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POLICY HIGHLIGHTS

February 5, 2026

Teaching When the World Delivers Fear On the Horizon

9 Ways Schools Can Respond to Endless Images of Violence

In a recent Education Week opinion piece, Marc Brackett, Robin Stern, and Dawn Brooks-DeCosta offer nine strategies to support students and staff amid repeated exposure to violent acts across various media.

(Doing the Nearly Impossible: Teaching When the World Delivers Fear: 9 Ways Schools Can Respond to Endless Images of Violence, Marc Brackett, Robin Stern & Dawn Brooks-DeCosta, Education Week, January 26, 2026)

While the piece was offered in response to recent events in Minneapolis, rather than debating policy, the authors' aim is to protect children and support district leaders and staff: They note, "When children are exposed to violence, especially graphic, replayable violence—their brains and bodies do what they're designed to do: scan for danger. In that state, learning becomes secondary."

(While this piece was offered in response to specific troubling events, the guidance that follows is easily transferable to a range of traumatic events to which young people may be exposed and therefore will be added as an Appendix B item following [Policy 5142, School Safety: Preparation, Response, and After Action](#))

The opinion piece identifies the leadership task in the face of such recorded violence as "to protect students' nervous systems without denying their reality and protect teachers so they aren't carrying this alone." They cite the American Academy of Pediatrics' recommendation to limit repeated exposure, keep conversations age-appropriate, correct misinformation, and check in regularly.

1. Start with connection, not commentary

Students don't need a lecture. They need a comforting signal: "You matter here. You're not alone. We will do everything we can to keep you safe at school."

Open class with a two-minute opt-in check-in: "Let's share one word for how we're feeling today; it's also OK to pass."

Then ask: “What questions or worries are coming up for you, if any, without sharing graphic details.” (Ask students not to replay the violence, as some may have past trauma from gun violence. For tougher conversations, involve mental health experts.)

Being seen by another and invited to say what is on your mind is often the first step back to steadiness.

2. Set a “no replay” norm for graphic content

Many students aren’t just hearing about traumatic events; they’re rewatching them. Create classroom or schoolwide norms about viewing violent social media posts:

- We will not show violent videos at school.
- If something upsetting shows up, tell an adult you trust. They will help you handle it.

It’s best if all students hear one message: Our school does not agree with amplifying harm by repeated exposure to violent events.

3. Keep it simple and stick to what’s true

After tragedies, more information isn’t always helpful. In classrooms, “simple and direct” sounds like:

- “Here’s what we know. We’ll share more as we learn more.”
- “If you hear something that scares you, bring it here. We’ll sort fact from rumor.”
- “Here’s what our school is doing today to keep everyone safe.”
- Name safety steps without making promises you can’t guarantee. (Avoid phrases like: “This will never happen here.”)

4. Invite and welcome all feelings. Hold firm boundaries on behavior

All feelings are welcome. Not all behaviors are:

- “It makes sense to feel scared/angry/sad. Let’s identify the adults you trust.”
- “Big feelings are OK here. We all have them. Hurting others is not.”
- “We can disagree without putting others down, threatening, or targeting.”

Warmth plus limits keeps classrooms safe without shutting students down.

5. Offer “choice points” to restore agency

Trauma steals choice. Connection restores it. Give students options that don’t derail instruction:

- Write instead of speaking.
- Step out for two minutes and return.
- See a counselor or social worker.
- Join a brief grounding practice—or quietly opt out.

6. Watch for distress—and respond quickly

Trouble coping often shows up as sleepiness, headaches or stomachaches, irritability, shutdown, conflict, appetite changes, or persistent worry. If you notice a change in behavior or shift:

- Treat it as a signal, not a character flaw or weakness.
- Ask for guidance from your support team early.
- When appropriate, encourage families to consult their pediatrician or a mental health professional.

7. Adjust the approach by grade level

- Preschool–grade 2: Keep it concrete and calming: “Something scary happened. Grown-ups are working to keep people safe.” Lean on routines and warmth.
- Grades 3–5: Start with what they heard, correct misinformation, and teach the power of social support. Create a “trusted adult map”: two or three adults at school they can go to when they have big feelings.
- Middle school: Normalize intensity and reduce shame for feeling scared. Use structures, such as timed turns, a pass option, and written reflection first. Consider a buddy system. Help them set one media boundary for the evening, such as not using social media.
- High school: Name emotions—grief, outrage, helplessness—and channel them toward care. Offer prosocial pathways (e.g., schoolwide care campaigns) that build connection rather than conflict. For older students, educators can also ground this moment in history.
- For students with disabilities or developmental delays, relying on what you know helps that particular student feel safe and calm.

8. Protect students who feel targeted—without asking them to disclose

When immigration enforcement is part of the fear, some students may be terrified and afraid to say why. Don’t put them on the spot. Say publicly and repeatedly:

- “If you’re worried about someone at home, we’ll connect you with someone who can help.”
- “Tell me as much or as little as you want. I will help you find support.”

Coordinate with administrators so the burden doesn’t fall on you alone. Promise your presence only when you know you can be there.

9. Build a “connection chain” for adults

Teachers have big feelings, too, and can experience empathic distress when supporting students. When educators feel depleted, students feel it. Leaders can make small moves to support teacher well-being:

- A five-minute staff check-in each morning and a five-minute staff debrief before leaving.
- A shared script for tough moments so teachers aren’t improvising alone.

The most important message students will learn during these hard weeks (and beyond) is not only what we say about the world, but it’s also how we model being human in it.

When the outside world feels frightening or cruel, classrooms can become counterforces: places where every child experiences dignity, steadiness, and belonging. That is not politics. That is the best of education.

On the Horizon

As the 2026 legislative session kicks off this week, we will be monitoring two policy areas:

- New homeschool regulations are expected to emerge, resulting from high-profile news stories over the past couple of years involving child abuse and neglect and overall concerns related to the State's constitutional responsibility to provide public elementary and secondary education in the state. Current proposals include mandatory annual registration for all district-level homeschool students, an annual check-in for each child, and a dedicated state-level "homeschool office" to manage this work.
- While the State has moved further towards requiring cellphone restrictions in schools with the State Board of Education's Position Statement, subsequent State Department of Education guidelines, and CAFE's updated model policy aligned with both, there continues to be a push by some towards a State ban on cellphones and other personal technologies in schools.

We can expect to hear both items debated throughout the Spring. As these and other (There will be others!) legislative initiatives move through the legislative process, CAFE will continue to advocate, monitor, and update relevant model policies as bills become law.

In the meantime, bundle up. It's going to be a very cold Super Bowl Sunday!