ISSUE 4

SCHOOL SAFETY: MUCH MORE THAN METAL DETECTORS

Issue Overview

The debates about how to respond to school shootings specifically can overshadow a broader discussion of school safety more generally. School shootings, like those in Parkland, Florida, are still statistically rare, especially when compared to the safety issues schools deal with daily, such as bullying, fights, and theft.

As schools and districts in Georgia address the issue of school safety, it is important to understand the full spectrum of safety issues. A comprehensive framework for school safety includes the physical safety of the building and addresses issues of school climate, discipline, and the behavioral health of students and faculty.

Significance for Georgia

In addressing school safety, schools and districts must properly understand the root causes and consequences of school violence and its impact on overall school safety. A wide variety of issues such as firearms, adult and student sexual misconduct, substance abuse, gangs, bullying, approaches to discipline, and the social-emotional health of both students and faculty all play a role in school safety.

Critical to school safety is ensuring a positive school climate, one which fosters safety; promotes a supportive academic, disciplinary, and physical environment; and encourages and maintains respectful, trusting, and caring relationships throughout the school community. Reciprocally, both physical safety and emotional safety are key components to a positive school climate. Emotionally safe learning environments can be achieved by making social and emotional learning (SEL) an essential part of education. Strong SEL competencies support the mental health of the student body. Social and emotional well-being leads to mental wellness and the development of soft social skills that are part of being a productive member of a community.

Action Steps

In 2018, Georgia passed two laws aimed at increasing school safety by addressing student discipline policies related to behavioral and mental health and attendance protocols that support a positive school climate. One of them, HB 763, also made specific recommendations about school safety plans. A Senate School Safety Study Committee, which met throughout 2018, issued recommendations in the late fall of 2018. HB 763 centered on three key areas aimed at strengthening school safety: 1) crisis prevention; 2) the physical security of school buildings, facilities, and buses; and 3) emergency response.

School safety is a complex challenge, and one strategy alone will not address all elements of school safety. State and local leaders across Georgia are recognizing the complexity of this issue and what is necessary to meet the needs of each individual student. At the state level, that includes continued, and in some cases expanded, support for programs that impact school climate and support student learning, such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), mental health supports, language and literacy, and SEL competencies embedded into state standards. At the district level, this includes developing integrated strategies that incorporate such diverse elements as climate; prevention and intervention programs related to mental health; school facilities and personnel; student behavior and discipline policies; security hardware and security systems; safe school planning; coordination of communications between schools and local law enforcement, fire, and emergency experts; and teachers, parents, students, administrators, and community members working together.