



Attorney General Abbott's School Safety Initiative to Protect Texas Students

Abbott's expanded National School Safety Task Force recommendations for improved school safety.

AUSTIN – As the state's chief law enforcement official, Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott has called for new safety measures designed to protect students from school violence. Attorney General Abbott, whose office serves on the Texas School Safety Center (TxSSC) board, has urged school districts to implement new safety procedures to help prevent a Columbine or Virginia Tech-style shooting in Texas.

"Texas schools must be safe and secure," Attorney General Abbott said. "This school safety initiative teaches educators how to prevent school shootings – and how to react if disaster strikes."

Attorney General Abbott added: "During a school shooting, panic can overwhelm students and teachers. The difference between life and death can depend on how they respond in the seconds before and after an incident. Our school safety toolkit outlines steps that schools can take to secure students and save lives."

New training tools to assist educators and law enforcement to improve campus were unveiled by Attorney General Abbott, TxSSC Director Curtis Clay and Eanes ISD Superintendent Dr. Nola Wellman

The TxSSC, created in 1999 in the aftermath of the Columbine tragedy, provides schools with research, training, and technical assistance to reduce youth violence and promote safety in Texas schools.

The Attorney General has recommended Texas school districts adopt the following safety measures:

- Develop, implement and annually practice campus emergency plans. Schools must develop and implement school emergency plans and update their existing plans. Schools should team up with law enforcement to practice school safety drills once a year, rather than once every three years as current law requires.
- Establish a **Campus Crime Stoppers** or similar anonymous incident reporting program. According to research by the U.S. Secret Service, most school violence incidents were foreshadowed by warning signs that went unreported to authorities and school personnel. Schools must educate teens that it is "Cool to Come Forward."
- Encourage information-sharing between law enforcement, juvenile justice officials and school authorities. Strict interpretations of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) and the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) have hampered information-sharing between schools and law enforcement during "imminent danger" situations. Information-sharing between school districts and law enforcement must prioritize public safety over personal privacy concerns.

Attorney General Abbott, who is a member of the National Association of Attorneys General School Safety Task Force, also supports the national task force recommendations, which include:

- Improve reporting systems. Schools must have a centralized communications system in place so that disturbing behavior can be reported and the information can be triaged by a team of professionals.
- Clarify existing privacy laws. Congressional and state legislators must clarify how schools can legally share medical and educational information. When students exhibit violent or disturbing behavior, public safety must override the push for privacy.
- Report data on the mentally ill to the National Instant Criminal Background System (NICS). Texas should provide information about individuals who are disqualified from possessing firearms for mental health reasons to federal authorities responsible for administering NICS.
- Since September 2008, Texas school districts must report the results of their first campus security audits to the TxSSC. Texas law requires schools to conduct these safety audits every three years and practice their campus emergency management plans.

Attorney General Abbott encouraged all school districts to team up with law enforcement to annually practice campus safety procedures: “Having a plan is important, but executing that plan under stress – when seconds count – is critical to saving lives,” he added.

To help school safety administrators improve campus safety, the Office of the Attorney General (OAG) will provide all Texas public schools with an interactive DVD and CD-Rom, “School Safety: Saving Lives When Seconds Count.” The video illustrates the enormous impact school and law enforcement personnel can have during a crisis situation. The training materials offer administrators, principals, teachers and school safety officials the tools they need to conduct school safety audits, prepare incident command kits and address warning signs. The materials also include a special School Safety Guide as well as other useful OAG publications addressing juvenile crime and discipline.

Recognizing that students are critical to school safety, the OAG also developed and launched the Texas Teen Page. This interactive and comprehensive online Web community encourages Texas teens to make good choices, including coming forward to report suspicious behavior on campus. The Texas Teen Page also offers students helpful information, including how to make wise financial decisions, recognize summer job scams and spot fraudulent credit card or scholarship offers. The Texas Teen Page can be accessed by clicking on the “TXT” icon on the OAG’s main Web site at www.oag.state.tx.us.

Attorney General Abbott encouraged Texas students to come forward and report alarming behavior to authorities. He encouraged all school districts to implement a **Campus Crime Stoppers** program, which allows students to anonymously report perceived campus threats. Under Texas law, the identity of any person who provides information to the **Crime Stoppers** program is protected.

“**Campus Crime Stoppers** is critical to school violence prevention,” Attorney General Abbott added. “We are working closely with the Texas School Safety Center and the **Governor’s Criminal Justice Division Texas Crime Stoppers Council** to evaluate the expansion of this and similar valuable reporting programs. Children are the future of our great state so we must keep them safe.”

The Texas Crime Stoppers Council is mandated by the Office of the Governor and the Texas Legislature with encouraging, promoting and certifying Texas Crime Stoppers programs. Additionally, the Governor’s Criminal Justice Division CJD provides funding for training, travel, technology and telecommunications to certified Crime Stoppers programs.

In May 2008, Attorney General Abbott and several state attorneys general launched the Task Force on School Safety, which identified innovative programs, policies, and legislative initiatives that would improve school safety. The attorneys general sought input from educators, law enforcement, and public and private educational advocacy groups across the nation.

For more information, visit the Office of the Attorney General’s Web site at www.texasattorneygeneral.gov