

# Safe and Sound Schools' Guide To How to Start the Safety Conversation with School Leaders



Initiating conversations with your school's leaders about school safety can feel like an ominous task. It is easy to see how busy they are with ongoing operations and special events.

Your questions are important and deserve answers. Here are a few ideas to ensure your discussion results in a successful exchange, one that we hope leads to a positive collaboration.



**BE PREPARED.** Make a list of your concerns and questions. Taking the time to write out your questions will help you clearly articulate your goals and objectives. (See our [Straight-A Safety Assess Toolkit](#) to help you generate ideas to evaluate your school). Choose your top 1-3 concerns, which will be the focus of your initial meeting with school leadership. We recommend 1-3 because it is a realistic, containable number. Going in with a laundry list can overwhelm leadership and may result in a defensive response.



**DETERMINE THE APPROPRIATE AUDIENCE.** Critically evaluate which staff member is best suited to address your issues. A clear understanding of your goals and objectives will allow you to properly identify the correct leader that can address your concerns. The following are examples of ways to match the appropriate leader with your specific issue:

TOPIC	LEADER TO CONTACT
Within the classroom	Teacher
School protocols and procedures	Principals or safety team at the school
District-wide safety policy or issue	Superintendent
Building a Parents for Safer Schools team	PTA/PTO president of school improvement council



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**MAKE AN APPOINTMENT.** If you stop your principal who is directing traffic during parent pick-up to discuss your safety concerns, you're most likely not going to get his/her undivided attention. A scheduled appointment provides the most optimal environment to have a productive conversation.



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**ADJUST YOUR APPROACH.** Your approach and attitude during your conversation can make all the difference. The last thing you want is for the receiver of your message to become defensive.



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**KEEP YOUR COOL.** Avoid blaming, losing your temper, and pointing fingers at others during your meeting. Clear and open dialogue centered around productive communication should be the objective.



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**VOICE YOUR CONCERNS.** Explain that you have concerns/questions that you would like to discuss and work down your list.



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**LISTEN.** Hear their responses/solutions. Allow the receiver to respond to your concerns/questions and note that some safety protocols are confidential. If there is something you don't understand, don't be afraid to ask clarifying questions.



**OFFER YOUR SERVICE.** Ask how you can help/support their efforts. School safety is hard work and if there is a way you can help support your schools efforts—take action! Ask how can you be a part of the solution and what you can do to help? School safety works best when all stakeholders from within the school community work together.



**AGREE ON NEXT STEPS.** After thanking the person meeting with you, recommend your next steps. For example, you can ask to set a follow-up meeting right there. If the person promised you some information, you can confirm the person is going to email you. Perhaps you need to broaden the discussion, so agree on who else you will bring into the conversation for the next meeting.



**PUT IT IN WRITING.** After returning home, it is a good idea to send a thank-you email to the person you met with and summarize the key points of the meeting. It is especially important to spell out those agreed-upon next steps. Give yourself time to edit your email and make sure it has the right tone. We want to foster a spirit of collaboration, not aggression.

**Not sure how to open the conversation? It's always good to start with an introduction such as:**

- Hi, my name is \_\_\_\_\_ and I am the parent/guardian/grandparent/caregiver of \_\_\_\_\_, who attends \_\_\_\_\_ school.
- Hi, as you know, I am in our schools frequently as a volunteer/class parent/PTO member/involved parent.



**Then, think about your request as a way to open the door to a discussion. It shouldn't be aggressive, but rather aim to have a helpful tone, such as:**

- I am very interested in becoming more involved with our school's safety initiatives. I have been learning a lot from [Safe and Sound Schools](#), a nonprofit organization focused on school safety, and would love to hear more from you about our approach to safety. I feel so good about the safety initiatives we have in place, such as \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_. However, I am wondering if there are more ways I can give back to make our school even safer.
- I recently read an [article](#) about school safety that truly inspired me. It couldn't help but make me think about our school.
- A friend of mine recently told me about these two parents who lost their children at Sandy Hook and created a group called Safe and Sound Schools. I went to their [web site](#) and was impressed by the tools and resources they make available for free. It made me wonder about our school, and whether we were aware of these programs.
- My son/daughter/student has been more and more concerned about \_\_\_\_\_. While I trust the school is aware, I would like to learn more about the resources and plans we have in place to address this, and what I can do as a parent to support the team's efforts.
- Our own school has done some impressive work on the school safety arena. As I talk to other parents in the district, it isn't clear if their schools have the same safety plans and resources in place. I would love to see what I can do to help spread these ideas, and help drum up support from parents.
- Our PTA/PTO has done such a great job of bringing our school community together. One area I'd love the association/organization to explore is school safety. Parents can bring so much to the table and positively impact the safety of our schools. I wonder how we can tap into the power of our parents to make our school safer.
- A number of parents have been talking lately about school safety and asking questions we just can't answer. I would love to work with you to address their questions in a helpful and productive way.

**To close the email, put in a specific request for follow up, such as:**

- Can we please set up some time so we can talk together?
- I know you are busy, but if we could schedule 15 minutes to chat, I think it would yield positive results.
- I will be at school on \_\_\_\_\_. What time can I drop by so we can connect in person about this?
- If there's anything I can do to help you in the classroom, please do not hesitate to ask. [Safe and Sound Schools](#) has a lot of [resources](#) and books for kids, among other tools.

## What to do if you aren't getting a response?

- **ASSESS YOUR APPROACH.** If you aren't getting a response from your school administration, consider your tone and approach. Ask yourself if your delivery could be improved. Are you focused on being part of the solution and collaborating?
- **ADD VALUE WITH FOLLOW UP.** When you want to check on the status of a meeting, or get some new information, it is a good idea to follow up. Forward the original note, and then in the "new" part, add some additional information to make that note meaningful, as well. For example, you can add a link to a recent news article as a way to bring up the open question again. Or you can point to a recent conversation you had with another parent, or something you saw at another school. This shows patient, well-measured dedication to the cause.
- **ASK FOR THE SUPERINTENDENT.** If you are having a difficult time getting a response your school administration, make an appointment with your district's superintendent. Prepare your message ahead of time to ensure you don't forget anything and you stay on point.
- **RECRUIT OTHER SUPPORTERS.** Encourage others to join your mission. This can include parents, teachers, students, staff, and other concerned school community members. This will demonstrate to the school district how important safety is to your community and that there is support in favor of action.

At the end of the day, it is important to remember we are all working toward the same cause – to keep our students safe at school. Though it can be uncomfortable, starting these conversations is essential to our success. Thank you for all you are doing to make our schools safe and sound. And a special thanks to the following people for their input on this resource:

- **Alissa Parker** - Safe and Sound Schools Co-founder
- **Brady Cottle** - Principle of Shasta Middle School, Oregon
- **Jeff Stephens** - Superintendent of Weber School District, Utah
- **Jessica Gonzalez** - Safe and Sound Schools Parent Council Member
- **Joelle Reidy** - Safe and Sound Schools Parent Council Member

