



## Episode 27: Human Error and School Safety

**#REMSontheAir Podcast Intro (Recorded):** [00:00:00] Welcome to the #REMSontheAir Podcast, hosted by your partners at the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Safe and Supportive Schools and its Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools Technical Assistance Center. If you're an old friend, you know us as the REMS TA Center, your national school safety center.

Join us as we chat about key topics in school and campus safety, security, and emergency management with experts and partners from the field.

**Janelle Hughes:** We're looking forward to hosting another episode of the #REMSontheAir Podcast. My name is Janelle Hughes. For those of you who may be new to the podcast, I serve as the Project Director here at the REMS TA Center. Today, I'm joined by my colleague, Katie Barnett.

**Katie Barnett:** Glad to be here, Janelle. In today's [00:01:00] episode of #REMSontheAir, we will be discussing human error and school safety. In this episode, we'll also hear from a special guest, Dr. Garry McGiboney, former Deputy State Superintendent for the Office of School Safety and Climate at the Georgia Department of Education.

Dr. McGiboney comes to us with over 30 years of experience in public and alternative education across grade levels. He has written numerous professional journal publications, been interviewed by many major and local television networks, authored eight books, and has served on several committees as an appointee of the governor's office, covering topics such as children's mental health, school safety, and leadership. He also serves by appointment on numerous committees and initiatives with the Georgia Supreme Court.

For his work, Dr. McGiboney has been quoted in *Time Magazine*, *USA Today*, *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Wall Street Journal*, among [00:02:00] others, and has won many awards, including NAACP Educator of the Year and the National Association of School Psychologists' National Friend of Children Award. If there is anyone who has had the time, experience, and insight to explore human error in school safety, it is Dr. McGiboney, and we are thrilled to have him on the podcast today.

**Janelle Hughes:** Thank you, Katie. I agree. I'm so looking forward to this discussion today, and the strategies that we'll discuss are really relevant for all school staff, all year round.

**Katie Barnett:** We have with us Garry McGiboney, the Chief Operations Officer for Health Security Dynamics. Welcome, Garry.

**Garry McGiboney:** Thank you very much. I'm glad to be here.

**Katie Barnett:** We're so glad to have you. Garry, before we get started getting into the topic of human error in school safety, can you just introduce yourself?

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**Garry McGiboney:** OK, again, I'm Garry McGiboney, Chief Operations Officer for Health Security [00:03:00] Dynamics. I have over 30 years of experience working in school safety emergency operations planning and response to and development of safe school plans.

I worked as Deputy Superintendent for one of the largest school systems and in the nation, with over 200 schools and over 150,000 students. And I worked as Deputy State School Superintendent for 14 years for the Georgia Department of Education.

**Katie Barnett:** Well, Garry, that is fantastic and impressive. Thank you so much. We look really forward to learning from your expertise. And you have studied and written extensively on the topic of human error in school safety, which, by human error, is something I think a lot of schools overlook. So, we're really excited to learn from you today. To get us started, in your own words, can you define "human error" and identify some of its primary causes?

**Garry McGiboney:** Sure, well, first [00:04:00] we need to note that human error is inevitable. It's unpredictable and unintentional. It's a failure in a way we perceive and think and even behave. It's not a behavioral choice. We do not choose to make errors, but we're all fallible. So, human errors: when someone with no ill intent does not follow the school system's established rules or policies or practices or procedures and that causes an incident or accident or unfortunately in some cases a tragedy. And one of the primary causes, oddly enough, is complacency, a sense of security and belief that action is insignificant and will not cause any harm.

Like I said, people are all prone to human error. All of us are. It happens every day in a lot of different places. People are even tempted by human error because we commit human error to save [00:05:00] time. It's for convenience or because something is perceived as a nuisance. And people think sometimes that school safety procedures do not apply to them, but I hasten to add that in their thinking, it's not intended to be malicious or careless or intentional. So, the most important point is that human error is going to occur in our schools, most assuredly, if we don't acknowledge it and plan for it in order to prevent it.

**Katie Barnett:** Thank you so much. So, it sounds, if I'm hearing you right, that human error is more of a when, not an if, but there are some things we can do to prevent it and mitigate it.

**Garry McGiboney:** Yes. And the primary thing you'll hear time and time again today is acknowledging that human error will occur. And by acknowledging it, we can oftentimes prevent it.

**Katie Barnett:** So, with this, what are some of the most common forms of human error that you're aware of in schools?

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**Garry McGiboney:** Well, actually, [00:06:00] there are several types of human error, and I'll just kind of go through some of these by providing some examples. Like, there's errors of omission, which is like leaving an exterior door open. There's errors of selection, where procedures or policies are so complex that it's difficult for the staff to keep up with them. For example, as we all know, sheltering in place is one of the most complex and constantly difficult processes to follow because there's so many moving parts. So, error of selection is very possible to occur just by not understanding the procedures that are so complicated.

And then there's errors of sequence. For example, a staff member does not shift to the secondary evacuation site when the primary site is not available. And there are errors of timing. For example, teachers release students into the hallway before an intruder alert [00:07:00] all-clear signal is given because she's thinking, "Well, this is just another practice drill, and it's time to change classes," when actually there may be an intruder in the building.

And then there's error of resources. And this is when you may have, for example, faulting or aging equipment or old facilities. For example, let's say there's an exterior door that doesn't close properly, and it's been like that for a long time, so it's very likely to be unsecured during a lockdown. Or another example of error resources is a certain classroom is hot all the time, so the teacher leaves the door open.

Those are predictable conditions of human error related to resources. And also, there's errors of reporting, where, for example, teachers know about a science teacher who is not storing chemicals safely, but they don't report it, and later there's a chemical fire. And then there's [00:08:00] errors of what is called social and emotional conditions, where because of, let's say, personal issues, a staff member is distracted and does not follow emergency instructions, or may have a reaction to a personal problem that's triggered by an emergency at school and is manifest in, for example, fear of leaving the classroom during an evacuation. Those are the seven types of human errors that are the most common.

**Katie Barnett:** Thank you. That is so helpful to have those seven categories, I think. We might know what human error is but having categories for them can be a really helpful way to start thinking about this in terms of school emergency planning. You mentioned the gamut of faculty and staff in schools. Do you have any thoughts on who might be most likely to commit human error in a school setting or under what conditions? And of course, this is not asked [00:09:00] to blame, but just what are some of the situations that are most common to provoke this?

**Garry McGiboney:** Sure, I understand what you're saying, and you're right. It's interesting because the research regarding this question seems kind of counterintuitive because the research shows that the more experienced staff members are the ones more likely to make a human error. And that's because they're thinking, "Well, I've been in the school a long time,

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and nothing has ever happened, and it's unlikely to happen." And then, without thinking, they compromise school safety.

But there are also situations that—and conditions that—impact all staff members because one of the most significant predictors of human error is the climate of the school, which is, of course, the quality and character of school life. Because we know a positive school climate enables leaders and teachers to anticipate hazards [00:10:00] and the potential for human errors and prevent them through honest dialogues and interactions. It's the sense of community that evolves from a positive school climate where everyone in the school is concerned about each other, and they become protective of each other. So, school safety becomes a shared responsibility and not a top-down mandate, which creates conditions for human errors to occur.

**Katie Barnett:** That's such a great connection with school climate. That sounds really like an important factor.

**Garry McGiboney:** Right, and you'll hear me talk about school climate a lot today.

**Katie Barnett:** Can you describe for us the relationship between risk and human error, and how this holds importance specifically for schools?

**Garry McGiboney:** Well, I think there's a need to distinguish between risk and human error because at-risk behavior is behavior that's perceived by the staff member as justified, maybe even to make a point or make a statement like stemming from [00:11:00] dissatisfaction at school with assignments and et cetera. For example, staff member says to the leadership of the school that the school is not safe, and he points out why, but the leadership of the school pays no attention and gives him no feedback of his concern, so he thinks the school is not safe and no one cares, so he doesn't make sure doors are closed and materials are stored properly, et cetera.

Well, that's intentional at-risk behavior, where human error, on the other hand, is when we drift away from safe habits without regard to how it might impact safety, and I'll give you a quick example. Let's say a teacher is outside the school with her students and loses track of time, so her class is late for the lunch period. So, she rushes them back inside the school, and a student cries that she left her scarf outside. So, the teacher leaves the students in the hallway and runs [00:12:00] outside to retrieve the scarf. Well, while the students are unattended, one of the students, who let's say has a habit of drifting off by himself, finds his way to an exterior door and leaves the school.

Well, the teacher in the meantime finds the scarf and rushes back into the school without ensuring that the door is secured because she's in a rush, and then escorts the students into the

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lunchroom without accounting for each student. So, in that scenario, that altogether covers no more than 5 minutes, probably less than 5 minutes, the teacher has unintentionally and without malice—because she’s a great teacher who cares deeply about her students—has committed, let’s see, how many human errors?

One, she lost track of time. Two, she left students unattended. Let’s see, three, she did not secure the exterior door. [00:13:00] Four, she did not account for all the students before they went into the cafeteria. That’s four human errors in just 5 minutes that resulted in a missing student and a breach of security with an exterior door. And she didn’t mean for any of that to happen.

**Katie Barnett:** Wow. Thank you for that. Earlier, you mentioned school climate. Can you further describe the relationship between school climate and human error and the importance that this holds for schools?

**Garry McGiboney:** Sure. Well, actually, the research is clear that school safety and climate are strongly linked. There’s no doubt about that. In a school with a positive school climate, there exists a sense of community, camaraderie, an expectation of looking out for each other, a lot of communications between and among teachers and other staff members and leadership and students [00:14:00] engaging in the purpose of the work of the school. So, in a school with a positive school climate, human error is less likely to occur because a sense of responsibility for each other has increased significantly, so human error is reduced, and so is at-risk behaviors.

A negative school climate is manifest in forgetfulness, inattention, poor motivation, and even negligence. And sometimes even recklessness is more likely to occur in a negative school climate. The potential for human error increases significantly under those conditions. And I think the most salient point cannot be said too often, and you’ve said it too, is there is a strong link between school safety and school climate, which is manifest in fewer safety issues related to human error.

Comprehending and paying attention to the school’s climate is a leading indicator that helps [00:15:00] in the identification of hazards prior to their existence and transition into human error that compromises safety. We know from the research that a strong safety culture, which accompanies a positive school climate, with the commitment to safety and positive relationships built on trust, is a core value that leads to improved safety outcomes and including fewer incidents, accidents, and fatalities caused by human error. So that link with school safety and school climate is unmistakable.

**Katie Barnett:** That’s fantastic. Thank you so much, Garry. That’s also fascinating as I think it could be easy to think of school climate and human error as two separate categories. But with emergency management, we see that a lot of these things are linked, and there’s definitely a

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very powerful relationship between school climate and human error. So that is incredibly helpful. [00:16:00]

In your work, you distinguish between remedy- versus solution-based thinking. Can you explain the importance of this difference, specifically for responding to human error incidents in schools?

**Garry McGiboney:** Well, I'm really glad you asked that question because the distinction between a remedy and a solution is significant. Remedy thinking is when we are task driven, trying to address the presenting problem or the problem that's in front of us without regard to the determinant or the cause of the problem. And because we do that, because there's so many other duties and responsibilities we want to get to, so we want the presenting problem out of our way as soon as possible, so we can reach for a quick fix that we think addresses the presenting problem, so we think it is a solution when it only—it's a Band-Aid that will later be exposed [00:17:00] eventually and culminating in the problem coming back to us over and over again. Or instead, if we are purpose driven, which requires us to think differently, we will take the time to look for the basic problem instead of only the presenting problem.

And I assure you that when we do that, we're more likely to find a solution that truly addresses the problem, and therefore the problem is less likely to reoccur. And the best way to identify the potential for human error is also to address human error by using the purpose-driven approach because there is a determinant, like I said, a cause for every behavior.

And there is a difference between telling, for example, a teacher to close and lock the door and tell them not to do it again. That's the remedy: close the door. So, that presumed problem is out of the way, and I move on to something else. But the basic problem may be that during that class period, the classroom is unusually [00:18:00] hot, so the teacher opens the door for some fresh air because the teacher has student behavior problems when it's too hot in the classroom.

So, finding a way to address that problem, that's the basic problem. Leaving the door open is just the presenting problem. And if we—all we do is address leaving the door open without, let's say, trying to find out what the basic problem is, guess what's going to happen? The door's going to be left open again, time and time again.

We know that the purpose-driven problem-solving approach of taking the time to look for the basic problem is a key, a major key, to preventing human error.

**Katie Barnett:** Thank you so much. That is such an important distinction to make with very practical outcomes. It sounds that looking for the purpose-driven thinking is actually a great

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strategy for avoiding human error, but would you have any other top strategies and/or [00:19:00] best practices that you've encountered for avoiding human error?

**Garry McGiboney:** Certainly, and it may, it may seem simple, but it's not. Making staff members aware of the possibility of human error is the best place to start. Because frankly, staff members in education typically do not hear anything about human error. In many of the other professions—like in aviation, transportation, manufacturing—human error is discussed frequently. But when we talk to staff members about policies and procedures and practices and plans, we do not include a discussion about human error and how human error can compromise the safety of everyone in the school.

So, school leaders should generate a discussion about human error while talking about safety procedures and seek out ideas from the staff when and where human errors are most likely to occur. And it actually advances the discussion when leadership [00:20:00] and schools give many examples of human errors and how they can occur, like the example I gave earlier about the teacher leaving the students unattended. And that's when the teacher innocently and unintentionally committed four human errors in less than 5 minutes. So, if leadership can give examples like that, then I think staff members will then begin to understand what we're talking about when we refer to human error.

But to me, the most compelling strategy to avoid human error is for a school to take stock of its school climate and stay constantly in tune with the climate of the school. I have conducted hundreds of school safety assessments in schools across the nation, and I've also testified and give depositions in juvenile court, state court, superior court, and Federal court, and I can verify from my experience that schools with a positive school climate are schools where staff members and students are engaged in every aspect of the school [00:21:00] and view the school as their community. And those schools are safer because of it and much less likely to experience human error and therefore can avoid a lot of the tragedies that we see happening in schools.

**Katie Barnett:** Well, thank you. Beyond spreading awareness and working on school climate, are there other steps that you would say, "All right, if you're going to take one step today ...." What would it be to work toward preventing human error?

**Garry McGiboney:** Sure. Well, in addition to building a positive school climate and talking about human error, schools and school district leaders can, I think, systematically review their emergency operations plan or safe school plan and identify areas that may be prone to human error and illustrate those by developing scenarios that could be used in tabletop exercises that focus on human error.

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I found that [00:22:00] teachers and other school staff members and school leaders and even SROs [school resource officers] are surprised how quickly human error can occur and how tragic the results can be, so it becomes a very rich discussion, and I think a lot of that discussion can be enhanced by some tabletop exercises designed around human error.

Recently, I was at a large school where a group of the staff members went through each section of their school's safety plan for the purpose of identifying parts of the plan that may be susceptible to human error. And they identified over a dozen places where human error is a real possibility. So, those items were discussed with the faculty and staff members. They developed some examples and scenarios. So now they feel like there's an awareness of that school staff about human error as it relates to the safe school plan. So, awareness is critically important, [00:23:00] and those difficult conversations are essential to identify the basic problems that can be manifest in human errors.

**Katie Barnett:** Fantastic. And last question for today. I really appreciated your research and your work because you provided very practical and logical solutions to this problem. In an area that could be ridden with fear, human error, the mistakes we can make, your work was very positive. So, I'd like to ask, do you have any suggestions for whole-community buy-in on this topic and also working from a place of safety and creativity without giving into a fear-based analysis of everything that could go wrong?

**Garry McGiboney:** Right, well, I, as you can tell, I have a proclivity for focusing on the trust factor when working with schools and talking about school safety with them: [00:24:00] Trusting each other. Trust between the central staff and school leadership. Trust between school leaders and the faculty and staff. Trust between faculty and staff and students. Trust between the school and the surrounding community. Trust is the—it's the fabric of all positive school climate, and a positive school climate is what brings everyone together to identify potential problems and solutions, not remedies.

And within the trust environment, there can be a thorough, extensive, and even meticulous discussion that identifies the potential for human error. But honestly, the usefulness of these discussions about the potential for human error will be determined by the climate of the school, which is also essential to address and avoid the fear-based atmosphere where there is more emphasis on compliance than there is on relationships. Those [00:25:00] fear-based school climates are an incubator, frankly, for human error and other breaches of school safety, where a positive school climate with open discussions about basic problems and solutions related to school safety can make a school safer without being fear based, and we can include human error in those discussions. And when we do that, I'm convinced our schools will be safer.



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**Katie Barnett:** Well, thank you for that. That emphasis on relationships is so beautiful and so important. And, of course, avoiding human error is all about protecting those relationships in our students in our schools. So, thank you so, so very much for all of your wonderful input today.

**Garry McGiboney:** Thank you. And I just want to add, and I appreciate REMS TA [Center] focusing on school climate as much as you do and for also including human error in this discussion. It's very important.

**Janelle Hughes:** Thank you so much for tuning in today. [00:26:00] Remember to follow us on social media and bookmark the *#REMSontheAir* hashtag. Tweet us using the hashtag if you're also addressing similar topics. And if you have any questions related to today's discussion or just want to learn more, send us your questions via email or give us a call at 1-855-781-7367. Pose questions that may be possibly featured in a future podcast episode as well.

**Katie Barnett:** And don't forget that you can also email us at any time at [info@remstacenter.org](mailto:info@remstacenter.org) to join our mailing list where you'll get up-to-date information on webinars, Web chats, and other virtual opportunities to learn and share.

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