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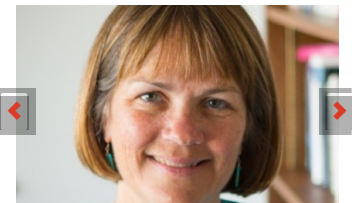
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Ensuring school safety: UB expert speaks on New York State's new school lockdown drills

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Amanda Nickerson, SUNY Distinguished Professor in the UB Graduate School of Education.

By Danielle LeGare

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BUFFALO, NY —America's Safe Schools Week has arrived (October 16-20) and ensuring the safety and well-being of students continues to be a top priority for educators and parents alike. With New York State's Board of Regents recently adopting new guidelines for school lockdown and evacuation drills, the spotlight is on balancing effective emergency preparedness with students' psychological well-being.

Amanda Nickerson, SUNY Distinguished Professor in the University at Buffalo's Department of Counseling, School and Educational Psychology, specializes in school safety and bullying intervention and offers important insights into how schools can better manage these drills.

This fall began a new procedure where approximately 6 million parents in New York State are notified at least one week before a school lockdown or evacuation drill. The drills must be age-appropriate and trauma-informed, reflecting a shift towards practices that minimize harm to students. These regulations aim to reduce trauma associated with emergency drills while maintaining preparedness.

With implementing these new guidelines, Nickerson's expertise is more relevant than ever.


"I love the change about not having the realistic drills, which I've often called more sensorial drills, where they use actors or props or simulations of active shooters. In my opinion, we don't know enough about the effect that those things have," said Nickerson. "When we have fire drills, we don't light a fire or make people think that there's an actual fire. So why would we do these kinds of things?"

Nickerson's research has emphasized that school safety must involve both physical and psychological well-being.

Trauma-informed drills, which focus on teaching safety skills without causing undue stress, offer an effective solution. Nickerson, who is also the director of the Graduate School of Education's Alberti Center for Bullying Abuse Prevention, believes that announcing drills beforehand, creating opportunities for students to ask questions and providing emotional support during and after drills can significantly reduce anxiety.

Additionally, Nickerson highlights the importance of schools forming multidisciplinary teams to develop safety protocols that include perspectives from mental health professionals, educators and parents. These teams can

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*Counseling, School and
Educational Psychology*

help ensure that emergency drills are effective and considerate of students' emotional needs.

School safety tips: What parents, schools and students should know

In light of these new guidelines, Nickerson offers the following tips to ensure school safety while minimizing trauma:

Parents: Before a drill, talk with your child about why drills are necessary, comparing them to everyday safety practices like locking the door at home or wearing a seatbelt. Keeping the conversation calm and factual helps set the right tone. If your child shows signs of anxiety, reach out to the school in advance.

Schools: Develop a trauma-informed approach to drills by planning ahead. Form multidisciplinary safety teams that include mental health professionals, teachers and parents. Teach students the procedures for each type of emergency drill (e.g., lockdown, shelter-in-place) before practicing them, and always announce that a drill is happening to reduce fear.

Students: Understand that drills are a part of being prepared, just like wearing a helmet or learning to cross the street safely. Stay calm, follow instructions and know that drills are meant to keep you safe.

"Adult behaviors really matter, especially when it comes to how this is explained and modeled to kids... A lot of us didn't grow up with this, and I think that can be upsetting to us," Nickerson said. "But schools have had to think through this and really plan."

Nickerson also stresses that while physical safety measures such as locked doors and evacuation procedures are vital, trust and relationships are the foundation of school safety. A sense of connection in the school environment often makes students feel secure enough to report potential issues, which can help prevent emergencies before they escalate. Many averted school shootings have been prevented by students raising concerns, further demonstrating the value of psychological safety.

The new guidelines reflect a significant shift towards practices that prioritize the emotional well-being of students while maintaining preparedness for emergencies.

"We can and should be outraged that we have to do this. But let's not let it overwhelm everything else that we are doing and the very positive things that we are focusing on in our schools, homes and communities."

For more information or to schedule an interview with Amanda Nickerson, please contact Danielle LeGare, dmligare@buffalo.edu

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