist to protect the rights of all stakeholders. Educators are legally governed by laws and statutes at multiple governmental levels, which outline their rights and responsibilities regarding

school safety (International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2009). Students possess due process and free speech rights which must be considered when developing and implementing school safety policies (Lewis et al., 2000). The National School Boards Association recommended ongoing consultation with law enforcement and school attorneys to ensure these rights, as well as privacy laws such as the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, are not violated (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), 20 U.S.C. § 1232g; 34 CFR Part 99, 2018; National School Boards Association, 2018).

Chapter 3. Research Methodology

Introduction

A qualitative research study utilizing a phenomenological approach formed the basis for this study with the purpose of identifying, describing, and understanding the perceptions of administrators of public school districts in northeast Tennessee regarding school safety. Perceptions of administrators regarding safe school environments and the factors that contribute to safe school environments were identified utilizing an interview-based approach to data collection. Utilizing the data generated through interviews with public school administrators throughout northeast Tennessee, an understanding was determined as to the elements of effective safety, as perceived by the individuals tasked with ensuring that environment on a day-to-day basis. This understanding evolved throughout the data-gathering process as the researcher interacted with the people and perspectives involved (Charmaz, 2014).

The researcher identified the district administrators responsible for overseeing and developing district emergency operations plans. These individuals served as a data source to best describe the components in each district's emergency and safety operations through interviews and a review of district emergency operations plans. They served to identify the key administrative individuals involved in the design and facilitation of district plans. District-level administrators in twelve northeast Tennessee districts were contacted, utilizing district-appropriate approval and communications procedures, to facilitate one-on-one interviews. Participants used an electronic online video streaming methodology to complete a semi-structured interview process. Data for the study was attained from 12 participant interviews. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis, with each no more than 60 minutes in

length. Member checking with two participants took place to extend responses regarding safety perceptions.

Review of data took place concurrently during the interview process by coding the interview transcription, utilizing an initial line-by-line and incident-with-incident format, followed by a focused coding summary. The goal of such review was to identify the overall perceptions related to school safety, as well as the individual components that were perceived by district administrators as contributing to a safe environment. Additionally, the researcher sought to identify the components that are present or missing and that in doing so, create an unsafe perception.

During the study process, it was important to maintain, monitor, and record a high level of detail related to the research rationale, data sources, and the described environment of the research participants. This allowed for a more meaningful context for the study audience and provided for the highest potential for trustworthiness of the study results. It was critical to adequately describe the individuals that were involved in the study, as the participants' perceptions of school safety were shaped by the specific environment in which they work. For instance, an administrator in a setting with plentiful resources may have more structural safety supports in place than a colleague in a school with fewer resources. Or, regardless of the school safety structure, if a facility is located in a surrounding environment with safety concerns, a perception of risk may be affected. Deeply understanding the individuals involved in the study helped the reader draw a more informed conclusion regarding the study's credibility.

Research Questions

The primary research questions central to this study were:

1. What are district-level administrator perceptions of safety in a school district?
2. What factors do district-level administrators associate with a safe school district?
3. What factors do district-level administrators most associate with an unsafe school district?
4. What do district-level administrators identify as needs for the improvement of safety?
5. What do district-level administrators perceive as future safety issues at the school and district level?

Qualitative Design

The use of a qualitative research method based in phenomenological design provided the best possible framework to identify, develop, and provide the deepest possible understanding related to perceptions of school safety. Through the utilization of a systematic data collection process via direct interviews, theory was able to be discovered, as is the hallmark of qualitative social research (Urquhart, 2013). The utilized research method was centered on the concept that theories regarding school safety perceptions would be generated based on interviews with individuals who have similar experiences related to safety processes and situations, which were then reviewed to determine theories that gave explanation to those perceptions (Creswell, 2007).

By focusing on how the researched individuals had experienced safety situations and formed their perceptions of school safety, it was possible to add additional research questions to move the study forward. This process further defined the study's theory and provided a fuller

explanation regarding administrator perceptions. Through the analysis and deciphering of collected data through the qualitative research process, connections were generated that resulted in new understandings and theories that produce new ideas regarding safety components (LaRossa, 2005).

Theories related to administrator perceptions were able to emerge and guide the study's progress by utilizing a continuous data collection process. The construction of such theories regarding school safety rose from the interactions, perceptions, and experiences of the studied participants, and can serve to inform future best practices by administrators and staff (Charmaz, 2014).

Role of the Researcher

Though nuanced differences exists when considering the role of the researcher in qualitative research utilizing an objectivist or a constructivist approach, key common factors with all research were found in this study of school safety (Charmaz, 2014). The researcher interacted with the data and participants in a way that served to assist in the emergence of concepts and categories that revealed theory related to school safety. Data was observed, recorded, and analyzed by the researcher to establish how the observed behaviors and perceptions aligned with the emerging theory. The researcher gathered information in a way that was localized to the scope of the study, analyzing and identifying emerging patterns and themes throughout the course of the study process. Finally, the researcher took care to maintain the trustworthiness of the findings by addressing issues of credibility and dependability, so that emerging theories could be generalized while also maintaining the safety and confidentiality of all participants (Chesebro & Borisoff, 2007).

Ethics

The researcher sought and received approval from the East Tennessee State University (ETSU) Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to beginning interviews with research participants and obtaining documents related to the research topic. Approval to conduct research was obtained from representatives from each participating school district. The researcher included the approval letter from the IRB in Appendix A. The letter requesting participant consent is included in Appendix B. The information outlining participant informed consent is included in Appendix C.

The researcher created documents communicating the purpose and structure of the research study, which were distributed to all prospective participants. The participant consent letter (see Appendix B) served to describe the population, purpose, setting, and methodology utilized to obtain study data. The participant informed consent document (see Appendix C) described the purpose, duration of the study, procedures to be utilized, and possible risks to participants. Each document described the participants' right to decline participation or revise his or her responses at any point during the duration of the study.

Setting

The interviews with district administrators took place utilizing an online electronic video streaming methodology due to safety reasons and for the convenience of participants. Interviews took place from September 9-17, 2020 at the convenience of the interviewees.

Sample

A geographical and personnel scope was identified to obtain a representative sample of Tennessee public school district administrators. By selecting a proportional sample that was representative of the region, the researcher was able to study the perceptions and attitudes in a focused manner with a clearly defined participant group. By gathering data from district administrators, the researcher was able to gain valuable insight from the individuals most directly tasked with managing school and system operations and facilities in ways that best ensure the ultimate goal of student learning, a key leadership outcome goal identified by the American Association of School Administrators (Hoyle et al., 1985).

The researcher limited the study to the districts in the First Tennessee CORE Region, a collection of 17 public school systems located in the furthest most northeast portion of Tennessee (Resources for Districts: Tennessee Core Districts, n.d.). Ten of these school districts are governed by county boards of education, with seven districts governed by municipal boards of education. Participating districts were selected in a manner that proportionally represented the county and municipal districts in the region. The study's research model was structured to require seven county and five municipal districts to be included in the data gathering process.

The districts in the First Tennessee CORE Region identified for the study were selected to produce a range of representative data from districts that very in geographic size and location, student and administrator population size and demographics, and perceived available resources.

Within each district, an individual was identified to participate in a semi-structured interview, based on his/her administrative role that placed them in a position of most direct responsibility and involvement with district safety. Interviewed individuals included district directors and district-level administrators responsible for the oversight of administrative

operations and day-to-day operation of the district's Emergency Operations Plan. By researching and obtaining the perceptions of these identified individuals in First Tennessee CORE districts, the researcher was able to gain valuable insight as to the most representative district perspectives of school safety across northeast Tennessee.

Interviews

Twelve research interviews took place between September 9, 2020 and September 17, 2020 utilizing the Zoom online electronic conferencing system. Online interviews were conducted utilizing COVID-19 safety protocols to ensure researcher and participant safety. Following completion of the online interviews, all participants were provided a copy of their transcribed interviews for review. Participants were offered the opportunity to make revisions or changes to the record to better communicate their perceptions or views on the study topic. The participants were identified throughout the study report by sequential numbering, based on the order in which their interview took place.

The interview process took place as outlined in the interview guide created by the researcher. Open-ended interview questions were designed to elicit the participants feelings, thoughts, observations, and perceptions on issues related to school safety with the understanding that such a process best allows insights and theories to emerge, based on the space and time provided to the interviewee (Charmaz, 2014). Interview questions were utilized that sought to generate data to ascertain the administrators' general perceptions regarding safe school environments and the factors involved in creating that perception. Additionally, information was collected to identify the specific components that led to feelings of safety, as well as the presence or lack thereof of components that led to administrators feeling unsafe.

Through the interview process, participants were asked to articulate their beliefs in three major areas: the components that are currently in existence in their educational setting that make their environment safe, the components that exist that make their school unsafe, and the items that do not exist that would make their environment safer. An interview guide was designed to elicit responses from administrators in a variety of cultural, geographic, and resourced districts from across the region. Additional questions were utilized by the researcher to gain additional data as to the individual experiences that administrators had personally experienced in their environment. Questions were utilized to measure how awareness and knowledge of safety-related events outside of the research participants personal experience has formed or altered their perception of their own environment related to safety. It was critical to identify and assess how such perceptions and experiences have altered administrative practice in their environment or created areas of focus or study for potential future action, policy change, environment modification, and procedural adjustment. Questions were utilized related to how perceptions have been formed or altered by professional learning and contacts and interactions with local, state, or federal safety experts. Interviews also included questions regarding how processes and policies of authorities such as local Boards of Education and state or federal policy-making bodies have affected safety perceptions, as well as how funding or lack-thereof has impacted the safety environment, thus forming or altering participants' perceptions.

The facilitation and execution of this interview process was centered on a phenomenological approach that pursued data with theoretical plausibility, direction, centrality, and adequacy in mind. Utilizing this designed interview process allowed the researcher to collect information from the participants' experiences, assess that information for its plausibility, and then group it in a way to identify themes and tentative categories. Through such a data

collection and review process, a theoretical base and central theme was defined that emerged from the interview process (Charmaz, 2014).

The researcher established a maximum length for interviews of 60 minutes. This was done to not only provide for a systematic process for each interview that allowed for both the full development of interviewee thought and expression of perception, but also to emphasize the need for proper pacing and interview focus. The interviewer provided positive feedback to the research subjects throughout the data gathering process, asking relevant follow-up questions based on provided responses or when further explanation or answer development was warranted or desired by the researcher. Positive verbal and non-verbal feedback was provided by the researcher throughout the interview, including responses such as eye-to-eye contact, affirmative head gestures/nods, and short verbal affirmation of the respondent's responses. The researcher also took note of verbal and non-verbal communication provided by the interview subjects during the data gathering process, including non-verbal physical gestures, vocal intonations and inflections. Additional notation was made regarding other researcher perceptions during the interview process, such as the interviewees' sense of physical and emotion comfort or discomfort.

Interviews took place via online/electronic conferencing to ensure the highest level of safety and comfort for the participant and the greatest depth of interview response. These sessions were from 45 to 60 minutes in length, largely determined by the participant based on the length of their response to predetermined questions and if such responses elicited follow-up questions from the researcher. All interviews were recorded using electronic methods to ensure the greatest level of accuracy in collecting and transcribing interview data. The electronic recordings of interviews, as well as the subsequent written transcripts, were stored in a password-

protected cloud-based storage system to ensure the highest level of confidentiality and security, while remaining readily accessible to the researcher for playback and analysis.

Data Management

All electronic files containing participant interview data, including video files and interview transcripts, were maintained within a password-protected cloud-based storage system. Electronic versions of district emergency operations plans were also secured using this same file storage system.

Measures of Rigor

In order to establish and maintain credibility and trustworthiness throughout the study, precautions were necessary throughout the design, research, and data analysis process. Ongoing verification of trustworthiness during the study was necessary, rather than waiting to the end of the study, to identify and adjust for potential threats. Due to the potentially highly emotional nature of the topic being studied, an awareness of issues with credibility, transferability, and dependability was critical to ensure the most rigorous and trustworthy data and results were generated.

For the highest level of credibility to occur, care was necessary related to the creation and delivery of appropriate interview questions that eliminated the potential for bias and did not lead the interview subject to specific answers. As the study was designed to focus on perceptions, utilizing questions that extended the administrator beyond consideration of likely the most commonly considered issue (such as active shooter) without creating bias was a threat. The

researcher's personal depth of knowledge of safety planning and emergency operations was also a consideration when developing the interview questions.

It was critical to establish appropriate triangulation through the utilization of multiple sample populations. One-on-one interviews with individuals within the researcher's own school district would not have ensured credible results. Interviewing administrators in multiple districts and in multiple environments, both geographically and in various administrative roles, assisted in eliminating potential issues. This served to create a broad sample size that involved engaged and knowledgeable individuals to the study's purpose, which helped to mitigate potential threats.

As additional events occur at the local and national level and schools are forced to adjust to a changing regulatory funding environment, administrator perceptions regarding safety are consistently evolving (Hull, 2011). Such new realities will likely cause a change in school safety perception over time. While this is to be expected on some level, the random occurrence of world events, what those events are, where they take place, and how they are communicated to interview participants, created a shift in administrator perception throughout the study process. Thus, the credibility and dependability of the study were threatened due to factors outside the control of the researcher and administrator participants.

Considering all of these factors, the researcher utilized multiple techniques to best ensure the most credible and dependable results:

- Field testing of the interview guide by district administrators in school districts not included in the study sample
- Use of a uniform and systematic interview structure and process
- Peer review of data and coding by colleagues in the field of educational safety

- Availability of a trained peer interviewer if potential conflicts of interest exists between researcher and participants
- Use of multiple districts from which to collect data
    - Multiple geographic locations within northeast Tennessee
    - Use of both county and municipal school districts
- Use of multiple administrator types from which to collect data
    - District Director of Schools
    - Assistant Superintendent/Directors
    - Directors/Supervisors of Coordinated School Health
    - District Directors/Supervisors
- Detailed and accurate transcription of all interviews
- Ongoing and final review the by the researcher's dissertation committee

Data Collection Procedures

The process of qualitative data collection involves a series of interrelated activities to identify, sample, collect, and record data for analysis (Creswell, 2007). To initiate this research study, district administrators were determined to be the key individuals necessary to provide useful data that had the most direct involvement with and impact on safety. Once individuals were identified, contact was made and approval for permission to perform research was requested with the individual responsible for academic research at each of the selected districts. Approval of the research study design and process was also requested and granted by the East Tennessee State University Institutional Review Board (IRB). Study participants were notified of the study structure and format, ensuring that participant confidentiality would be maintained

throughout the study. The researcher-developed interview guide was field-tested prior to formal data collection to ensure the highest possible level of reliability. Field testing occurred with district administrators in school districts not selected for participation in the study. Study participants included 12 district administrators employed by 12 selected districts within the First Tennessee CORE Region. All administrators were classified as district-level. All participants were licensed as administrators by the State of Tennessee Department of Education.

Data collected occurred using two primary methodologies: a document review of key district safety information and through one-on-one interviews. A request for the district Emergency Operations Plan was made to the district administrator tasked with direct oversight of the district's safety efforts. Face-to-face interviews were also conducted, taking place electronically to ensure the safety of participants.

Data Analysis

By its nature, qualitative data can contain great description and serve to provide a depth and personalization that aids in drawing conclusions and establishes cause/effect relationships. However, evaluating such information can be complex, as researchers seek to analyze in a way that reflects credibility, dependability, and replicability (Miles & Huberman, 1994). To do so effectively, this process is one where it is necessary to, "return to the data over and over again to see if the constructs, categories, explanations, and interpretations make sense" (Patton, 1980, p. 339). This continual reexamination and analysis of the data was critical throughout the study to establish and maintain exactness and to ensure that the core emphasis of accurate categorization and connections between data points was maintained (Dey, 1993).

During the course of this qualitative study, multiple data types were collected through the review of written documentation and via human interaction. A review of key safety-related documents included the district Emergency Operations Plan for districts within the studied population. Interview data was collected via electronic face-to-face interviews regarding administrator perceptions of school safety. The process of blending this information through a careful and systematic coding process was vital to establish credibility, gain understanding as to the theories emerging from the data, and draw conclusions regarding the full body of data (Creswell, 2007). By ensuring accurate coding through both a continual review of data and the utilization of a peer-review process, an integration was established that served to meet the objectives of making certain the strength of claim produced by the research and establishing credibility and transferability of the analysis (Bryman & Burgess, 1994).

Electronic transcripts were generated when participant interviews were completed, utilizing the transcribing platform available through the Zoom online electronic conferencing system. The researcher reviewed each interview video to make corrections and revisions to the automatically created transcription, ensuring full accuracy of the transcription document. A numeric coding system was utilized to sort the transcribed interview responses and document review by research question, then into groupings that described the recurring themes that emerged from interview responses. Analysis took place to identify the most frequently occurring themes and patterns related to perceptions of safety. Handwritten notes were taken to record visual and non-verbal responses exhibited by participants during the course of the recorded electronic interviews. These notes were used to supplement the record of transcribed verbal responses in determining items of emphasis and perceived importance to the participant.

Information produced through the study was continually reviewed to identify emerging themes, triangulate data, and establish connections between different data points and formats. Repeat listening of interview recording and review of transcripts were completed to ensure that accuracy was maintained and data interpretation was verified. Such systematic processes served to ensure that the developed theory and understandings aligned with the evidence presented, leading to the most accurate interpretation of categories, themes, and meanings.

Interview Analysis

Coding of the interview responses and document review allowed the researcher to identify themes and commonalities regarding perceptions of safety that emerged during the research process. Initial coding served to categorize data according to generalized administrator perceptions of safety, identifying the overall sense of district security. Additional coding was utilized to identify the specific elements found in school settings that indicated them as safe and unsafe environments, as well as to identify specific future safety needs. Analysis of such coding was utilized to identify the most prevalent perceptions and specific components that emerged from the data collection process, resulting in the identification, description, and understanding of the perceptions of administrators of public school districts in northeast Tennessee regarding school safety.

Study Timeline

The proposed qualitative research study was initiated in August, 2020 with the seeking of IRB approval, followed by initial contact with research coordinators from 12 selected public school districts in the First Tennessee core region. At that time, district Emergency Operations

Plans were obtained, along with permission to interview district administrators from each identified district. Review of district Emergency Operations Plans took place in September, 2020. District administrator interviews took place from September 7-19, 2020. Data coding and analysis took place concurrent with the interview process. Conclusions were articulated through the written draft starting in September, 2020. Study and dissertation completion is anticipated by November, 2020.

Summary

Chapter three presented a review of the study's methodology, research design, and implementation, outlining the qualitative study that utilized grounded theory to determine the perceptions of district and school administrators in northeast Tennessee regarding school safety. It included a summary of the study's design, providing information regarding the processes utilized to gather the necessary relevant data to achieve the goals of the study. The study's research questions were identified, as well as how those questions would guide the research process. The study's participants were identified, in addition to how those participants were selected. Data collection procedures were outlined, as well as how that data was to be analyzed and interpreted taking care to ensure the highest possible level of credibility. Finally, the role of the researcher was defined, to provide clarity as to further define his position and involvement with the research process.

Chapter four will review the data compiled through the document review and interview process, as well as provide an analysis of the collected data.

Chapter 4. Analysis of Data

Introduction

The purpose of the study was to identify, describe, and understand the perceptions of administrators of public school districts in northeast Tennessee regarding school safety. The qualitative study focused on one central research question with four supporting questions.

In responding to semi-structured interview questions, study participants provided information regarding their perceptions of safety in their school districts, the factors associated with safe schools, factors associated with unsafe schools, identified needs necessary to improved safety, and future safety issues at the school and district level. The results of data analysis and research findings associated with this study are found in Chapter 4.

Participant Profiles

The twelve participants in this study were a representative sample of district level administrators in northeast Tennessee. All interview participants currently hold district-level administrative positions with direct oversight of safety related operations in their respective school district in the First TN Core Region. Individuals interviewed included a district director of schools, assistant superintendents/directors, directors/supervisors of coordinated school health, and district directors/supervisors. Seven of the study participants are currently employed in county school districts and five study participants are currently employed in municipal districts.

Administrator #1 is a district administrator in a county PreK through 12th grade school district, holding the role of supervisor of K-6, curriculum and instruction, and federal programs. The district consists of seven schools and serves approximately 2,100 students. The administrator has overseen district safety for 10 years.

Administrator #2 is a district administrator in a municipal PreK through 12th grade school district, holding the role of supervisor of safety and mental health. The district consists of twelve schools and serves approximately 8,000 students. The administrator has overseen district safety for 11 years and mentors safety administrators throughout Tennessee.

Administrator #3 is a district administrator in a county PreK through 12th grade school district, holding the role of supervisor of technology, safety, and communications. The district consists of twenty-three schools and serves approximately 9,200 students. The administrator also oversees all grant applications for the district.

Administrator #4 is a district administrator in a county PreK through 12th grade school district, holding the role of Career and Technical Education director and 504, homebound, and safety coordinator. The district consists of fifteen schools and serves approximately 5,000 students. The administrator has overseen district safety for 11 years and directs all district counseling operations.

Administrator #5 is a district administrator in a county PreK through 12th grade school district, holding the role of director of schools. The district consists of seven schools and serves approximately 2,300 students. The administrator has served as district director for five years, having previously been a teacher and school administrator in the same district.

Administrator #6 is a district administrator in a municipal PreK through 12th grade school district, holding the role of supervisor of attendance, transportation, homelessness, and safety. The district consists of eight schools and serves approximately 4,000 students. The administrator has overseen district safety for 12 years, having previously been a teacher and assistant principal.

Administrator #7 is a district administrator in a county PreK through 12th grade school district, holding the role of assistant superintendent for administration. The district consists of

eighteen schools and serves approximately 10,500 students. The administrator has overseen district safety for 20 years.

Administrator #8 is a district administrator in a municipal PreK through 8th grade school district, holding the role of coordinated school health director. The district consists of one school and serves approximately 650 students. The administrator has overseen district safety for 12 years.

Administrator #9 is a district administrator in a county PreK through 12th grade school district, holding the role of coordinated school health director. The district consists of eighteen schools and serves approximately 6,500 students. The administrator has overseen district safety for eight years.

Administrator #10 is a district administrator in a county PreK through 12th grade school district, holding the role of assistant director. The district consists of twelve schools and serves approximately 4,500 students. The administrator also mentors safety administrators throughout Tennessee.

Administrator #11 is a district administrator in a municipal PreK through 12th grade school district, holding the role of director of special education and Response to Intervention services. The district consists of five schools and serves approximately 2,500 students. The administrator has overseen district safety for one year and also oversees all safety grant applications.

Administrator #12 is a district administrator in a municipal PreK through 12th grade school district, holding the role of coordinated school health supervisor. The district consists of seven schools and serves approximately 2,900 students. The administrator also serves as the district nursing coordinator and has a background in hospital nursing.

Confirmability Matrix

Emergent Themes: Perceptions of Administrators of Public School Districts in Northeast Tennessee Regarding School Safety

Data Source	Research Question #1			Research Question #2			Research Question #3			Research Question #4		Research Question #5	
	Administrators Have Positive Perceptions Regarding the Overall Safety of School Districts in Northeast	Administrators Reflected a High Level of Awareness and a Climate of Preparedness Regarding Safety	Safety Has Improved due to Increased Availability of Funding	Presence of Law Enforcement in the School Environment	Presence of Adequate Preparation and Safety-Related Professional Development	Presence of Adequate Financial Resources	Inconsistent Adherence to Safety-Related Processes and Procedures	Lack of Appropriate Physical Security and Access Control	Age, Design, and Current Condition of Physical Facilities	Additional Safety-Related Training and Professional Development	Additional Resources for Safety-Related Improvements	Mental Health/ Social-Emotional Issues	Technology and Cyber-Security
Administrator #1	X	X	X	X	X	X	X			X	X	X	
Administrator #2	X		X	X	X	X		X	X		X		X
Administrator #3	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X
Administrator #4	X			X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Administrator #5	X			X			X			X	X		
Administrator #6	X			X									
Administrator #7	X	X		X			X			X	X		
Administrator #8	X	X	X				X	X	X	X	X		X
Administrator #9	X	X	X	X	X					X	X	X	
Administrator #10	X		X	X	X			X	X	X	X	X	
Administrator #11	X	X		X	X			X	X	X			X
Administrator #12	X	X		X		X						X	
Document Review Analysis				X	X		X	X	X	X			

Interview Results

Results from participant interviews are included to serve as evidence of emergent themes related to the central and supporting research questions. All study participants were notified of the study's purpose and provided informed consent before taking part in online research interviews. All participants were provided an electronic copy of their interview transcript and given an opportunity to revise any responses to more accurately reflect their perceptions and intended responses. Such revisions were made to two interview transcripts, Administrator #7 and Administrator #9, prior to coding and analysis of interview data.

Research Question 1

What are district-level administrator perceptions of safety in a school district?

(Central Research Question)

Administrators had positive perceptions regarding the overall safety of school districts in northeast Tennessee.

The emergent theme of positive overall district safety is associated with Research Question 1 due to the stated perceptions of district administrators. Administrators stated that they perceived their districts to be safe for students and staff and were environments where continual improvement is prioritized. Administrator #5 reflected this by stating, "On a one to ten, I would probably put us at eight or nine." Administrator #10 expressed a similar statement, saying, "We're probably an eight." Administrator #2 stated, "I feel really, really good. We do the state safety assessments every year. (Though) we didn't do them this year because of COVID… We always feel like we get really high marks." Administrator #6 was pointed in responding when asked if his was a safe district, saying, "Very much so."

Regarding a climate of continual improvement, Administrator #1 stated:

> We're in a pretty good place. We can always do better. There's always things that we can do to improve, but I feel like if somebody notices something that they think we should look at or do, they bring that to our attention and then we do try to handle that immediately if possible, or start having the conversation about … how we can address the issue.

Though having rated his district as an eight out of ten, Administrator #5 emphasized the need to continually monitor and seek ways to improved:

> I think we battle, in some cases, the simple things like teachers propping doors open … You still battle some of the things that you think we really shouldn't be having to talk about … but we still have those handful of teachers that I don't feel like take it seriously enough. It won't happen here. It can't happen here ... I wish I could say I felt like we were a ten. I think we're pretty good and I think we've got a lot more people on board over the last couple of years than before, but we're still probably not exactly where I'd want us to be.

Administrators reflected a high level of awareness and a climate of preparedness regarding safety.

The emergent theme of a high level of safety awareness and a climate of preparedness is associated with Research Question 1 due to the perceptions of district administrators that such an atmosphere exists in schools. Multiple administrators cited an increased awareness by student and staff to issues of safety, as well as how such awareness and a focus on continual training and preparedness improves the safety environment. Administrator #1 stated:

> There's much more awareness. I feel like teachers and school staff in general are much more aware of the importance of school safety as a result of … school shootings. But I feel like, not necessarily just looking at safety as far as … keeping an active shooter at bay, that type of thing. But I feel like, in general, we really take a closer look at how our school setup … and they are safer in general about all aspects.

Administrator #8 summarized this perception by stating, "I feel like it's a lot more safer … because we're much more aware and we concentrate more on that."

A climate of preparedness was identified by multiple administrators when describing the overall safety environment. Administrator #11 commented on ongoing training with both local law enforcement and staff, saying:

> I think we do a pretty good job of being as prepared as we possibly can be. We have a great relationship with our local police departments … We're a small community so it's kind of one of those where everybody has a vested interest … We go through and do as much training as possible with our whole staff. We do the ALICE training every year with them. As much as you can without seeming to panic, I guess, or instilling panic. I think we do a good job of making sure that our faculty and staff are aware of what's going on and kind of prepared for those situations as they arise.

Administrator #12 described an ongoing focus on professional training, citing how safety initiatives are delivered at the school level through collaboration between district administrators and school personnel:

> I think that has been the one big thing … to really push it down to the boots on the ground level, where it works day-to-day … Over the last number of years, every other year, we do something called a safety blitz day. We're allowed to use that as a training

> day for every single person within our district. So that's not just for teachers, because … if you're looking at safety, I need everybody from bus drivers, to nutrition folks, to the aides, to all of those folks … you're trying to catch everybody.

"Administrator #3 summarized the perception of many participants by stating, "You know what? You can't be prepared enough."

Administrators perceived that safety has improved due to increased availability of funding.

The emergent theme of improved district safety due to available funding is associated with Research Question 1 due to the stated perceptions that increased resources have been made available to school districts. Administrators frequently cited the recent availability of additional funding as positively impacting the school safety environment. Administrator #1 commented on the ability to increase safety in recent years due to increased funding, stating:

> I do feel like we've made a lot of improvements along the way, but that has been because we've had some additional funding to be able to help us do that ... We've been able to have some additional funds that we, you know, especially the last four years, that we haven't had before.

Administrators indicated that increases in state and federal funding through the Safe Schools grant and the SAVE Act had made safety improvements possible in a variety of areas that improved safety, including personnel and physical facility improvements. Administrator #9 commented:

> The state has provided more funding through Safe Schools and now we have the SRO funding, the grant funding, for the SROs, which we did not have an SRO in every

> building until last year. And so that has been an improvement for us that we are able to have an SRO on every campus, and that has been a big improvement.

Administrator #10 reflected on physical and personnel improvements that were possible due to increased resources and the need for such continued funding, stating:

> The positive effect of funding has been the ability to upgrade door locks. You know, I used Governor Haslam's last round of school safety money to upgrade our door locking systems. The positive effect has been the SRO grant … Every school has an SRO … It's just we need more. We're one of the 15 distressed counties, so the availability of excess funds is just not here.

Research Question 2

What factors do district-level administrators associate with a safe school district?

Presence of law enforcement in the school environment.

The emergent theme of the presence of law enforcement in the school environment is associated with Research Question 2 due to the stated perceptions of district administrators that such a presence is associated with safe school districts. The most commonly referenced component that district administrators associated with safe school environments was the presence of law enforcement in the school setting, including the ability of the school resource officer to support safety protocols and act as a visible deterrent. Administrator #10 stated, "School resource officers are very critical just in their visibility. You know, having a patrol car sit in your parking lot right out front is a visible barrier to a bad person wanting to do bad things." Administrator #5 noted the positive perception related having law enforcement in schools, saying:

> We have one full-time in every building. I think that has helped. I think the perception of that in the community is … one SRO officer isn't enough. And I agree. You could have more, especially at some of our larger populated campuses. But I still think having one full time is good.

Administrator #3 stated that, "…having these SROs, that's another huge piece that is wonderful."

In addition to the physical presence of the school resource officer, building and maintaining positive relationships between school and the law enforcement community was cited as a key safety component. Administrator #6 stated:

> I think we have had a great relationship with the police department for a number of years, like I said, for the last 10 to 15 years. With our SRO at the middle school while I was there, I got to know a lot of the officers just by the calls that were being made at the middle school, the things that were going on at the high school, and I just kind of really got to see the working relationship between the school system and the police department. I think through that relationship and working on the safety team meetings, we have the best situation that we can have with that relationship.

Administrator #11 discussed the benefits to now having both SROs and local law enforcement in schools:

> We have an SRO in every school now, which before it was just at the high school and middle school. And then they would kind of share the wealth in terms of spreading out to the elementary just as needed. Of course, being a smaller community, I think we have anywhere from, I think it's six to seven officers on duty at any time in the community and the farthest distance between two of our schools is about three miles. So we can make a phone call and have, you know, three to seven officers on site if we need them

> immediately, which is nice. And that's happened before, just whenever we've had any kind of issue, we thought we might need them, they're always here. So that's a huge key for us.

The ability of local law enforcement to perform walk-throughs in schools was also recognized as a key safety factor, as evidenced by Administrator #5:

> Police officers will pop in. And they'll be around campus, sometimes, especially at heavily populated times like drop off in the mornings and afternoons and lunches. They'll have a pretty good presence. So I've really got to brag on our county sheriff's department and our city… police department. They're really good at being visible, especially during those morning, afternoons, and lunchtime. So that's been a big help.

Presence of adequate preparation and safety-related professional development.

The emergent theme of the presence adequate preparation and safety-related professional development in the school environment is associated with Research Question 2 due to the stated perceptions of district administrators that such preparation is a component of safe school districts. District administrators frequently cited preparation and safety-related professional learning by students and staff as a key factor associated with safe schools. Specific items mentioned by participants included drills on operational procedures, preparation on specific safety approaches, and training on issues such as threat assessment.

When asked about specific components that have made school environment safe, Administrator #3 identified the role of the State of Tennessee in providing a variety of beneficial professional learning:

> I think some of their better training has been on threat assessment … That's another thing that I think that's a very important thing … They did a safety specialist course and … that has a lot of stuff that was great. And … they do a lot of things on lessons learned that, again, is that multi-hazard that they have people that have come and have different things happen, like tornados and things like that … We've had them come and train us on this and then later they kind of did it for a whole group is the post-vention training … especially a large-scale incident or a suicide, here's your plan. Things that are very practical are very good and that you can come away with, this is exactly now we're going to handle it … And I think just on tabletop exercises and how to run those to make sure everybody is seeing the whole situation, doing everything that needs to be done.

Administrator #1 referenced the safety enhanced by training related to social-emotional needs:

> I feel like we've had a ton of professional development focus around ACES and mental health awareness, those types of things. I really do think that forced us to look at the problem beyond having a safe building, structures here. But how do we identify which students are, you know, struggling and have those ACES indicators. I do feel like that's kind of why we headed down this road of mental health. So I think that the training that's been out there that we've had has been focused more in that direction. And so that has definitely shaped how we are viewing … how we can make an impact on safety.

Administrator #4 discussed the value of training in partnership with local law enforcement:

> We've also invested in quite a bit of training. We have a good relationship with the sheriff's department and we drill. Of course, we do all the required drills the state requires, but once or twice every year, especially in the summer, we try to play out different scenarios with trainings at different schools. We do that to help the SRO and

> the sheriff's department to become very familiar with the buildings, all corners of the buildings, if you will. So that has been a focus for us over the last, I'm going to say seven or eight years. We've done pretty extensive training.

The benefits of proactive preparedness was also mentioned by Administrator #11 when discussing how ALICE training has made schools safer:

> Putting folks in a situation where they're having to think on their feet as much as possible. You know, thinking proactively in terms of what their classrooms look like, what our buildings look like if we ever have a safety issue. And then, not just in terms of thinking the worst terms of school shooting, but in terms of, you know, evacuations and fire drills … In our evacuation drills, our principals do a really good job of, at times, they'll block an entry and an exit to the school and say, hey, redirect. You know, doing some reverse evacuation drills, where we start as a fire drill and then halfway through, have to go back in. Just kind of that proactive mindset of, let's make sure that we're able to think on our feet and then kind of be able to replant if we need to, as kind of a standard in our system … So it's just the preparedness, I think, that we try to make sure we do a good job.

Presence of adequate financial resources.

The emergent theme of the presence of adequate financial resources is associated with Research Question 2 due to the stated perceptions of district administrators that such funding is a component of safe school districts. Having adequate financial resources for safety-related priorities was frequently cited by district administrators. Such funding was often utilized for items such as school resource officers and physical security improvements.

Administrator #9 commented on how her district was able to utilize available funding to provide an additional law enforcement presence in schools:

> The state has provided more funding through Safe Schools and now we have the SRO funding, the grant funding for the SROs, which we didn't have an SRO in every school until last year. That has been an improvement for us that we are able to have an SRO on every campus and that's been a big improvement.

Administrator #12 shared a similar perspective regarding the availability of grant funding for resource officers. "(because of) grants, we now have an SRO in every school. And that's huge. They're an integral part of the day-to-day." She went on to describe being able to use, "safety grant money … to redo the admittance to the school and to tighten up on security."

Increases in safety-related funding from the State of Tennessee was cited by multiple district administrators. Administrator #2 stated, "After the Florida situation, that for the first time in ten years, they gave us additional safety money. And then they doubled it again the next year. And that was a real welcome response from the state." Administrator #1 also identified state-level funding as contributing to a safe school:

> Probably the biggest positive change for us is the fact that, you know, the state legislature put money aside so that we can afford to have an SRO in every building. I don't know if our county would have ever been able to afford that, just because we don't have a big tax base and our county commission is just not able to provide us with additional dollars a lot of times. And so that was definitely very positive.

Administrator #3 listed a lengthy list of safety improvements that were able to occur through increased state funding:

> Typically, we used to get about 40,000 dollars a year, which was really a drop in the bucket. And, you know, we have about 21 schools and they're all a lot older so that was really a drop in the bucket for us to get a lot of things fixed. So, you know, a couple of years ago, they gave us about 200,000 dollars, 211,000 dollars, I think, that we could do more large-scale projects. These were also projects, too, that were you know, more time consuming … there was a lot of facilities work. It was changing structures … but things that most definitely needed to happen … access control on the outside of the building … four or five projects that included basically building vestibules and things to contain people when they came in … secretaries that had big open office windows, to putting those bank teller windows in … we have put cameras in. We have a camera system that we can all view online … and even things like our badge machine and we got Raptor. We not only use the visitor management piece, but we use the emergency management piece for accountability … I think we're probably safer than we've ever been.

Research Question 3

What factors do district-level administrators most associate with an unsafe school district?

Inconsistent adherence to safety-related processes and procedures.

The emergent theme of inconsistent adherence to safety-related processes and procedures is associated with Research Question 3 due to the stated perceptions of district administrators that it is a component of unsafe school districts. The factor associated with unsafe schools most frequently cited by district administrators during the study was a lack of adherence to safety-related processes and procedures. Multiple administrators commented on the fact that though

safety operational procedures were established and in-place, individual decisions made by students and staff members to deviate from such procedures led to unsafe environments.

Administrator #5 spoke of how the familiarity in a small-town environment led to an unsafe situation in a school:

> Everybody knows everybody. We've run into a couple of situations in the last couple years where, I'll give an example of a domestic home situation where there has been a restraining order and court documents that we had on file, but because the person walking working the front knew the dad, knew the mom, went ahead and let them in. And so those types of things can be really big ones. I mean, what happens if … the dad takes the kid and they're gone out of state before we know it? Se we really had to address a couple things there.

Administrator #3 spoke of a similar situation, where familiarity led to an individual being allowed access to a school building and a shooting ensued:

> They knew the guy and just kind of let him in. You know that's something that periodically in principals meeting that you can preach … that you have to talk to those kids about. You don't let anybody in that building even if you know them. And quite frankly, you've got to talk to teachers about that.

Administrator #4 commented on lack of proper procedure during a recent safety drill and ensuring all adults are aware of safety protocols:

> For example, we did a drill not long ago, and it was a lockdown drill, when we pulled the fire alarm just to see how they would react. And unfortunately, there was a classroom that came out after the fire alarm was pulled. And that was a no-no. So we tried to take that and, you know, address that and just let them know … follow your safety plan. And

> in that case, the safety plan wasn't followed. Was the teacher aware of the safety plan? And another aspect … is when we have substitutes in the building. Are they aware of the safety plans? Do they know what happens or how to react, you know, when scenario A happens? So that is a big worry of mine, as well.

Administrator #1 described a situation with an employee responded to a personal situation outside of school protocols:

> One of our employees … (was) having some problems and things kind of escalated. That night, she got out of the house and … didn't know what else to do, but she went to work … and she hid herself in the safe until somebody got to school that next morning. She did what she thought was best for her, but she didn't really think about the implications, the fact that it had on everybody else at the school.

Ensuring students are aware of and follow safety procedures was also a critical concern to Administrator #8:

> You know, one thing we always think about, we have different entrances into the school, and so there's always a chance of an adult coming to the door and, you know, a student being in the hall at the water fountain and opening the door. You know, that's always a concern … That would be the main thing I worry about, children letting an unknown unauthorized personnel into the building.

Lack of appropriate physical security and access control.

The emergent theme of lack of appropriate physical security and access control is associated with Research Question 3 due to the stated perceptions of district administrators that it is a component of unsafe school districts. Multiple district administrators cited the lack of

appropriate physical security and ability to control access to their facilities as factors negatively impacting safety. Administrator #12 works in a district with an open-campus high school, which he specifically noted due for the inability to secure its campus. "I think the biggest challenge we face from our district is the open campus." He commented on the fact that the local municipality owned multiple facilities that were located within the footprint of the school, which made it difficult to fully harden the exterior perimeter due to the necessary public access. His inability to fully fence the property due to this fact contributed to the perception of unsafety. "So I always feel like we can't completely control our campuses, the external part of our campuses, in the way that would be ideal."

Administrator #10 referenced the lack of appropriate access control to student areas and the prohibitive costs to make such improvements:

> You know, windows and doors are your first access points for people that you don't want in your buildings. The financial barriers to replacing windows and doors is huge … Every year we try to replace 40,000 dollars worth of doors. And every year we try to update a building's locking system internally so that if we were to call a lockdown, the teacher has the ability to walk to their classroom door and push the button on the door knob, versus going into the hallway and keying the door shut. Just retrofitting buildings that weren't built for school safety is probably our biggest failure or barrier.

Physical facility hardening, the necessity for technology supports, and challenges aligning needed upgrades with current governmental regulations were all mentioned by Administrator #11:

> We're actually using a lot of safety money this year to work on the hardening of some entrances into schools, kind of redirecting and re-forcing visitors and entrances in schools

> through a main office where we're actually putting eyes on them. We use the Raptor system. I think most schools use that now to scan them in. We've been trying to do that for … five, six years. We looked at ways to do it there and what we ran into is that old construction meeting with new code standards … The difficulty in hardening some places goes against fire code, those kind of fighting entities that help govern everything we do. So we are, at three of our schools this year … hardening our entrances.

Age, design, and current condition of physical facilities.

The emergent theme regarding the age, design, and current condition of physical facilities is associated with Research Question 3 due to the stated perceptions of district administrators that they are components of unsafe school districts. Administrators noted the safety limitations arising from facilities that were not designed to current safety standards and are deteriorating due to age and lack of funding for continual improvements. Administrator #10 noted:

> Operational failures of the physical plant is probably how I would describe those. And being that 80 year old buildings, that the infrastructure of the building was never designed for what we now consider modern school safety. It's hard to retrofit a building that was meant to draw the community in, to now try to keep people out. So in short of building new facilities, we have to work with what we've got.

Administrator #11 spoke of antiquated building designs that were not aligned with current safety best-practice:

> The downside to our community is that all of our school buildings are older. I think our newest building is around 40 years old. So in terms of looking at the way they were built, they weren't built to today's safety standards. When they were built, you know, we

> wouldn't worry about intruders. We weren't worried about how to lock down the school. Look at places like our high school, where the front door, once you buzz in, you have access to three different main hallways, and can get there without having to go through a main office at any point and scan in. Yet it's the same way at our elementary schools and middle school … that was my biggest area of concern.

Administrator #4 also noted the difference in design priorities with facilities constructed many years ago, and the difficulty in making improvements to such buildings:

> Well, the biggest issue that we face, we have a lot of older buildings, if you will, that weren't constructed with safety in mind when they were built. So some of the things like that are very challenging to us. And we've tried to address them as best we can, but some of our buildings and campuses, if you will, present probably the biggest challenge for us in order to be able to better secure our buildings. So that's probably one of the biggest challenges physically that we have.

Administrator #9 commented on both the safety issues caused by older construction and the financial limitations in making desired alterations:

> You don't have enclosed vestibules at all of our schools. Some of the newer schools do, but we hand an architect come in and do an architectural assessment of how much it would cost to enclose those areas and it's a very high price tag to make those improvements. We have some schools that you walk in and you're in the cafeteria as soon as you walk into the school. So, I mean you walk through the cafeteria to get to the front office. You know that's certainly a safety challenge that we want to improve, but the funding is not immediately available for. Through Safe Schools funding, we're trying to slowly add some walls and open some window areas on certain walls that would allow

> you to speak directly to the front office before they allow you to go further into the school. But that's a big challenge for us just because our schools are older and they weren't built with safety in mind.

Research Question 4

What do district-level administrators identify as needs for the improvement of safety?

Additional safety-related training and professional development.

The emergent theme of additional safety-related training and professional development is associated with Research Question 4 due to the stated perceptions of district administrators that they are needs for the improvement of school safety. When asked to cite the items most needed to improve safety, district administrators identified safety-related training. Administrators mentioned not only the types and volume of training that was desired, but also the frequency in which such training needed to occur.

Ensuring that all individuals in the school setting are properly training in an ongoing way was identified by Administrator #10 as a key need:

> Situational awareness is the foundation … Everybody can be aware of their surroundings. I'll go back to substitute teachers, again, who are not always in the same building. So they're maybe not as familiar with their surroundings as their students are. But when a substitute walks into a room, they need to know, what is my primary way to exit in case of an emergency. What is my secondary way to exit in case of an emergency? Situational awareness. We drill that all the way down to our students.

The ability to have time for vital professional development throughout the school year was also a barrier that administrators noted regarding professional learning. Administrator #8 said:

> I … would like if we could have more lockdown drills. You know, we really just have one huge one. You know, the full lockdown, one a year … I think that it would be beneficial to do that maybe earlier on in the year. But you know, it's always so busy.

Administrator #11 shared a similar desire to extend professional learning throughout the school year:

> I think the biggest thing for us is making it more consistent, professional development. You know, a lot of the training we end up doing comes in the first, you know, few weeks of the school year as we're starting back, and updating on some changes and the faculty is new in the building and don't know those situations. But we need to do a better job of being consistent throughout the school year in terms of making sure we that we're revisiting those things … Just having our folks in the mindset of, if something ever goes wrong safety-wise, let's be in a position where we can be proactive and not reactive.

Administrator #7 also spoke of the need to provide training throughout the year, but noted the time limitations that occur:

> Ideally, I would like to meet with every school staff and … discuss their emergency operations plan with their staff and their team in their building and walk through scenarios with them to say, okay, now when this happens, let's critique this and see how you would handle that. And again, that's a time factor. But it's something that's very beneficial for us here in central office as well as people in school.

The need to provide consistent training throughout the year was noted by Administrator #3 in regard to emergency response:

> I think with that, there's got to be … I can stand here one time and talk to you about that and everything, but I almost think it's really got to be something more detailed to that …

> It's a series of monthly … tabletop exercises. Because it's really changing the mindset and a way of thinking. And helping people to think on their feet. I don't think you can just one-and-done that … I would like to … do those with principals and then ask them to do a monthly or bimonthly meeting and take that exercise back and do it with their staff.

Administrator #1 spoke of the need for ongoing training to unify the safety focus of students, staff, and community related to mental health:

> I do think that we probably need some additional support and training. We've tried to train all teachers … but some teachers take hold of that and they were willing to do whatever. I still think there is a small percentage of our teachers that feel like that this is just a waste of time and that students don't care and that families don't care. You know, just that negative attitude. And so I think that's just something that we have to keep working on and we have to keep focusing on.

Additional resources for safety-related improvements.

The emergent theme of additional resources for safety-related improvements is associated with Research Question 4 due to the stated perceptions of district administrators that it is needed for the improvement of school safety. District administrators identified the availability of funding for safety-related improvements as a key need to improve safety. Such funding was seen as vital to addressing current deficiencies in the areas of facilities, technology, law enforcement/SROs, professional learning, and mental health services. Having available funds and balancing safety improvements and resources was cited by Administrator #2 as a core need:

> I think schools are always going to have the financial component … I mean, as you know, you can spend an infinite amount of money on safety. So what you have to

balance is, so what's the most practical ideas that we can provide? And what's the most reasonable thing that will help support our ideas? But there's always going to be some restrictions when it comes to financial resources.

Administrator #2 went on to discuss financial needs related to mental health training:

> I think it'd be great if they really … supported districts that have less resources than we have … really get some robust training for your folks. Because I really do think identifying students early is the key. The vast majority of violent incidents, whether they be individual violent student-on-student or mass violence incidents, can be dealt with effectively if we have relationships built with those students … If you think about everything we do, including the mental health piece, we spend well over a million dollars just out of our local budget.

The prohibitive costs to physical safety improvements was noted by Administrator #8:

> (Regarding) our entrance, it would be nice if we could construct an area where outside people didn't come in. They could communicate with the office. We'd have a speaker, but like, they wouldn't even be able to come in the lobby until we cleared them … It would be pretty expensive … Because we're one school and … we don't have a whole lot of funding. A lot of people think that the city school, we're just rich and have it flowing from everywhere, but we don't.

Administrator #1 referenced funding for improved technology as a critical need:

> If we had enough funds … one of the things we would really like today is our outside doors, we've been able to do the swipe cards, the swipe badges. We would really like to be able to do that on the inside classroom doors. We feel like that would enhance what we're currently doing even more.

The high cost of desired law enforcement was also noted, as well as the necessity to ensure such funding remains available. Administrator #7 stated:

> I think we would like to have more of an SRO presence in our buildings. That's expensive. Our SROs in our middle schools are half time. Our SROs in our high schools are full time. We do not have any SROs in our elementary schools. Some elementary schools have 600 students in them, so it would be good if we could afford to do that.

Administrator #10 shared a similar perspective:

> It all revolves back to money. Every school district in the state gets a Safe Schools grant. We have to use ours towards partnership with our sheriff's department to get SROs. So four of our SROs are funded with our Safe Schools grant. We have 11 SROs. Luckily, seven of those 11 are now funded through the state school resource officer grant. But that grant, there's no guarantee on continued funding for that. We've had it for two years now. I hope we will continue to get funding from the governor for SROs. If not, we're going to drop from 11 back down to four SROs, probably.

When asked about the main barrier that prevents making the improvement needed to make his district safer, Administrator #4 simply stated, "Well, it's basically funding." Regarding funding for desired improvements, Administrator #5 added:

> The cost … those things that if you knew it was going to save a life, there's not a number that you wouldn't pay. But do you get your bang for the buck? … Funding, it always impacts. You always want to be able to do more.

Research Question 5

What do district-level administrators perceive as future safety issues at the school and district level?

Mental health/Social-emotional issues.

The emergent theme of mental health and social-emotional issues is associated with Research Question 5 due to the stated perceptions of district administrators that they are future safety issues for schools and districts. When asked to identify the most pressing future safety issue facing school districts, administrators most frequently cited mental health and social-emotional needs of students. Administrators spoke of such needs and how districts were positioning themselves to address the issue in the future. Administrator #12 stated:

> I think it's the mental health for students, just to be honest … Last year … we hired a mental health coordinator for our district through a grant that we'd gotten. And that was one of the things our principals want to continue this year. We're just seeing more and more and I think that's true for other schools, as well. We'll have kids with problems and trying to manage that in the course of a day and still deliver instruction, I think that is probably our most significant challenge right now. And it's something that is relatively new. I think that is going to be a lot worse. Things I went to a few years ago, they would talk about … I know that's one of the things I heard in healthcare that I'm not sure schools were really ready for. But you're getting ready to have a tsunami.

Administrator #1 perceived a connection between mental health concerns and acts of violence in schools:

> I feel like that … until we get a good handle on mental health, we're going to continue to have issues. And I feel like … that's why we started to have the issues we have with

> school shootings and things like that. I'm thinking that until we have some things in place to help, you know, those students and help families, I feel like we're probably not going to see a huge change in how individuals react and the things that they do. But again, I feel like especially for us, it's real hard to get the services that we need. And I feel like it's probably that … it's the same issue across the state. There's just not necessarily enough help to go around whenever you really, really need it. Or I guess maybe quality help for families.

The connection between mental health and unsafe acts was shared by Administrator #10:

> I'll go back to mental health. That directly ties to a safe school. If the mental health of your community is poor, or if the mental health of the people in your building is poor, then there is a higher risk for something unsafe happening in your building, whether it be an altercation that happens in the building, student-to-student, or student to a teacher, or whether it's an unhappy parent with a grade or a domestic situation at home that rolls over to school.

Administrator #4 identified the need for additional counseling services to address needs:

> I really think (mental health) seems to becoming more and more of an issue … We have a lot of kids, we're seeing more and more problems from that, from that end of the spectrum … We have contracted … counselors. They have more on their plates than they can handle. So we have contracted with some mental health facilities to be able to offer some more mental health counseling with our students and faculty, if needed.

Multiple district administrators also spoke of increased mental health needs connected to the COVID-19 pandemic and students not having access to the resources provided through school while schools operated virtually. Administrator #9 stated, "Of course, with COVID and kids

being at home for six months in bad situations, we're anticipating getting kids back full-time is going to be a challenge." Administrator #5 added:

> I think the social and emotional needs of our kids, especially at the middle and high school levels, the breakdowns that we're seeing there, I would say that's probably one of the more pressing concerns I have, as far as those kids' safety and the safety of all the other kids, as well … We've dealt with some kids over the last couple of years that I truly have been concerned about and walked away thinking I wouldn't be surprised at all, you know, if the student … And so, I think kids' social and emotional state of mind right now, and I think especially COVID again has kind of enhanced that. We've not seen some of these kids for six months or so and they were struggling when we went away. And as much as we tried to stay in contact, the counselors did, there was a breakdown there when they were at home. We just didn't have the same eyes and ears on them that we had before March. And so, I think with all that's going on with kids now and the pressures and the social emotional stuff that they have, I would say that's the number one concern for me.

Technology and cyber-security.

The emergent theme of technology and cyber-security is associated with Research Question 5 due to the stated perceptions of district administrators that they are future safety issues for schools and districts. Such concerns were most often related to district network security and student use of technology. Regarding network security, Administrator #11 stated:

> We've focused so much on the physical side of things, I think the cyber safety side of things is huge right now. And I think we've seen some of that with … look at the

(neighboring school district) shutdown that happened at the beginning of the school year, when they went virtual this year. Looking at those external threats to your networks, those kind of things. That's the stuff that doesn't get talked about a whole lot. I think especially smaller systems like ours, we have to outsource a lot of that. That's a concern. Looking at ways to make sure that we're safe there. Our schools have not been one-to-one in the past. We're moving that direction right now. So as we, you know, look at more and more of our day spent online using the virtual side of things, making sure that our student and staff are protected there is key. I think a lot of the focus has been on that physical side of things and are we physically safe, that we lose sight of sometimes the biggest threats sneak in that way.

Multiple administrators identified student interaction with social media as a key future safety issue. Administrator #2 stated:

> The explosion of social media (is a concern) and the school's ability to understand it, be nimble with it, (and) not overreact to it. Students have access to each other at all hours of the night. So sometimes, I'm dealing with things at one o'clock in the morning because of a Snapchat threat. And students are so nimble electronically. They're so nimble with technology that once you kind of feel like you get a handle on one thing, they've moved on to the next. So being able to manage that appropriately at the district level is just always going to be tough, I think.

Administrator #8 shared a similar concern, citing the student use of technology as a platform to bully:

> I feel like social media and that concern with bullying, I think that's going to become greater in the near future, especially with … the middle schools and the high schools, and the

risk of students getting mad, especially as a result of bullying and social media. It's pretty rough. I think that's going to be one of the major areas.

Summary

Data collected via 12 online, electronic one-on-one interviews September 9 – 17, 2020 was presented in Chapter 4. Semi-structured video interviews consisting of seven primary questions and multiple follow-up questions ranged in length from 35 to 60 minutes and are securely stored electronically per East Tennessee State University protocols. Interviews were transcribed and reviewed and approved by participants to ensure accuracy. Triangulation occurred through analysis of transcripts, notes, and video interviews. Transcripts were coded to allow for analysis and identification of emerging themes related to the study's purpose and research questions. Ongoing review of interview data and district emergency operations plans took place during the analysis process. Chapter 5 contains further discussion, conclusions related to each research question, recommendations for practice, and recommendations for further research.

Chapter 5. Discussions, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Discussion

Conclusions resulting from this qualitative study on rural district administrator perceptions of school safety in northeast Tennessee public schools, as well as recommendations for practice and further research, are found in Chapter 5. The introduction to the qualitative study, review of literature, and discussion of the study's research methodology are found in Chapters 1-3. The results and analysis of the study's research data, which emerged from participant interviews and a review of district emergency operations plans, are found in Chapter 4. This qualitative research study explored how district administrator in twelve northeast Tennessee school districts perceived the state of safety in their districts. The results of the study identified the major components perceived to make school districts safe or unsafe, the needs and obstacles that must be overcome to make districts safer, as well as the major safety issues that administrators will face in the future.

With the knowledge that the development of a full awareness of all components of school safety can result in the safest possible environments for student and staff, this study sought to provide the understanding that would support administrators in facilitating such environments. The conclusions and recommendations below are the results of such study. The perceptions of the district administrator participants describe not only their perspective relative to their own district, but can serve as a theoretical framework for other educators in designing and implementing safe environments in their own setting.

Conclusions

The qualitative study was guided by five research questions exploring the perceptions of district-level administrators of public school districts in northeast Tennessee regarding school safety. Through a review of district Emergency Operations Plans and analysis of participant interviews, the investigator was able to identify emerging themes from the collected data to develop understanding as to administrator perceptions of safety, the components that make schools safe and unsafe, the items identified as needed to improve safety, and perceived future safety issues at the school and district level. Conclusions deriving from such themes and understandings can serve to provide recommendations for district administrators in developing and implementing safety-related practices and guide further research on school safety. Conclusions for the five identified research questions are found below.

Research Question 1: What are district-level administrator perceptions of safety in a school district?

Rural district administrators in northeast Tennessee perceive their districts to be safe for students and staff. The positive results of ongoing safety reviews and assessments by administrators and staff reinforce this perception. Continual improvement is prioritized, emphasizing the need for a collaborative approach that involves all stakeholders within the school environment. Though deficiencies in practice and procedures are sometimes observed, administrators do not believe these to be systemic and such situations are resolved through communication and additional training of students and staff.

Administrators perceive there to be a high level of awareness and a climate of preparedness regarding safety throughout northeast Tennessee school districts. This is due to a

focus on continual professional learning and training of students, staff, and key community partners. The engagement of law enforcement in the training process is cited as especially important, due to their expertise and the critical nature of the school-law enforcement relationship. Administrators perceive ongoing training to be vital in maintaining safe school environments, with the belief that there is no limit to the amount of desired preparedness.

Recent increases in the amounts of available funding for safety is perceived to have positively affected the safety environment in northeast Tennessee school districts. Funds from state and federal sources have been utilized for items identified by administrators as necessary to improve safety. These include items such as school resource officers, physical facility and technology improvements, and additional school personnel. Such advancements would not have been possible without the influx of new resources that would otherwise not have been available to local school districts.

Research Question 2: What factors do district-level administrators associate with a safe school district?

District-level administrators in northeast Tennessee cite the active presence of law enforcement in the school environment as the greatest factor associated with safe school districts. School resource officers are perceived to act as a visible deterrent to unsafe behaviors and critical in supporting school safety protocols. The positive partnership between school districts and law enforcement agencies is seen as a vital component in facilitating a collaborative approach to school safety. Administrators believe the presence of an SRO in every school building is a necessary component of safety operations, serving to enhance the relationship between students, staff, and the law enforcement community. Such continual presence by SROs

and other non-school officers executing school walkthroughs also greatly decreases response time should an event occur at a school site.

The presence of adequate preparation and safety-related professional development was identified as a key component to a safe school district. Involving students and staff in ongoing learning through drills, operational procedures, and specific safety approaches was seen as most effective. Increased multi-hazard trainings provided by the State of Tennessee and law enforcement has served to better prepare all stakeholders. A recent focus on mental health and social-emotional issues was perceived as a positive response to escalating needs in such areas, as administrators seek proactive ways to serve students and decrease the potential for unsafe acts to occur in the school setting.

The presence of adequate financial resources to fund safety-related items and improvements was also cited as a factor associated with a safe school district. Having the funds necessary to provide school resource officers and physical security improvements enhanced safety efforts and improved perceptions of safety. Administrators noted the increased presence of SROs would not have been possible without recent increases in grant and state-provided funding. Funds were also utilized to complete physical school improvements such as construction related to access control, personnel safety improvements, and technology to support safety protocols in the school setting.

Research Question 3: What factors do district-level administrators most associate with an unsafe school district?

District administrators perceive the inconsistent adherence to safety-related processes and procedures by staff and students to be a key component to unsafe school districts. Though

protocols are in place to guide behaviors related to safety situations and events, actions by individuals during such events often stray from established procedures and lead to unsafe or potentially unsafe environments. This is often perceived to be the result of individual decision-making that does not align with best practice or differs from pre-established drill routines.

Administrators citied the rural northeast Tennessee culture as a contributing factor to inconsistent adherence to safety protocols. A mentality of accommodation and familiarity can lead to actions based on personal judgements rather than uniform safety precautions. Lax observance to access control measures have led to unauthorized individuals having access to secure student and staff areas, sometimes leading to violent acts. Incidents such as domestic situations spilling into the school and a local occurrence of an active shooter have all taken place in northeast Tennessee schools due to staff knowingly allowing individuals to enter the secure environment.

Inconsistent execution of emergency operation plans during safety drills is a contributor to unsafe environments. Lack of uniform adherence to items such as fire and intruder drill protocols highlight the potential for students and staff to be at risk should an actual occurrence take place. The lack of uniform knowledge by individuals such as substitute teachers contributes to the perception that not all individuals within the school setting have the knowledge and operational decision-making ability necessary to ensure safety.

The lack of appropriate physical security and access control was cited as a major contributor to unsafe environments. Open campus settings that are difficult or impossible to fully enclose present safety risks, as such schools were not designed with safety considerations in mind. Securing the exterior of these environments is problematic due to logistical and financial

limitations. Administrators recognize that such environments are impossible to fully control and account for in safety planning.

The inability to effectively harden physical school buildings that were not constructed to modern safety standards also contributes to the perception of unsafety. Administrators lack the resources to modernize physical structures with improvements such as secure entrances and technology controls. Antiquated physical structural components such as windows and doors do not provide the level of security desired by administrators who lack the funding to fully improve such components to modern safety standards. Such necessary improvements have also been found to conflict with governmental regulations such as building and fire codes.

The age, design, and current condition of physical facilities are cited as key factors that lead to a perception of unsafety. School facilities in use across northeast Tennessee are often of such an age that the original design does not align with current safety standards. Obsolete design characteristics, along with the general deterioration of such buildings due to lack of necessary improvement funding, create difficulties for administrators seeking to ensure student and staff safety. Administrators note that previous school designs were constructed with the goal of inviting visitors into the environment, with entry points providing open access to student and staff areas. A lack of resources to bring such facilities into alignment with modern safety design is a contributing factor to a perception of unsafety.

Research Question 4: What do district-level administrators identify as needs for the improvement of school safety?

Administrators state that in order to improve safety in northeast Tennessee school districts, additional safety-related training and professional development is needed. Staff and

students require more frequent and continual training to ensure that safety processes and procedures are understood and universally implemented when appropriate. Such training can serve to ensure that all individuals in the school setting are knowledgeable and fully prepared. Administrators note that safety training often takes place at the start of each school year, resulting in a lack of mindfulness as the year proceeds. Consistency throughout the school year is needed to maintain vigilance and awareness, though availability of time for additional training is cited as a barrier to this occurring. The need for the learning developed by ongoing tabletop exercise and a focus on mental health are cited as specific areas of needed focus to ensure the safest possible environments.

Administrators cite the necessity of additional resources for safety-related improvements as a vital need to improve district safety. Districts lack the resources necessary for safety-related improvements that have been identified as critical in maintaining safe environments. Without financial funding to improve items such as physical facilities and technology, provide needed personnel such as school resource officers, and offer professional learning and mental health services, administrators will lack the ability to improve perceived safety deficits.

Administrators continually evaluate potential safety enhancements to make the best use of the limited resources made available to them. Identifying the key safety-related factors that have the greatest potential impact is a priority, as administrators utilize a cost/benefit mindset in approaching procurement decisions. Taking a proactive approach to mental health, physical facility improvements, and collaboration with law enforcement is currently seen as the best use of available resources. The availability of additional future funding is cited as a critical factor, as administrators believe safety needs will continue to increase along with the desire to provide more supports for students and staff.

Research Question 5: What do district-level administrators perceive as future safety issues at the school and district level?

Administrators perceive that mental health and social-emotional issues will be the most pressing safety issues that school districts will face in the future. Administrators are currently seeing a rise in the amount of mental health concerns faced by students and the resulting behaviors that manifest from such issues. Delivery of effective instruction is becoming increasingly difficult with such students, with schools often lacking the necessary supports to provide needed interventions. Violent behavior often results due to a not having proper services in place because of lack of funding or available trained personnel. Poor mental health within the school setting is perceived to equate to a higher risk of unsafe behavior, increasing the risk of harm to students and staff. Though administrators have added staff to address such situations, additional counseling supports are needed to meet a rising wave of issues, many exacerbated by the lack of student-adult connections during the recent COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent school closures.

Administrators cited technology and cyber-security as a major future concern facing school districts. The ability to secure district technology networks in an increasingly online environment and supporting student use of technology were specific areas of focus identified as critical needs. With school districts increasingly relying on virtual instruction through one-to-one technology programs and online learning platforms, an increased level of vulnerability to outside system attacks now exists to negatively impact the educational operations of school districts. Administrators also fear that as students increase their use of technology for such learning and social interaction, unsafe behavior, such as cyber-bullying and online threats, will

increase. The ability to manage student use and behaviors while online was seen as a major future concern in maintaining a safe environment.

Recommendations for Practice

The analysis of data generated from participant interviews, as well as the review of relevant literature and the document review of district emergency operations plans, offers recommendations for district administrators with oversight and influence on district safety. These recommendations include:

- Prioritize the development of a district culture of collaboration and continual improvement related to safety.
- Develop effective partnerships with law enforcement to provide a continual resource officer presence in schools, allowing for deterrence, support, and timely incident response.
- Seek and secure adequate resources to fund necessary safety-related items such as training, facility improvements, and school resource officers.
- Emphasize ongoing safety training for all staff and students to maximize awareness and minimize deviation from established safety protocols.
- Develop and implement effective access control measures to secure physical entrances to staff and student work areas.
- Identify deficiencies to facility design and conditions, and seek funding to implement needed improvements.
- Ensure necessary supports are available for the mental health and social emotional needs of students and staff.

- Obtain necessary security components to protect district and student technology platforms.
- Provide needed technical and emotional supports relative to student technology usage.

Recommendations for Further Research

The purpose of the study was to identify, describe, and understand the perceptions of administrators of public school districts in northeast Tennessee regarding school safety. The study, which includes the review of current relevant literature and the collection and analysis of interview data, is insufficient to address the full scope of potential components related to safe and unsafe school environments, nor does it offer the complete range of necessary improvements to ensure full district safety. The researcher offers the following suggestions for continued research to gain a deeper understanding and further contribute to the research base regarding school safety:

- Given the evolving nature of safety best-practice recommendations due to the experiences of districts experiencing unsafe events, additional examination of safety case-study research is recommended to provide information to district administrators in developing safety protocols and procedures.
- As research indicates changing perceptions regarding the presence of resource officers in schools over time, additional research as to the perceived effectiveness of SROs in the school environment is recommended.

- With safety-related technology in a continual state of advancement, further research into available technology components and methodologies is recommended to provide the most cost-effective and impactful supports for implementation in the school setting.
- The perception of rapidly increasing mental health needs for students and staff suggests the necessity for continued research into best-practice methodologies to proactively identify and treat individuals before violent acts take place. Further study into the influence of adverse childhood experiences and the impact of social emotional needs on school district safety can serve to support administrators tasked with ensuring safe environments.
- Study findings indicate the critical nature of adequate resources in implementing necessary safety improvements and operations plans. Additional research on the impact of funding availability, funding gaps, and future funding sources could prove valuable to administrators in the development of strategic long-range safety plans.

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APPENDIX: Interview Guide

Interview # ____

Administrator Name _____ Position _____

District _____ School/Location _____

1. Please tell me about yourself and your work.
    a. What is your position? What are the general responsibilities of that position?
    b. How long have you served as an administrator?
    c. What other positions have you held in your educational career? What was the scope of work in those positions?
2. What is your perception regarding the overall safety of your district?
    a. What are the components that currently exist in your schools that you feel make it a safe environment? What is it about those items that serves to improve safety?
    b. What are the components that currently exist in your schools that you feel make it an unsafe environment? What is it about those items that serves to decrease safety?
    c. Are there safety components that do not currently exist in your schools that if they did, would improve the safety environment? Why do you believe these additions would improve safety? What barriers do you face to putting these components in place?
3. How have your experiences shaped your perceptions of school safety?

a. Have there been specific events in your professional history or the history of your schools or community that you feel have shaped your perspective regarding safety?
b. How has your role and your work as an administrator impacted your perception of safety in your district?

4. How have your perceptions of safety in your district impacted your practice as an administrator?
    a. What safety practices have you changed based on your perceptions of safety? How has your perception of your environment changed based on these improvements?
    b. On what areas of focus are you studying or considering for future safety improvements? Why?
5. How has professional learning on safety altered your perception of your district environment?
    a. In what type of professional learning are you engaged regarding school safety? How has your perception of your district's safety environment been impacted by this learning? What additional learning is needed to improve the perception of your district's safety?
    b. How has the recommendation of experts in the world of safety and/or school safety impacted your district's safety?
6. How have influences outside your control impacted the safety of your district?
    a. What safety-related events in other school settings have impacted your perception of safety or safety practices in your own district? How?

b. What safety-related events in other non-school settings have impacted your perception of safety or safety practices in your own district? How

c. How have actions by policy makers impacted your perception of your district's safety?

d. What policies or procedures have affected your district's safety, either positively or negatively? How/Why?

e. What policies changes or modifications would serve to improve the safety of your district? Why?

f. How has the presence, or lack thereof, of funding for safety measures impacted the safety of your district?

7. What do you perceive as the most pressing future safety issue facing school districts?
8. Thank you so much for sharing your perceptions regarding the safety of your district's environment with me. Following our interview today, I will be transcribing the recording of our conversation and I will send a copy of that transcription to you. If, in reviewing that, you feel you would like to make any revisions or changes to your responses to better communicate your perceptions on school safety, please feel free to do that. I will be happy to reflect those changes in the record.
9. Is there anything else you would like to add or share with me at this point?

VITA

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Professional Experience:	Assistant Superintendent – Administration, Kingsport City Schools; Kingsport, Tennessee, 2016-2020
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