



Office of the
Washington
State Auditor
Pat McCarthy

PERFORMANCE AUDIT

Report Highlights

Opportunities to Improve School Safety Planning

Effective school safety planning is the foundation of a school's ability to respond to an emergency. Public awareness of school safety issues and emergency preparedness has increased due to recent events around the country and in our state. Two Washington school districts have experienced an active shooter incident in the past four years, and the even greater likelihood for multiple types of natural disasters inherent to Washington makes effective school safety planning of critical importance.

Every school district is required by law to have a comprehensive safety plan. These plans prepare schools and districts to address risks that students or staff might face, including building threats, active shooters and natural disasters. Federal guidance suggests that preventative elements contributing to a positive school climate, such as prevention of suicide and bullying, also be taken into consideration when forming a safety plan. Schools that have a comprehensive school safety plan can inform staff, students and parents what actions to take in an emergency, while working closely with first responders on proper training and drills. According to state law, a comprehensive safety plan should address emergency mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery. The law also specifies required safety planning activities as part of the plan, such as utilizing certain training guidance and setting guidelines for coordinating with first responders.

Many schools' comprehensive safety plans are incomplete. District responses to surveys conducted by the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) in 2014 and the federal Department of Education in 2015 revealed areas where K-12 school safety planning practices fell short of state requirements and recommended practices. This audit was designed to identify ways school officials could efficiently address some of these known gaps in planning.

What challenges contribute to gaps in school safety preparedness?

Although state law requires districts to have a comprehensive safety plan, there are no mechanisms in place to ensure they are complete. Responsibility for ensuring complete safety plans is left entirely up to local school boards, with no additional oversight at the state or local level. While OSPI has general oversight authority over the state's school districts, it does not enforce adherence to safety planning requirements to ensure a comprehensive plan. Two of the state's key resources for school safety planning also appear to be underfunded. OSPI's School Safety Center, which provides tools and guidance to school districts, has not received a budget

increase in 15 years. Rapid Responder, the state's school mapping system, has not had stable funding to pay for ongoing program maintenance. Competing priorities for attention, time and money at school and district levels can place safety preparedness low on the list of district priorities.

What opportunities exist to address known gaps in K-12 school safety planning?

Previous surveys of school districts identified four areas of weakness in districts' safety plans. We followed up with school districts and identified ways some had successfully mitigated these gaps. Of the four areas of weakness identified in surveys, coordination is the cornerstone of improving school safety preparedness. Several districts coordinated at a regional level to strengthen planning, create efficiencies and increase accountability. Educational Service Districts (ESDs) can play a wide-ranging role in facilitating school safety coordination. An oversight mechanism at the regional level could produce more consistent safety preparations statewide, increasing coordination, accountability and cost-savings.

State Auditor's Conclusions

School safety planning does not always get the attention or resources it requires, in part because it has to compete with other, more immediate demands placed on schools. However, school and community leaders must not lose sight of the value in basic planning and collaboration. In the event of a natural disaster or other emergency, that work could save lives.

The purpose of this audit was to identify concrete, cost-effective processes and programs already happening in Washington, so schools and districts can learn from one another and narrow some of the gaps in their plans. We found the biggest opportunities in the area of collaboration with other key players in safety preparedness and response, including police and firefighters, other government emergency management experts, and neighboring school districts.

School district officials and their elected boards should explore this audit and take note of ideas that might apply to their area, then work toward greater collaboration and coordination.

Recommendations

We recommended that OSPI determine the staffing and funding required for the implementation of a regional school safety program, and make a request for the necessary funding to the Legislature. Funding permitted, we recommend OSPI organize and establish a statewide regional school safety program to be delivered through the educational service districts.

We further recommend that the Washington Association of Sheriffs and Police Chiefs (WASPC) determine the staffing and funding required for a comprehensive review of the statewide school mapping system, and make a request for the necessary funding to the Legislature. Funding permitted, we recommend WASPC convene a work group to review how the statewide school mapping system could be better utilized.

Finally, we suggest that school districts consider implementing the practices highlighted in this report, by working together with the community to foster greater collaboration and coordination at a local and regional level.