

# THE FEDERAL SCHOOL SAFETY CLEARINGHOUSE & THE CISA SCHOOL SAFETY TASK FORCE

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Over the past few years, the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) has garnered significant attention for its work in leading the nation's school safety initiatives. Recently, Rob Evans, COSECURE's Vice President and K-12 Practice Leader sat down with Mr. Don Hough, Deputy Associate Director for School Safety, School Safety Task Force (SSTF) at CISA, to discuss CISA's ongoing work and future landscape of this important work. This article is based on the insights from that conversation.

## **An overview of CISA's work in school safety**

CISA is a non-law enforcement, non-regulatory, advisory agency. CISA works with a variety of partners to defend against existing threats and collaborates with these partners to build a more secure and resilient infrastructure for the future.

While schools are not what we generally consider critical infrastructure, any threat to their safety and security could negatively impact communities across the country. CISA's school safety work is designed to help schools enhance their security programs by developing tools and products that are timely and actionable and can be tailored to meet the unique needs of each school community.

## **The evolving landscape of school safety and security**

Even though violence in our schools continues to make the headlines in our national and local media, schools must continue to plan and prepare for the wide range of threats and vulnerabilities they face each and every day. Transportation safety, weather related events, community-based issues, medical emergencies, and safety at after-school activities are just some of the things schools need to continue to prioritize during future-planning and preparedness initiatives. Understanding the current threat environment is critical for schools' prioritization and funding purposes.

The threat environment keeps accelerating, especially as technology allows bad actors to continue to create stress and anxiety for our schools at an alarming rate. For example, on March 13, 2024, bomb and school shooting threats were communicated to over 200 colleges and universities in just one day, which caused significant concern for those having to respond to these threats.

There is also a growing importance of seeing safety and security as an intersectional discipline – seeking to strengthen systems to prevent harm and mitigate future risk. One of the best investments to make is in the people charged with making safety and security decisions, and it is essential to hire, train, and coach faculty and school/school district leadership teams. Safety cannot be achieved in a silo; rather, everyone from school administrators, students, and parents all have a role to play. Moreover, leveraging technology and the role it can play in preventing harm and enhancing situational awareness when managing a critical incident.

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### **CISA strives to be a valuable partner and resource to schools and school districts**

The SSTF provides an array of resources, such as guides and templates, to help schools streamline safety and security planning and training processes. These tools and resources are essential as superintendents, principals and school leadership teams often find themselves overwhelmed with the depth and breadth of this important work.

CISA supports schools in a variety of additional ways. First, CISA has a cadre of regional protective security advisors (PSAs) across the country with expertise in both physical security and cybersecurity. These PSAs live in the communities they serve and can offer free support and guidance to schools as they work to identify risks and develop the appropriate plans and practices to address any identified concerns.

The SSTF also manages the SchoolSafety.gov website, a comprehensive repository of federal and state resources, programs, tools, and actionable recommendations to enhance school safety. One of the resources it provides is a grant-finder tool, specifically designed for K-12 schools. This tool is designed to help schools identify appropriate funding opportunities, including determining individual eligibility and the timelines for submitting their grant applications.

### **Subject matter experts play a big role in executing on the SSTF's mission**

No single entity has a monopoly on keeping kids safe. Everyone has a critical function to carry out in this complex ecosystem. There are over 130,000 K-12 schools across the country and the challenge is to tailor a security solution to the context of each specific school.

School safety does not stop after the purchase of a specific technology like security cameras or emergency notification systems, either. There must be a connection between this equipment and the school's overall security philosophy and policies, and there has to be training and coaching on how to connect tactics and technology to the ultimate goal of safety. Thus, the most impactful subject matter experts and vendors always think about wraparound coaching to create a greater whole from the sum of all the technical and tactical pieces.

### **CISA outreach and continuing partnership**

The federal government takes a big tent approach to school safety because kids deserve to be safe, and schools need all the help they can get to keep them safe. To that end, the SSTF is highly focused on outreach. SSTF members are currently traveling across the country to participate in school safety conferences and other public-facing events to ensure school safety stakeholders are aware of CISA's products and services. In addition, members of CISA's school safety team continue to leverage outreach opportunities to learn from the nation's school safety partners as it looks to develop and advance the tools, products, and services it currently provides to schools and communities.