

CHAPTER
12

**STRATEGIC TRIPARTITE ALLIANCE IN ESTABLISHING
A SAFE SCHOOL PROGRAMME IN MALAYSIA**

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Abstract: This paper describes the Safe School Programme, which was established by Malaysia's Ministry of Education in 2002 in response to growing concerns about safety and security in schools. It presents previous measures used to address problems such as school violence, in addition to the objectives, the elements, the role of schools, families and communities, the procedures and the recommendations for the current Safe School Programme.

History of school safety in Malaysia

In Malaysia, schools have a legal responsibility to ensure the safety of students under the common law doctrine of *in loco parentis*. However, school safety is a growing problem in both primary and secondary schools; the number and severity of incidents of school violence, vandalism, theft and gangsterism, and general student discipline and misconduct problems are increasing. Widespread media coverage of these incidents has exacerbated the problem.

Traditionally, preventative measures were used to address negative behaviours: school circulars were disseminated by authorities (Ministry of Education, 1975), school rules posted in every classroom, staff room and on school notice boards, and school bags, equipment and grounds checked by teachers and prefects. All teachers were required to recognise and understand the various ordinances and circulars related to school discipline. School rules were enforced using a system of surveillance, penalties and punishments (*i.e.* suspension, expulsion, alternative school placement and arrest) (Purkey, 1999), although fines were not imposed on parents or guardians.

Recent incidents have forced the Ministry of Education to re-evaluate school discipline policies and practices. In 1999, in response to public demand for safer schools in Malaysia, the Educational Planning and Policy Research Division of the Ministry of Education conducted a study on Gangsterism in Daily Secondary Schools (1999). Results of the study indicated that students' involvement in delinquent activities is influenced by their ethnicity, peer group and place of residence. Students with low parental income who live in densely populated areas, new villages, apartments or temporary public housing, for example, are most at risk. At-risk students have a tendency to rebel and break rules and regulations; to desire to be the centre of attention; to have low academic achievement; to receive little parental attention; and to be susceptible to negative peer influence.

The Safe School Programme

To create a safe school environment, the Ministry of Education established a committee to examine and formulate a strategy to minimise violence in schools. It developed a blueprint for a Safe School Programme in Malaysia, known as the *Safe School Concept and Manual: Implementation Guide to Create a Safe School, Community and Family for Children* (Ministry of Education, 2002). The aim of the blueprint, which called for the support of families and local communities, was to reduce school violence and contribute to a safe school culture and environment.

Defining the problem

The committee considered the following elements as impeding the provision of a safe school environment:

- General lack of attention to school safety issues.
- Need for a formal policy to address the inter-related physical, social, emotional and technical elements that contribute towards school safety problems.
- Lack of collaboration and co-operation on safety issues between the family, society and educational institutions.
- Limited ability of the school to solve safety issues without family and community support.

Objectives

The specific objectives of the Safe School Programme are to:

- Improve understanding of safety-related procedures, such as emergencies, accidents and disasters.
- Develop strategies for planning and incorporating safety-related issues in school activities.
- Foster a school environment that is safe, healthy and conducive to learning.
- Protect the rights of each individual in the school.
- Enhance the quality of teaching and learning.
- Prepare guidelines for each action.
- Increase the focus on study and work in the school community.
- Encourage all involved to make a positive contribution towards the school.

Elements

The Safe School Programme focuses on the following elements:

- Awareness-raising in the community.
- Partnerships with external agencies, local authorities, corporate sectors and the media.
- School regulations.
- Management of emergencies and natural disasters.
- Eradication of truancy.
- Prevention of drug and alcohol abuse, and smoking.

- Socio-cultural awareness.
- Student leadership.
- Family and community participation.
- Special community programmes.
- Crime prevention through safe school building design.
- Extra-curricular and recreational activities.
- Identification of background of staff and students.
- Staff development.
- School safety control.
- Social services.
- School health services.
- Transport.
- Legislation.
- Assessment and monitoring.

Safe School Committee

A Safe School Committee will be established in each school. The role of the committee is to:

- Prepare a code of ethics and responsibilities for the school community and other individuals.
- Actively promote the code of ethics within the school and local community.
- Educate and train teachers, school staff and community members on safety procedures.
- Ensure that all parties are aware of issues related to the programme.
- Implement, assess and re-examine all of the programme's policies and procedures regularly.

The role of schools, families and communities

A strategic alliance of schools, family members and community representatives must be established to achieve the objectives and ensure the effectiveness of the Safe School Programme.

The formal duties of the *school* in the Safe School Programme are to:

- Establish a Safe School Committee, prepare a Safe School Policy Guide and enforce all school regulations.
- Provide information and copies of the school regulations to all relevant parties.
- Prepare an action plan to overcome problems related to school safety.
- Establish a crisis management plan.
- Identify early warning signs and address them.
- Incorporate elements of safety in teaching and learning.
- Encourage students to report cases related to safety.
- Record all incidents concerning safety violations.

The role of the *family* in the Safe School Programme is to:

- Support all school policies and regulations.
- Actively participate in school and community activities.
- Strengthen religious/moral values among children.
- Communicate regularly with children, their peer group and parents.
- Participate in organisations that seek to address safety issues.
- Educate children on ways to protect their own safety.

The role of the *community* in the Safe School Programme is to:

- Involve all community leaders in the process of making schools a safer place.
- Support all school policies and regulations.
- Provide expertise and materials to services governing school safety.
- Support and participate in organisations that improve school safety.
- Actively participate in school activities, and assist in identifying and solving school security-related problems.
- Establish a monitoring system in the school to prevent crime.
- Narrow the gap between the younger and older generations.

Procedures for reporting safety issues

In the Safe School Programme, each individual is responsible for reporting safety-related cases. The programme has thus established a formal procedure to resolve safety issues, which encourages transparency, accountability and responsibility. The principles governing the procedures for resolving safety issues are:

- Each complaint must be given serious attention.
- Immediate action must be taken, involving an independent third person such as a counsellor. A meeting with the school principal or other representative must be arranged to ensure that the complaint is investigated. If the complaint proves to be true, the appropriate punishment must be meted out and the complainant informed.
- The feelings of each individual involved must be considered.
- All parties should be treated equally and fairly.
- A case is not considered solved if both parties remain in conflict.
- Information on policy and procedure must be simple.
- Procedures must be understood by all parties.

Recommendations for the Safe School Programme

At present, a number of elements in the programme could be improved:

- A *checklist* that assesses security should be developed. The model checklist described by Stephens (1995) addresses aspects of physical security and emergency preparedness procedures.
- A *written crisis management plan* should be prepared to address the needs of schools located in different areas; a school located on a congested road, for example, has different needs to a school situated in a rural, seaside community.
- *Regular risk assessments* should be undertaken.
- *Teachers' professional training* should be established to ensure that teachers know and understand approved school safety-related policies and practices, such as how to deal with cases of bullying, child abuse and sexual harassment.
- An *Incident Profile Form* – which records the exact nature, time and location of an offence, with descriptions of the offender and victim as well as actions taken by the school (Blauvelt, cited in Gaustad, 1999) – would help to monitor the effectiveness of the programme.
- The effectiveness of the programme could be enhanced by seeking the *co-operation of law-enforcement agencies*. Richards (1997), for example, suggested that school

staff, parents, students, communities and law-enforcement officials could contribute towards the establishment of a *security checklist* that meets the specific needs of the school district.

- School safety management would be more effective with the participation of the *Education District authorities and State Education Department*. The Safe School Programme does not currently assign a role to these bodies.

Conclusion

Children have human rights, regardless of their behaviour or the school setting. The Convention on the Rights of the Child sets the basic, minimum standards for juvenile justice procedures, children's access to education, their rights to bodily integrity and mental health, and the provision of other resources to enable children to become healthy and productive adult citizens. One of the main tenets of the Convention is that children's human rights rest on a bedrock of their right to be heard, to be listened to, and to participate in the decisions and environments that affect their lives. (Beyer 1997)

While schools are required to maintain a violence- and crime-free environment, they are not expected to guarantee safety; accidents and violence will inevitably occur. Gold and Szemerényi (1997, cited in Raymond, 1999) pointed out that "schools do not have an obligation to do the impossible but only to work in a competent and reasonable manner". Beyer (1997) also asserted that schools have the right to pro-actively isolate and reduce perceived causes of school violence. Thus, such incidents can be prevented with due care and a recognised code of practice.

The Safe School Programme in Malaysia represents a comprehensive approach to school safety. It promotes active involvement of and co-operation between communities, teachers, parents and students. It also informs school administrators and teachers about their responsibilities concerning safety management and planning. Although schools in Malaysia remain susceptible to violence, implementing the Safe School Programme represents an important step towards providing a safer teaching and learning environment.

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