



What  
can you do  
to recognize  
the signs  
that could  
result  
in your  
students  
being hurt?

# The Red Flag

Edward F. Dragan

**P**eople who are passionate about school safety have a vision—a vision we share with concerned parents, educators, and especially with the kids we're obliged to protect.

It's a vision where our public schools become safe havens for kids—warm, welcoming sanctuaries that foster an environment of teaching and learning and wall off the threats and violence so pervasive in our society.

In my talks across the country and in court cases I've worked on, it's become only too apparent that school safety has become a paramount concern in the public arena. That's actually good news if shining a brighter spotlight on the problem makes it easier to establish a new mindset and make our schools safer.

More and more news broadcasts focus on critical problems proliferating in schools around the country—bullying, teachers having sex with students, and rapes and murders in schools. The mentality that something “could never happen to us” is being dispelled by headlines about kids dying on class trips, losing fingers in shop class, being hit by cars at poorly planned bus stops, and beating up their teachers.

As a school safety expert and consultant, I've faced an endless variety of challenges. The only common thread is that when standards are lax, children get hurt.

## Some statistics

Let's take a look at some relevant statistics about school safety and security:

■ **Violent crime:** The percentage of public schools experiencing one or more violent incidents increased from 71 to 81 percent between 1999-2000 and 2003-2004. In 2003-2004, 18 percent of schools experienced one or more serious violent incidents, 46 percent experienced one or more thefts, and 64 percent experienced another type of crime.

■ **School environment:** In 2005, approximately 6 percent of students ages 12 to 18 reported that they were afraid of being harmed at school. Another 5 percent reported that they were afraid of harm away from school.

Compelling data is accumulating on other issues as well, such as:

■ **School-sponsored social events:** In many places, the school-sponsored, all-night graduation party has come into vogue as a substance-free outlet for senior celebrations. However, you really don't need a study to tell you that an all-nighter of music and movies still renders partying teens unfit to drive home safely at 7 a.m. the next day.

■ **Bullying:** More than 16 percent of students reported bullying by peers during the 2000-01 school year, according to a survey funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

■ **Sexual harassment:** Most of the public's knowledge about educator sexual misconduct comes from newspaper reports. Journalists report allegations and these news stories increase public awareness.

## Finding the red flags

Here are several situations that you can find in many schools

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today, plus the red flags that each raises:

**Situation:** Take a walk through any school during a change of class, go into the cafeteria at lunch time, or stroll onto the playground during recess. What is your first impression? Is the school calm and orderly, or are students running, shouting, pushing, and shoving? Are teachers visibly present, standing at their classroom doors and directing students in the lunch line? Does the principal stand in plain view greeting the kids in the morning and helping them on their way?

**Red flags:** No order to how students conduct themselves at school outside of class. On the playground, three aides are huddled at one corner talking while students throw rocks at each other at the other end. Several kids are picking on a vulnerable student in the hallway, cafeteria, or on the playground and an adult does not intervene.

**Situation:** Do teachers meet with students alone in the classroom or behind closed doors in an office? Do teachers or coaches drive students home after school or after sports? What is the school's policy on the relationships and contact teachers and coaches can have with students? Does the school have clear rules on sexual harassment and do teachers and students understand the boundaries of their relationships? When was the last time the school conducted a real exchange of information about sexual harassment?

**Red flags:** No meaningful training of teachers and students regarding interpersonal boundaries. No policies and procedures or monitoring regarding a staff member's inappropriate contact with students. Teachers and coaches drive students home. Students call teachers on their cell phones after school.

**Situation:** Are parents contacted when a teacher is planning a class trip and are chaperones assigned? When planning such a trip, does the teacher take into consideration the students' age and experience, any potential hazards associated with the planned activity, and the adult-to-student ratio? Did the teacher review the trip with the chaperones and assign specific students to each? Has the principal reviewed the activity? Are emergency measures in place to allow for cell phone and radio contact, the presence of a nurse, and special provisions for students allergic to insect bites and certain foods?

**Red flags:** Students embark on trips without parental notice. The teacher is unfamiliar with the site and its potential hazards. The teacher is the trip's sole supervisor. The nurse has not been contacted to consider the students' safety or special needs.

**Situation:** Visit a shop or practical arts class where power tools are used. Are yellow caution lines on the floor around the table saw and other potentially dangerous equipment? Is the teacher situated to maintain visual contact with all students and to respond to an emergency? Where is the emergency power shut-off button located? Is it easy to get to from anywhere in the room? Could someone trip on materials

dumped on the floor? Is the room meticulously organized, materials labeled, caution signs posted, and instructions displayed on each piece of equipment? Does the teacher maintain all power tools according to manufacturer's specifications and shut down faulty equipment?

**Red flags:** Supplies are disorganized. The teacher sits at a desk talking with students while others use table saws. There is insufficient signage instructing students on the use of equipment in easily understandable language and pictures. The floor is littered with debris and students don't wear safety glasses when using equipment. Equipment is not maintained according to the manufacturer's specifications. The school doesn't budget for regular equipment maintenance.

**Situation:** Go out and observe the bus stops. Where are they? If the district operates or contracts for school buses it must make bus stops safe. Do students have to cross a highway in the dark morning or evening hours to get to a bus stop? Is there a pedestrian crosswalk and other aids to help students cross the street safely? Does a crowd of students at the bus stop push and shove close to the road? At the end of the day, do students need to pass between parked cars in the lot or street to get to their bus? What school official has directly observed each bus stop to decide whether it's safe? Can parents easily register concerns about their child's bus stop assignment?

**Red flags:** Students must cross four-lane highways in the dark, or walk between parked cars, rendering them less visible to traffic. Parents are unaware that they can complain or ask questions about bus stops. The district's transportation coordinator assigns stops by consulting a map and never observes students at the location. The district does not have written criteria for how a bus stop will be assigned and how it can be changed.

### What red flags mean

Red flags in a football game mean someone violated a rule or purposely injured another player. Red flags in the school environment mean something may not be right, and that attention must be devoted to that issue.

It is the responsibility of the principal—the school's educational leader—to look for red flags, get information from those who report them, assess the situation, make modifications, and protect the kids. It is the responsibility of the central office and school board to make sure that the principal is doing his or her job.

This is something that can and should be at the top of every school leader's priority list. It requires open communication in a climate where everyone is aware of the need for student safety and where one individual is identified as the person who takes care of things. Remember, safety counts. ■

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