Safety and Security: Key Elements for Student Success in Billings, MT
By Erwin Garcia, Superintendent Billings Public Schools

Ensuring the safety and security of our communities is not just a matter of basic human needs; it's also a cornerstone for fostering thriving economies and attracting top talent across various fields. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, meeting safety needs is paramount for a community's ideal state. This is intricately linked to the prosperity and quality of life experienced in cities nationwide, as exemplified by the top 15 safest cities in the U.S., such as Thousand Oaks, California, Fishers, Indiana, and Pembroke Pines, Florida. Interestingly, not a single Montana city made it to the Forbes list[1]. The importance of safety is further underscored by the findings of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, particularly in their article "Double Jeopardy,"[2] which emphasizes the critical milestone of mastering reading by the end of third grade. Research shows that students who struggle with reading proficiency by this stage are significantly more likely to drop out of school. This correlation is especially pronounced for students living in poverty and those from racial minority backgrounds.

In Billings Public Schools, our commitment to addressing educational disparities is evident in the stark contrast seen in our graduation rates. While our overall rate stands at a commendable 86%, it's disheartening to note that the native American population trails behind at only 69%. This discrepancy underscores the urgent need for targeted interventions to support marginalized communities within our student body. Each year, we witness the loss of between 220 to 260 students, primarily due to factors such as disengagement, boredom, or struggles with coursework. These challenges are not unique to our district; they are echoed in the findings of Civic Enterprises' report "The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts." This comprehensive study highlights a pervasive issue: the disconnect between classroom instruction and its real-world relevance, a key driver behind student attrition. To confront this issue head-on, Billings Public Schools took proactive steps to secure state funding for an Opportunity School. This innovative initiative aims to provide a supportive pathway for students at risk of dropping out, offering tailored resources and guidance to help them navigate academic challenges and stay on track toward graduation.

Furthermore, recognizing the critical importance of literacy in academic success, we established a Reading Task Force comprised of the district's top reading educators. Tasked with a noble mission, this dedicated team is committed to ensuring that every student achieves proficiency in reading at grade level. Through cohesive first instruction, targeted interventions, and ongoing support, we aim to empower students with the foundational skills they need to thrive academically and beyond. By addressing these systemic challenges, Billings Public Schools remains steadfast in its commitment to equity, excellence, and ensuring that every student has the opportunity to succeed. Failing to raise academic readiness affects students' perceptions of school hence increasing the risk of dropouts. As determined by the Silent Epidemic article, dropouts are more likely to live in poverty, receive public assistance, and be in prison.

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[1] https://www.forbes.com/sites/laurabegleybloom/2024/02/28/americas-15-safest-cities-most-dangerous-cities-moneygeek-report/?sh=dd11b5d3b058
[2] https://assets.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/AECF-DoubleJeopardy-2012-Full.pdf

Recognizing that the safety of our schools is intricately linked to the overall well-being of our community, we have taken proactive measures. In collaboration with Secure Environmental Consultants (SEC) based in Minneapolis, we conducted a thorough assessment of our facilities, policies, procedures, and resources. Based on their 58 recommendations, we are proposing a Safety Levy to address critical needs. This levy, slated for the May 7 election, will include provisions for additional counselors, mental health specialists, school resource officers (SROs), gang prevention measures, dropout prevention programs, enhanced security systems, and professional development initiatives[3]. Ballots for the levy will be sent out on April 17 and are due back to the county on May 7.

Research from the Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago[4] and Johns Hopkins University's Center for Safe and Healthy Schools underscores the pivotal role of positive relationships and a sense of belonging in creating safe school environments[5]. By prioritizing respect, connection, and inclusivity, we aim to foster a culture where every student feels valued and supported. Furthermore, insights from "The Violence Project: How to Stop A Mass Shooting Epidemic" highlight the importance of addressing early childhood trauma and providing support for individuals in crisis[6]. By investing in preventive measures and resources, we can mitigate the risk factors that contribute to violent incidents and create safer communities for everyone.

As we move forward with the Safety Levy, we invite our community to join us in prioritizing the safety and well-being of our students and residents. Together, we can build a stronger, more resilient future for all.

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[3] https://billingsgazette.com/news/local/education/safety-audit-finds-inconsistencies-in-security-bps-to-place-school-safety-levies-on-may-ballot/article_8235402c-c54e-11ee-bb7f-a3771df5ab81.html#tncms-source=login
[4] https://www.edweek.org/leadership/study-links-school-safety-to-achievement-relationships/2011/05
[5] https://www.npr.org/2022/05/26/1101571302/what-schools-can-do-to-prevent-school-shootings
[6] https://www.ojp.gov/library/publications/violence-project-how-stop-mass-shooting-epidemic