

A Positive Youth Development Approach to School Safety

Researchers developed a comprehensive model of school safety to describe the multiple pathways that contribute to school safety and positive youth development. This comprehensive model is designed to help practitioners and policymakers understand how the strategies they choose may be related to a larger context of school safety. We consider school safety to refer to the psychological and physical well-being of students and school staff that requires attention to precursors of violence across a spectrum. The spectrum includes primary prevention, early intervention, and recovery strategies, which we represent in the model below:

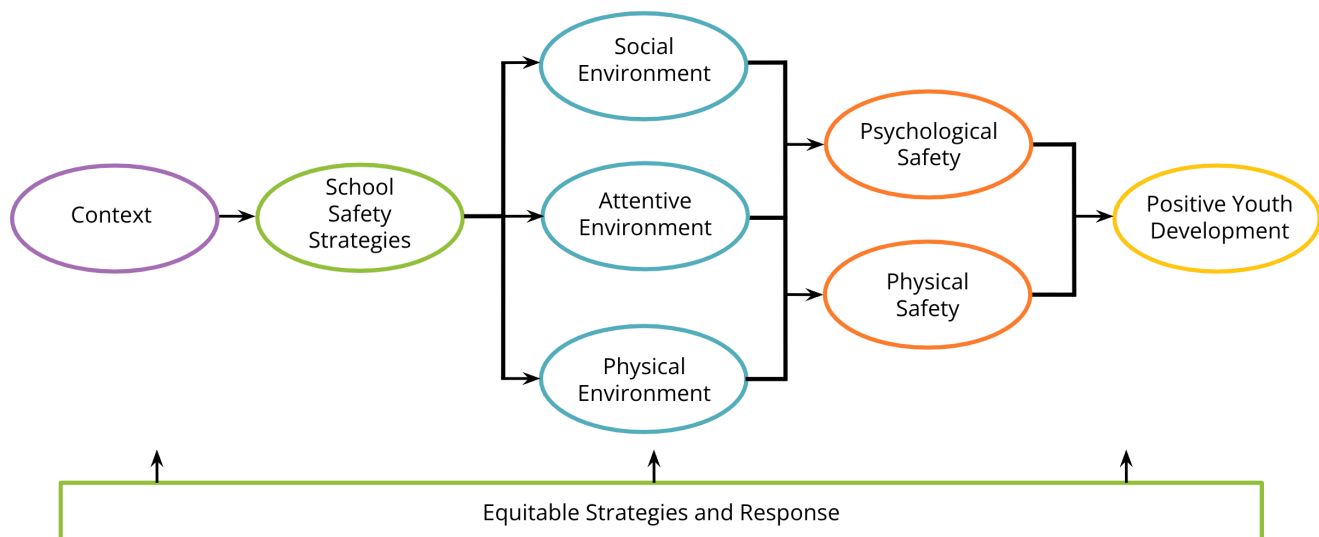


Image Description: A Positive Youth Development Approach to School Safety, which reads from left to right, represents 1) Contextual Factors; 2) Environmental Factors and their associated strategies; 3) Outcomes; and 4) Equitable Response.

Our model includes four key components: 1) Contextual Factors; 2) Environmental Factors & their associated strategies; 3) Outcomes; and 4) Equitable Response. The model begins with recognition of the underlying contextual factors necessary for the successful implementation of whatever approaches are taken in a particular district or school.

Contextual Factors

The contextual factors fall into three general areas: policy, capacity, and community. Policy refers to both a clear and consistent vision, mission, and directives for school safety. This provides the rationale and support necessary for creating a community and school culture committed to what it takes for implementation. Capacity refers to the specific staffing and appropriate skills of the staff, funding, and other resources needed for sustained efforts. Community includes school culture and caregivers that are supported, and the role they play in implementing effective and sustainable school safety strategies.

Environmental Approaches

These contextual factors then may drive the types of strategies used by schools to create safe environments that we define as social, attentive, or physical environmental approaches. The social-environmental approaches include programs designed to create supportive school climates (e.g., restorative justice, social-emotional learning). The attentive environment approaches include early detection programs that identify issues early before they grow into aggressive and violent acts (e.g., anonymous reporting systems, threat assessment, mental health first aid). Physical environmental approaches include deterrence measures (e.g., metal detectors, door locks, controlled entry). Furthermore, many of the school safety strategies that are implemented can influence multiple environments.

Equitable Responses

The model also emphasizes that Equitable Responses in the implementation of approaches are vital to ensure that strategies for school safety should attend to disproportionate effects on different groups of students based on any number of characteristics (e.g., race, LGBTQ+, gender, disability). The issues of equity need to be considered and continually evaluated to prevent differential effects across different groups. If approaches are not implemented fairly, it undermines efforts to create safe school environments for all students.

Notably, our model suggests that while the goal of comprehensive school safety strategies is to address both the psychological and physical safety of students and staff, it is vital that whatever is implemented ultimately helps schools create environments where students can thrive and develop into healthy and productive adults. Taken together, the overall outcome is positive youth development, which strives to support and empower the emotional, physical, and mental well-being of all students.

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About the National Center for School Safety

The National Center for School Safety (NCSS) is a Bureau of Justice Assistance-funded training and technical assistance center at the University of Michigan School of Public Health. As a multidisciplinary, multi-institutional center focused on improving school safety and preventing school violence, the NCSS team is composed of national leaders in criminal justice, education, social work, and public health with expertise in school safety research and practice. NCSS provides comprehensive and accessible support to Students, Teachers, and Officers Preventing (STOP) School Violence grantees and the school safety community nationwide to address today's school safety challenges. NCSS serves as the national training and technical assistance provider for the STOP School Violence Program.

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