



**Public Advocate for the City of New York**

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# **Preparing to SAVE:**

## **A Survey of Safety Planning at New York City Public Schools**

**A REPORT BY PUBLIC ADVOCATE BETSY GOTBAUM  
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# **Office of the New York City Public Advocate**

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

In response to a series of violent incidents in schools in the late 1990's, then New York State Governor Pataki convened a task force on school safety chaired by Lieutenant Governor Mary O. Donohue. In October 1999, the task force released a report entitled *Safer Schools for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A Common Sense Approach to Keeping New York's Students and Schools Safe*. Recommendations made in that report were used in crafting legislation, signed into law in July 2000 by Governor Pataki as the Safe Schools Against Violence Act (SAVE).

District- and building-level school safety plans are major components of the SAVE Act. The SAVE Act requires that all state school districts, including the New York City Department of Education (DOE), develop district-level safety plans. Every school in the state is required to develop a building-level safety plan. The building-level safety plans are drafted by a committee of school community stakeholders and are required by law to include policies and procedures for safe evacuation of a school building, designation of an emergency response team, establishment of communication systems, definition of the chain of command, and other steps that would mitigate the impact of an emergency in a school building. In order to ensure that the larger community is part of the planning process, the law requires that the safety plan go through a review process each year with a required public comment period before being filed with the city Department of Education.

Having a school safety plan in place can prevent chaos, injury, or even loss of life in the event of an emergency. According to the New York State Center for School Safety, "there is little doubt that compliance with the mandates outlined in the SAVE legislation, which included the development of district and building level safety plans, was a major factor contributing to the safety of every one of the over 3.3 million students attending school in New York State on September 11, 2001."

To determine whether New York City public schools are in compliance with provisions of the SAVE Act related to procedures for school safety plans, the Office of the Public Advocate surveyed UFT chapter leaders, each of whom serves as a member of the Safety Committee at their respective schools. The survey found that:

- 71 percent of respondents said there has been *no* early dismissal drill (also known as an emergency relocation drill) in their school this school year.
- 50 percent of respondents said there has been *no* school-wide training for staff on how to proceed in the event of an emergency.
- 28 percent of respondents said staff is *not aware* of their roles and responsibilities in case of an emergency.
- 21 percent of respondents said they *don't know* the chain of command if they think danger is imminent and the school may need to be locked down or evacuated.
- 11 percent of respondents said their school *does not* have procedures for intruder alerts in the building.

- 35 percent of respondents said the school’s safety plan *does not* include provisions for notifying parents at the time of an emergency.
- 41 percent of respondents said staff, parents, and students *did not* receive written information about emergency procedures in the school by October 1 of the current school year.
- 19 percent of respondents said they and other Safety Committee members *are not* given the opportunity to review, comment, and sign off on the safety plan before its adoption each year.

This report makes the following recommendations to ensure that school staff, students, and parents are adequately prepared for any type of emergency that might occur during the school day:

- The DOE should ensure that schools hold all required drills and trainings during the school year as required by the SAVE ACT.
- The DOE should provide schools with a template for addressing a wide range of health issues within the existing school safety plan framework.
- The DOE should make information about school safety plans more accessible to the public. The DOE should also require schools to send out notifications to local stakeholders informing them that the safety plan for that year has gone through the steps required by the SAVE Act and has been certified by the DOE and the NYPD.
- The DOE should create a public information campaign to inform parents about the school-based emergency alert system it will implement under the Public Schools Emergency Alert Act and their options for participating in it.
- The DOE should evaluate the school emergency alert system after the first school year including the rate of parent participation and a case-by-case review of any school emergencies.
- The DOE should ensure language access equality for the emergency alert system.
- The State Legislature should update the SAVE Act to take lessons learned from 9/11 into consideration.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, emergency preparedness training in schools has been synonymous with “fire drills” in which an alarm goes off and everyone from kindergarteners to high school seniors files down the halls and out of the school building behind their teachers.<sup>1</sup> Fire drills continue to be an important part of school safety procedures. In the last decade, however, emergency preparedness in schools has come to encompass a range of potential threats. A series of school shooting incidents beginning in the mid-1990’s raised awareness of the threat of random acts of violence inside school

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<sup>1</sup> Heath, Melissa Allen, Katherine Ryan, Brenda Dean, Rebecka Bingham. “History of School Safety and Psychological First Aid for Children,” Brief Treatment and Crisis Intervention Advance Access, Brigham Young University School Psychology Program, Oxford University Press, August 3, 2007.

buildings, causing schools to institute new policies monitoring who and what comes through the doors every day. The terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 brought about new concerns, leading schools to consider how they would keep students safe if an incident affecting the entire community occurred.

In New York State, comprehensive emergency preparedness planning is mandated by the Safe Schools Against Violence (SAVE) Act, signed by Governor George Pataki in July 2000. District- and building-level school safety plans are major components of the SAVE Act. The SAVE Act requires that all state school districts, including the New York City Department of Education (DOE), develop district-level safety plans. Every school in the state is required to develop a building-level safety plan. The building-level safety plans are drafted by a committee of school community stakeholders and are required by law to include policies and procedures for safe evacuation of a school building, designation of an emergency response team, establishment of communication systems, definition of the chain of command, and other steps that would mitigate the impact of an emergency in a school building.

In order to determine whether New York City public schools are in compliance with provisions of the SAVE Act related to procedures for school safety plans, the Office of the Public Advocate, with the help of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), conducted a survey of UFT chapter leaders, each of whom serves as a member of the Safety Committee in their respective school. In particular, the Office of the Public Advocate sought to determine whether schools are actively collaborating with their Safety Committees to create a plan that is appropriate for their particular building and population and whether school personnel know their roles and the steps to follow in the event of an emergency. This report is based on the results of that survey.

## **BACKGROUND**

When Jamie Rouse, a seventeen year old in Lynnville, Tennessee, shot and killed a student and a teacher inside his high school in 1995, the incident became only the first in a series of high-profile school shootings throughout the 1990's. In October 1997, sixteen-year-old Luke Woodham killed two students at his high school in Mississippi. Two months later, a school shooting in Kentucky left three students dead. In March of the same school year, two middle school students, just eleven and thirteen years old, killed four students and a teacher in Jonesboro, Arkansas. In perhaps the most infamous of these incidents, two students at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado killed twelve students and a teacher before taking their own lives.<sup>2</sup>

One of the lasting policy implications of this series of shootings is the impact it had on security in school buildings. A study published in 2002 found that violent events taking place in the 1990's in "suburban and rural schools have destroyed the perception that

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<sup>2</sup> "Santee School Shootings; Past School Shootings; For The Record," *Los Angeles Times*, March 6, 2001.

school violence is an urban phenomenon.”<sup>3</sup> This change in perception led to “an increased reliance on security devices” such as “metal detectors, video cameras, and a law enforcement presence,” as well as increased emphasis on crisis preparedness plans to mitigate the effects of such events.<sup>45</sup>

### *The SAVE Act*

In New York State, even before the Columbine incident, school shootings spurred then Governor Pataki to address the issue of school safety by convening a task force chaired by then Lieutenant Governor Mary Donohue. The Task Force on School Violence, announced in the Governor’s 1999 State of the State address, spent a year visiting schools and holding public hearings to receive input from communities across the state. This process yielded a 108-page report that included twenty-five recommendations for combating violence in schools. The recommendations fell into four broad categories: “Comprehensive School Safety Planning,” “State Prevention and Intervention Initiatives,” “School Crime: Tracking, Reporting, and Sharing Information,” and “Expanding Local Authority and Encouraging Local Initiatives to Enhance School Safety.” Under these headings came a wide range of recommendations, such as requiring School Safety Committees and plans, encouraging schools to do a better job of involving parents in safety planning, giving students lessons in character and citizenship, requiring fingerprinting and background checks for teachers, and creating a state center to provide training and technical assistance in violence prevention planning for schools. These recommendations formed the basis for the Safe Schools Against Violence (SAVE) Act, signed into law by Governor Pataki in July 2000. The SAVE Act addresses a wide range of issues and closely matches the recommendations made by the Task Force by requiring the following components:

- District-wide school safety plans;
- Building-level emergency response plans;
- Codes of conduct on school grounds;
- Teacher and principal authority to remove disruptive or violent students;
- Uniform violent incident reporting;
- Instruction in civility, citizenship, and character education;
- Health curriculum addressing issues of violence prevention and mental health;
- Interpersonal violence prevention education;
- School violence prevention education;
- Whistle blower protection for employees reporting violent incidents;
- Fingerprinting for prospective school district employees;
- Child abuse reporting;
- Prohibiting silent resignations to avoid disclosure of child abuse allegations;

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<sup>3</sup> Snell, Clete, Charles Bailey, Anthony Carona, and Dalila Mebane. “School Crime Policy Changes: The Impact of Recent Highly-Publicized School Crimes,” *American Journal of Criminal Justice*, Vol. 26, No. 2, 2002, p 282.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p 273, 279.

<sup>5</sup> Heath, p 217.

- Teacher discipline measures such as suspension, continuing education, or monetary fines;
- Court notification of schools regarding juvenile delinquency adjudications.<sup>6</sup>

Regulations of the SAVE Act were implemented in New York City at the beginning of the 2000-2001 school year.

### *School Safety Plans and Committees*

The new regulations mandated the creation of a School Safety Committee for each school to be comprised of the following individuals:

- Principal of the host building;
- Principal/Designee of any other program operating within the building;
- UFT chapter leader;
- Custodial engineer/designee;
- In-house School Safety Agent level III<sup>7</sup>/designee;
- NYPD Precinct Commanding Officer/designee;
- Parent Association President/designee;
- Dietician/designee of food services for the site;
- Representative of the Student Body;
- And any other person or persons deemed essential by the committee.<sup>8</sup>

The Safety Committee, which meets monthly, is principally responsible for developing a building-level safety plan on an annual basis “in order to meet changing security needs and conditions.”<sup>9</sup> The DOE Office of School and Youth Development in collaboration with the NYPD School Safety Division oversees the process of developing and approving the safety plan of each school. The SAVE Act specifies that building-level school safety plans must include but are not limited to the following:

- Policies and procedures for the safe evacuation of students, teachers, and other school personnel;
- Evacuation routes;
- Shelter sites;
- Emergency notification of parents or guardians;
- Procedures for assuring that crisis response and law enforcement officials have access to floor plans or other maps of the school interior and grounds;
- Establishment of internal and external communication systems for use in emergencies;
- Definition of the chain of command;

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<sup>6</sup> SAVE Summary Handout, New York State Center for School Safety.

<sup>7</sup> Level III Safety Agents supervise the other safety agents in the school building.

<sup>8</sup> New York City Board of Education, Regulation of the Chancellor, Number A-414, Category: Students

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

- And procedures for review and the conduct of drills and other exercises<sup>10</sup> to test components of the emergency response plan.<sup>11</sup>

The DOE provides each School Safety Committee with a template or “plan shell” to use as a starting point for its individualized plan. In previous years, the template included a section entitled “Staff Development” which stated that “SAVE Legislation calls for the annual school safety training for staff and students.”<sup>12</sup> The 2008-2009 school safety plan shell provided by the DOE does not include this section.<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless, schools must adhere to all requirements of the SAVE Act, including training for staff and students.

In accordance with the recommendation of the School Safety Task Force that the larger community, parents especially, be part of the planning and prevention process, the SAVE Act specifies that each school safety plan be “available for public comment at least thirty days prior to its adoption... [and] may be adopted by the school board<sup>14</sup> only after at least one public hearing that provides for the participation of school personnel, parents, students, and any other interested parties.”<sup>15</sup> City regulations require principals to “submit completed safety plans for approval to the appropriate superintendent by the end of the third week of September each year.”<sup>16</sup> The superintendent must then send the document to be certified by the Commanding Officer of the NYPD School Safety Division by October 15<sup>th</sup> of each school year.<sup>17</sup>

### *School Safety Plans After 9/11*

School safety plans were originally intended to address concerns about violent incidents affecting individual schools as opposed to citywide emergencies. Nonetheless, the New York State Center for School Safety (NYSCSS), a “government coordinating agency and information clearing house” on school safety issues in New York State,<sup>18</sup> in its evaluation of lessons learned from the 2001 terrorist attacks, asserted that “there is little doubt that compliance with the mandates outlined in the SAVE legislation, which included the development of district and building level safety plans, was a major factor contributing to the safety of every one of the over 3.3 million students attending school in New York State on September 11, 2001... The magnitude of the events of that day revealed the

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<sup>10</sup> This includes an “emergency relocation” drill, also referred to as an “early dismissal” drill in which students practice evacuating the school grounds close to their regular dismissal time. This is different from a regular fire drill, which can be held at any time during the school day and requires students to stay on school grounds and return to the building.

<sup>11</sup> New York State Education Law, Article 55, §2801-a

<sup>12</sup> 2007-2008 School Safety Plan Shell. New York City Department of Education and New York City Police Department, September 10, 2007.

<sup>13</sup> 2008-2009 School Safety Plan Shell. New York City Department of Education and New York City Police Department, October 6, 2008.

<sup>14</sup> In New York City, the Department of Education is the school governance body responsible for approving safety plans.

<sup>15</sup> 8 NYCRR § 155.17 (3)

<sup>16</sup> New York City Department of Education, Regulation of the Chancellor, A-414.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> New York State Center for School Safety homepage, (<http://nyscenterforschoolsafety.org/services.html>).

benefits of pre-planning required by the SAVE legislation, while exposing a need for refinements to the pre-planning process.”<sup>19</sup>

The NYSCSS made several recommendations to ensure that safety plans are more applicable to large-scale events. Recognizing that many people were so traumatized by the collapse of the World Trade Center that they were “unable to follow emergency protocols and procedures,” the NYSCSS recommended that plans “include provisions for the supervision and care of students whose teacher is unable to provide supervision.”<sup>20</sup> Other recommendations made by the NYSCSS included “utilizing alternate communication devices” so that school districts are “not dependent on any one means of communication” and redundancy for evacuation routes and designated evacuation sites.<sup>21</sup>

The city’s then Board of Education did make changes to safety plan requirements after 9/11. Immediately following the 2001 attacks, then Schools Chancellor Harold Levy announced that he was appointing a task force to make recommendations for improvements to the safety plans.<sup>22</sup> The *New York Times* reported that, after the attacks, “the Education Department required all schools to revise their safety plans... [to] specify at least three evacuation points and prepare for a range of incidents”.<sup>23</sup> In 2002, Mayor Bloomberg announced the creation of the Office of School Safety and Planning, which was primarily focused on school crime and developing “disciplinary procedures for children who disrupt classrooms with poor behavior” but also “charged with creating safety plans.”<sup>24</sup>

A September 2004 report by the non-profit America Prepared Campaign on terrorism preparedness in America’s twenty largest school districts included a mixed evaluation of the New York City DOE. The report praised the city’s “model system for formulating, vetting and approving individual school plans” and said its “plans and interagency communication are among the best in the country.”<sup>25</sup> It also found, however, that “New York is doing a poor job of informing parents about school plans [and] conducting drills other than fire drills.”<sup>26</sup> In a *Daily News* article discussing the report, the city refuted those findings, asserting that each school did in fact have a safety plan and would notify parents about the plans. A parent quoted in the same article indicated that the city had improved in this area. In 2003, she had complained about a lack of information regarding safety plans<sup>27</sup> but received a copy of the plan on the first day of the 2004 school year.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> New York State Center for School Safety, *What did we learn from 9/11? A New York State Perspective*, Research Brief No. 3, September 2003.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Wyatt, Edward. “Levy Orders Review of Schools’ Crisis Plans, Citing Communications,” *New York Times*, September 25, 2001.

<sup>23</sup> Herszenhorn, David. “Crisis Plans Being Redrawn By Schools Across Nation,” *New York Times*, April 12, 2003.

<sup>24</sup> Steinhauer, Jennifer. “When It Comes to School Discipline, Bloomberg’s Motto Is Safety First,” *New York Times*, September 18, 2002.

<sup>25</sup> Phinney, Allison. Preparedness in America’s Schools: A Comprehensive Look at Terrorism Preparedness in America’s Twenty Largest School Districts, America Prepared Campaign, September 2004, p. 40.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Gendar, Alison. “In Dark on School Evac Plan,” *Daily News*, February 14, 2003.

### *School Safety Plans and Pandemic Flu*

Recent events have highlighted another danger facing schools, that of pandemic illness. A 2007 report by the National Center for Disaster Preparedness at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health argues that "like fires and school shootings, pandemic flu is a low probability, high impact event for which those in the front line need to be prepared."<sup>29</sup> The report recommends that, rather than developing an independent plan for flu preparedness, schools add such a plan into the existing framework of the overall school safety plan. Working a flu plan into the existing safety plan has the added benefit of serving "as an opportunity to make sure that each school's overall school safety plan is complete and up to date."<sup>30</sup> The report also recommends that the DOE and the DOHMH work to increase "citizen confidence" in two ways: First, the DOE and the DOHMH should immediately "develop and distribute a pandemic flu information brief... to be distributed to all principals, staff and all school stakeholders (including those education partners in the private and non-public school sectors)."<sup>31</sup> Next, the report recommends that principals work to "ensure that staff, parents, and the neighboring community are aware of the steps that they are taking to prepare for the pandemic flu and where appropriate, have access" to the plans.<sup>32</sup>

### *Communication with Parents*

Communication with parents about safety plans and emergencies varies from school to school. Each school now has its own portal on the DOE website, but the extent to which schools make use of this resource appears to vary. An informal review by the Office of the Public Advocate indicates that many schools have chosen to post on the portal information about evacuation sites to which students would be brought in the event of an emergency in their building.<sup>33</sup> Other schools, however, do not use the portal to disseminate safety plan information to parents.<sup>34</sup> There are also schools that have

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<sup>28</sup> Lucadamo, Kathleen. "City Gets Low Grade On Schools Terror Plan," *Daily News*, September 18<sup>th</sup>, 2004.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas, Gregory A., Stephen Morse, Wilmer Alvarez, Lisa Soloff, David M. Abramson, and Irwin Redlener. The New York City Principals Pandemic Flu Survey: Are Schools Prepared?, National Center for Disaster Preparedness, Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University, April 2007, p. 10.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, p. 13.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, p. 12.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, p. 13.

<sup>33</sup> For example see: Queens P.S. 26

(<http://schools.nyc.gov/SchoolPortals/26/Q026/newsandinfo/Links/evacuation+procedure.htm>), Staten Island P.S. 37 (<http://schools.nyc.gov/SchoolPortals/31/R037/AboutUs/Policies/safetyevacuation.htm>), Brooklyn P.S. 236

(<http://schools.nyc.gov/SchoolPortals/22/K236/AboutUs/Policies/Evacuation+Plan.htm>), Manhattan P.S.

51 (<http://schools.nyc.gov/SchoolPortals/02/M051/TopLinks/EmergencyEvacuationProcedures.htm>),

Brooklyn New Utrecht High School

(<http://schools.nyc.gov/SchoolPortals/20/K445/newsandinfo/News/newsEmergencyReadiness.htm>).

<sup>34</sup> For example see: Bronx Academy for Language and Technology

(<http://schools.nyc.gov/SchoolPortals/09/X365/default.htm>), Brooklyn High School for Civil Rights

(<http://schools.nyc.gov/SchoolPortals/19/K504/default.htm>), Manhattan J.H.S. 054

(<http://schools.nyc.gov/SchoolPortals/03/M054/default.htm>), Staten Island P.S. 048

(<http://schools.nyc.gov/SchoolPortals/31/R048/default.htm>).

websites not provided by the DOE that, in some cases, provide information about emergency procedures.<sup>35</sup> It appears that the DOE does not have a uniform policy about how schools should make evacuation information available online.

Schools have also had difficulty contacting parents during emergencies. In December 2007, an education complex in Queens housing a high school and two different lower level schools was “locked down” shortly before dismissal because a threatening letter, later revealed to be a hoax, found in the mailbox of an assistant principal, set off a police search for a potential gunman. Frantic parents trying to call the school for information could not get through as staff tied up phone lines attempting to call each student’s emergency contact number individually. For many parents, the only information they received came from children inside the building calling from their own concealed cell phones,<sup>36</sup> considered contraband by the DOE.<sup>37</sup>

The ubiquity of cell phones with text messaging capabilities has made mass text alerts an increasingly reliable way of disseminating information to a large group of people instantaneously. A text message alert system at St. John’s University in Queens, implemented in the aftermath of the shootings on the Virginia Tech campus in April, 2007, is said to have prevented a tragedy by notifying students when a gunman entered the Queens campus the following September.<sup>38</sup> Following that incident, the city announced a pilot program for a cell phone based emergency alert system called Notify NYC.<sup>39</sup> Notify NYC was implemented May 28, 2009 but is not specifically intended to provide parents with information about their child’s school. On May 19, 2009, Governor Paterson passed the Public Schools Emergency Alert Act, which mandates that the city have a text alert system specifically for parents of schoolchildren in place by January 1, 2010.

## **METHODOLOGY**

To measure how many New York City public schools are following provisions of the SAVE Act related to school safety plans, the Office of the Public Advocate chose to

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<sup>35</sup> For example see: Manhattan P.S. 3 (<http://www.ps3nyc.org/>), Brooklyn P.S. 102 (<http://www.ps102.org/home.aspx>), Manhattan M.S. 167 (<http://www.wagner167.org/home.aspx>), Staten Island P.S. 42 (<http://www.ps42.org/home.aspx>)

<sup>36</sup> Mimoni, Victor. “Glen Oaks Lockdown Triggers Outcry,” *Queens Courier*, December 22, 2007.

<sup>37</sup> NYC DOE Chancellor’s Regulation A-412 bans students from carrying cell phones and other communication devices in school. The Public Advocate, along with the City Council and the UFT, has fought the Bloomberg administration’s enforcement of this regulation. In 2006, a coalition of New York City parents sued the city in an attempt to get the ban lifted. A New York State Appellate Court upheld the ban in 2008. In 2007, the City Council passed Intro. 0351 to allow students to carry cell phones to school. Mayor Bloomberg vetoed the bill and the Council overrode the veto. However, the Council lacks the authority to change school regulations, so the state court’s decision on the issue stands. Goodman, Emily Jane. “Upholding the Cell Phone Ban,” *Gotham Gazette*, May 16, 2007.

Bosman, Julie, “Manhattan: Cellphone Bill Vetoed,” *New York Times*, August 10, 2007.

<sup>38</sup> Barry, Ellen, and Winter Miller. “The Day After, Warning System Draws Wide Praise at St. John’s,” *New York Times*, September 28, 2007.

<sup>39</sup> Lisberg, Adam. “Notify NYC to Warn New Yorkers About Emergencies Via Email, Phone,” *Daily News*, December 5, 2007.

survey UFT chapter leaders because they are School Safety Committee members and are therefore likely to have knowledge of their school's safety plan. The UFT emailed the survey to its 1,385 chapter leaders, each of whom serves as a member of the Safety Committee at their respective school. Surveys were collected between January 6 and March 22, 2009. Of the 1,385 UFT chapter leaders who received surveys, 547 responded.

Most of the questions asked in the survey were based directly on New York State legislation or on guidance documents provided by the New York State Education Department.<sup>40</sup>

## **FINDINGS**

These findings are based on the responses of 547 UFT chapter leaders, each of whom serves as a safety team member in his or her school.<sup>41</sup>

*The majority of School Safety Committee members surveyed indicate that their school has not held school-wide emergency training or relocation drills.*

- 378 of 534 respondents, or 71 percent, said there has been *no* emergency relocation drill this school year.
- 264 of 524 respondents, or 50 percent, said there has been *no* school-wide training for staff on how to proceed in the event of an emergency.

*Many School Safety Committee members surveyed indicate that school staff is unaware of roles and responsibilities in their school in the event of an emergency.*

- 147 of 527 respondents, or 28 percent, said staff is *not aware* of their roles and responsibilities in case of an emergency.
- 112 of 537 respondents, or 21 percent, said they *don't know* the chain of command if they think danger is imminent and the school may need to be locked down or evacuated.

*More than one in ten School Safety Committee members surveyed indicate that their school lacks procedures for intruders in the building.*

- 56 of 526 respondents, or 11 percent, said their school *does not* have procedures for intruder alerts in the building.

*Many School Safety Committee members surveyed indicate that their school does not effectively communicate with parents about emergency procedures or in emergencies.*

- 169 of 487 respondents, or 35 percent, said the school's safety plan *does not* include provisions for notifying parents at the time of an emergency.
- 216 of 521 respondents, or 41 percent, said staff, parents, and students *did not* receive written information about emergency procedures in the school by October 1 of the current school year.

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<sup>40</sup> See appendix for survey questions.

<sup>41</sup> The number of respondents for each question differs from the number of respondents overall because some respondents left some questions unanswered.

*Nearly one in five School Safety Committee members surveyed indicate that their school does not consult them on the creation of its safety plan.*

- 103 of 533 respondents, or 19 percent said they and other Safety Committee members *are not* given the opportunity to review, comment, and sign off on the safety plan before its adoption each year.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum makes the following recommendations to ensure that school staff, students, and parents are adequately prepared for any type of emergency that might occur during the school day.

The New York City Department of Education should:

### ***Ensure that schools hold all required drills and trainings during the school year as required by the SAVE ACT.***

Half of the surveyed Safety Committee members said there has been *no* school-wide training for staff on how to proceed in the event of an emergency, and 71 percent said there has been *no* emergency relocation drill this school year. The DOE must ensure that schools hold all required drills during the year.

The 2008-2009 school safety plan shell provided by the DOE omitted the “Staff Development” section included in the 2007-2008 plan shell. This section reinforced the need for annual school safety training for staff and students. The DOE should restore this section to the 2009-2010 school safety plan shell in order to ensure that individualized safety plans created by Safety Committee members fulfill the requirements of the SAVE Act.

The DOE should encourage schools to provide additional training if staff are still unsure of their role in the event of an emergency after receiving the training required by law.

### ***Provide schools with a template for addressing a wide range of health issues within the existing school safety plan framework.***

The DOE should provide School Safety Committees with a protocol for mitigating the effects of a wide range of health issues including pandemic flu, for inclusion in existing school safety plans. This protocol should be developed by the Office of School Health (OSH), a joint program of the DOE and DOHMH, and reflect input from School Safety Committee members and the experiences they have had in dealing with the range of health issues that can arise in a school. The OSH should also distribute a brief on pandemic flu planning to all public and private school administrators, as recommended by the National Center for Disaster Preparedness, so that they can in turn inform parents and community stakeholders about steps being taken to plan for pandemic flu in schools.

### ***Make information about school safety plans more accessible to the public.***

Some schools make safety plan information available online through their portal on the DOE website; other schools post this information on separate websites; some don't post it at all. This ad-hoc system is confusing and inefficient, especially for parents who have children in more than one school. The DOE should create a single system for school safety plan information that allows parents to keep apprised of opportunities for public review required by the SAVE Act, see publicly available portions of their school's plan, and check to see that the plan has been certified for each school year. In addition, each school should send a redacted paper copy of the safety plan home with each student for parents and guardians and post the plan on the school web portal. The DOE should also require schools to send out notifications to local stakeholders informing them that the safety plan for that year has gone through the steps required by the SAVE Act and has been certified by the DOE and the NYPD.

***Implement a public information campaign to inform parents about the school-based emergency alert system***

The Public Schools Emergency Alert Act, passed by Governor Paterson in May, 2009, mandates that the city have a school-based emergency alert system using text messaging, email, and phone calls in place by January 1, 2010 to alert students, parents, and staff about school emergencies and provide them with instructions. A high rate of parental participation is key to the success of this system. The DOE should create a public information campaign informing parents about the new school-based emergency alert system and their options for participating. The DOE should ensure that parents are encouraged to participate in the system at every access point including school registration, parent-teacher conferences, and daily student pick-up and drop-off. The DOE should also ensure that schools are sending information for parents on the test alert system home with students.

***Review the emergency alert system after first year of implementation***

Given that it has a relatively limited amount of time in which to comply with the Public Schools Emergency Alert Act, the DOE should evaluate the resulting emergency alert system at the close of the 2009-10 school year. The DOE should review the rate of parent participation and, if needed, make necessary changes to increase participation. The DOE should also review any school emergencies that occur during the 2009-10 school year to identify areas of improvement for its emergency alert system. As part of its review process, the DOE should make a concerted effort to seek community input and make changes to the system based on that input.

***Ensure language access equality for the emergency alert system***

The DOE must ensure that the school-based emergency alert system is designed to accommodate parents with limited or no English proficiency. Emergency alerts should be made available in “the eight most common primary languages spoken by persons living in New York City as identified by the DOE,” as required by Chancellor’s Regulation A-663.<sup>42</sup>

The State Legislature should:

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<sup>42</sup> Regulation of the Chancellor Number A-663, New York City Department of Education, June 2, 2006.

***Update the SAVE Act to take lessons learned from 9/11 into consideration.***

In its evaluation of how school safety plans performed on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, NYSCSS recommended that safety plans include redundancy in evacuation routes and communication systems as well as a contingency plan for students whose teacher becomes incapacitated in some way. State lawmakers should amend the SAVE Act, now almost ten years old, so that it reflects these recommendations.

## APPENDIX

### Survey Questions

1. Do you and other safety committee members in your school have the opportunity to review, comment, and sign off on the school safety plan before its adoption each school year?<sup>43</sup> (Yes/ No)
2. Did staff, parents, and students receive written information about emergency procedures in your school by Oct. 1 of this year?<sup>44</sup> (Yes/ No)
3. Is staff in your school aware of their roles and responsibilities in the event of an emergency? (Yes/ No)
4. Have staff received school-wide training on how to proceed in the event of an emergency? (Yes/ No)
5. Has your school conducted an early dismissal (emergency relocation) drill this school year?<sup>45</sup> (Yes/ No)
6. Does your school have procedures for intruder alerts in your building? (Yes/ No)
7. Do you know the chain of command at your school if you think staff and students are in imminent danger and the school may need to be locked down or evacuated? (Yes/ No)
8. Does your school safety plan include provisions for notifying parents at the time of an emergency?<sup>46</sup> (Yes/ No)

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<sup>43</sup> 8 NYCRR § 155.17 (3): Each board of education, chancellor or other governing body shall make each district-wide and building-level school safety plan available for public comment at least thirty days prior to its adoption...Building-level plans may be adopted by the school board only after at least one public hearing that provides for the participation of school personnel, parents, students and other interested parties.

<sup>44</sup> 8 NYCRR § 155.17 (4)(i): Each public school superintendent... shall take action to provide written information by October 1 of each school year, to all students and staff about emergency procedures.

<sup>45</sup> 8 NYCRR § 155.17 (4)(j): Each school district or board of cooperative education services shall, at least once every school year, and where possible in cooperation with local county emergency preparedness plan officials, conduct one test of its emergency plan or its emergency response procedures under each of its building level school safety plans, including sheltering or early dismissal.

<sup>46</sup> NY CLS Educ § 2801-a: A school emergency response plan, developed by the building-level school safety team...shall include...emergency notification to persons in parental relation to a student.