Workplace Violence at Schools – “If You See Something, Say Something” Meeting Kit



WHAT’S AT STAKE

Schools should be safe and welcoming spaces for everyone – students, teachers, professors, guardians, and all members of the school community. Unfortunately, incidents of workplace violence, which can range from hurtful words and bullying to physical attacks, can sometimes happen in schools. These incidents can have a serious impact, causing emotional distress, physical harm, and disrupting the learning environment. That’s why it’s so important to be aware of the warning signs and to speak up if we see something concerning. A safe and respectful environment is essential for effective teaching, learning, and overall well-being.

WHAT’S THE DANGER

It’s easy to think, ‘That could never happen here.’ But the truth is, these kinds of incidents can happen anywhere. That’s why being able to recognize the warning signs is so critical. Workplace violence in schools can take many forms, and it’s important to recognize them:

Different Forms of Harm:

- **Verbal Threats and Intimidation:** This includes yelling, using aggressive language, making threatening gestures, or any type of verbal abuse that makes someone feel scared or threatened. For example, someone might say, “If you don’t do what I want, you’ll regret it.”
- **Harassment and Bullying:** This involves repeated unwanted comments, offensive jokes, intimidation, or any behavior that creates a hostile or uncomfortable environment. This can include spreading rumors or making personal attacks.
- **Physical Assaults:** This includes any physical contact intended to cause harm, such as hitting, pushing, shoving, kicking, or any other form of physical attack.
- **Threats with Weapons:** This is the most serious type of workplace violence and involves the use or threat of use of firearms, knives, or other weapons.

Spotting the Warning Signs:

It’s crucial to be aware of potential warning signs that someone might be at risk of becoming violent. They should be taken seriously and reported. Some of these signs might include:

- Noticeable shifts in someone’s personality, such as becoming unusually irritable, agitated, withdrawn, or anxious.
- Noticeable changes in mood, such as becoming easily angered or agitated.
- Social withdrawal or isolation from colleagues and students.
- Significant changes in work performance, attendance, or personal habits.
- Direct or indirect threats of harm to themselves or others.
- Fixation on a particular person, object, or idea.
- Statements indicating feelings of hopelessness, despair, or suicidal ideation.

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

What we can do to prevent and respond to workplace violence – it’s not just about reacting; it’s about being proactive and creating a culture of safety.

Recognizing and Reporting – Trust Your Gut:

This is where the “If You See Something, Say Something” message comes into play. If you notice any of those warning signs we discussed—a sudden shift in someone’s mood, threatening comments, or even just a gut feeling that something isn’t right—please, don’t hesitate to report it. Talk to your supervisor, the principal, a trusted colleague, or your designated school safety contact. It’s always better to be safe than sorry.

Responding in the Moment – Prioritize Safety and Follow Protocol:

Okay, let’s imagine a worst-case scenario: you witness a violent incident (students fighting with weapons, such as knives). This is a high-stress situation, but keeping these key points in mind can make a huge difference:

- **Your Safety and Others’ Safety First:** Your absolute top priority is your safety and the safety of those around you. If possible, calmly and quickly remove yourself and others from the immediate area. Use clear, loud commands to direct people to safety: “Get out of here! Go! Run!” Don’t try to be a hero; getting to safety is the most important thing.
- **Separate and Create Distance:** If possible, try to verbally separate the students. Use a firm, clear voice and give direct commands like, “Stop! Get back!” or “Separate now!” If there are other staff members nearby, immediately call for their assistance.
- **Activate Emergency Procedures:** Immediately activate your school’s emergency procedures. This might involve pulling a fire alarm (if appropriate for the situation), using an intercom system to announce a lockdown, or directly contacting the office. Familiarize yourself with these procedures beforehand so you know exactly what to do.
- **Call for Help – Don’t Delay:** Call 911 or your school’s designated emergency contact number as soon as it is safe to do so. Provide clear and concise information about the situation, including the location and nature of the incident.
- **Observe from a Safe Distance (If Possible):** If you can do so without putting yourself at risk, try to observe the situation from a safe distance. Note the number of students involved, their descriptions, and the types of weapons involved. This information will be crucial for law enforcement.
- **Follow Law Enforcement and School Official Instructions:** When law enforcement or school administrators arrive, follow their instructions carefully and cooperate fully.

FINAL WORD

Ultimately, our efforts to prevent workplace violence are about protecting our entire school community—our students, our colleagues, and ourselves. A safe and respectful environment is essential for effective teaching and learning.