

**Katarzyna Laskowska**

University of Białystok, Poland

k.laskowska@uwb.edu.pl

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6767-3929>

**Wojciech Filipkowski**

University of Białystok, Poland

w.filipkowski@uwb.edu.pl

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6248-0888>

## **Student Safety in Educational Facilities in Light of Goal 4a of Agenda 2030**

**Abstract:** In order to fill this research gap, the authors undertook an analysis of the problem specified in the title in the context of public elementary schools in Białystok. First, a dogmatic approach was taken, which involved a detailed analysis of selected provisions of educational law. Second, an empirical approach was applied by reviewing documents in the form of statutes from 44 out of 47 elementary schools, focusing on the degree of implementation of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Goal 4a. The research was based on criteria developed by the authors, grounded in the available literature, which focused on four key aspects considered essential for assessing the level of achievement of the stated goal. These criteria include ensuring the physical and psychological safety of students, internal and external aspects of security, safety education, and cooperation of schools with institutions charged with the provision of safety. The analyses partially confirmed the hypothesis that the examined national regulations and the statutes of public elementary schools are only minimally aligned with SDG 4a. These findings shed light on the existing theoretical and practical challenges related to the effective implementation of international educational standards at the local level and may serve as inspiration for further research.

**Keywords:** safety, school, security, sustainable development goals

### **Introduction**

Schools are places where students spend a significant part of the day. It is there that they acquire knowledge, as well as undergo the process of education. Parents,

entrusting their children to teachers, believe that schools will guarantee their children's safety and a high-quality education (infuture institute, 2023, p. 22). This expectation, which is universal and basic, is explicitly expressed in Goal 4a of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted in 2015 (United Nations, 2015). It stipulates that by 2030, educational facilities should be built and improved so that they are safe, non-discriminatory, and accessible to all, especially to children, people with disabilities, and people who are members of vulnerable social groups. Unfortunately, there is a lack of scholarly studies on the degree of implementation of this SDG in individual countries (Ferguson & Roofe, 2020, p. 959; Shabalala & Ngcwangu, 2021, p. 1573; Singh & Singh, 2022, p. 11685). This problem has also not been noticed in the implementation of the SDGs in Poland (Ministry of Development & Technology, 2023, pp. 79–82). At the same time, there are also reports that, due to global megatrends, it will be impossible to achieve these goals within the assumed timeframe (infuture institute, 2023, p. 9).

The subject of the research presented here is the safety of students in schools. Its aim is to develop scientific knowledge about methods of implementing SDG 4a in ensuring this safety and the degree to which they are implemented. It should be noted that this is the first study of its kind in Poland and is exploratory in nature; it focuses on selected Polish regulations which are generally applicable and on the statutes of public elementary schools in the city of Białystok that are based on these regulations.

The primary research problem is: What is the degree of alignment between the regulations analysed and SDG 4a concerning the safety of educational facilities (in elementary schools)? For the purposes of the study, the hypothesis was formulated that the analysed regulations at the national level and the statutes of public elementary schools are only minimally aligned with SDG 4a. To verify this, a dogmatic analysis of selected regulations in force as of December 2023, during the research phase, was conducted. This analysis focused on the 2016 Education Law and the 2002 Regulation on Safety and Health in Public and Non-Public Schools and Institutions. It aimed to determine the extent to which internal legal acts in schools, specifically statutes, addressed provisions related to student safety at that time. (Consequently, the study excluded the amendment to the 13 May 2016 Act on Preventing Sexual Crime and Protecting Minors, which came into effect on 15 February 2024, after the research was conducted.) For this purpose, the document analysis method was applied, examining 44 of the 47 available statutes of public elementary schools in the city of Białystok (Białystok Oficjalny Portal Miasta, n.d.).

## **1. Dimensions of student safety at school**

The literature on this subject discusses many typologies relating to the dimensions of safety in education, which certainly go beyond just the aspect of physical safeguards

to encompass emotional, psychological, and educational aspects, which are key to ensuring holistic safety in educational institutions. In the context of the implementation of SDG 4a, safety in education can be linked to the following dimensions:

- Physical safety: Ensuring that educational institutions are safe from physical harm, such as natural disasters, violence, and accidents. This includes implementing security measures such as surveillance cameras, security personnel, and access-control systems (Díaz-Vicario, 2017, p. 307).
- Emotional and psychological well-being: Providing a supportive environment that promotes the emotional and psychological well-being of students, teachers, and employees. This can be achieved through counselling services, peer support programmes, and creating a positive school culture (Díaz-Vicario, 2017, p. 309).
- Safety of persons: Ensuring the safety of teachers, employees, and students in educational institutions. This includes providing training in safety procedures, emergency responses, and conflict resolution (Díaz-Vicario, 2017, p. 307).
- Community engagement: Encouraging open communication between schools, students, parents, and community members to identify potential safety concerns and address them promptly (Write, 2019, p. 423). Schools should cooperate with local authorities and institutions responsible for safety to ensure effective protection of students and school personnel.
- Safety education: Educating students and the school community about safety is also an important element. This could include training on procedures to follow in emergencies, first aid, and hazard awareness (Kitamura, 2019, p. 221).

Considering the above aspects, dimensions, and types of safety in education, schools can consider them when creating a safe and inclusive learning environment that supports the achievement of SDG 4a.

## **2. Implementation strategies for SDG 4**

General strategies for creating a safe educational environment can include, for example (Flannery et al., 2021, p. 237; Zhu & Reed, 2023):

- Creating a positive school culture that promotes respect, inclusion, and tolerance and discourages bullying, harassment, and violence.
- Encouraging open communication between teachers, administrative staff, students, and parents to identify potential safety and security concerns and to promptly resolve them.
- Developing and enforcing clear policies and procedures to be followed during emergencies such as natural disasters, medical emergencies, and incidents involving the use of violence.

- Providing training for employees and students on safety and security procedures, including how to respond to emergencies.
- Implementing technical safety and security measures such as surveillance cameras, security personnel, and access-control systems to prevent unauthorized access to school premises.
- Providing mental health support services for students who may have emotional or psychological problems.

### **3. Selected aspects of legislation concerning student safety at school in Poland**

It should be stated that, at the end of 2023, there were 41 pieces of legislation (acts and regulations) that addressed the issue of safety at school, broadly defined (Portal Oświatowy, n.d.). Due to the limited scope of this paper, the most relevant solutions to the problem under study are indicated here synthetically, in relation to physical and psychological safety, internal and external security, issues of safety education, and schools' cooperation with institutions responsible for safety, which are characterized in second paragraph of this paper.

#### **3.1. Act of 14 December 2016 – Education Law**

According to Article 1 of the Education Law (EL), the purpose of the educational system in Poland is to promote the full development of students, including in the physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and social spheres. Schools are required to maintain safe and hygienic conditions for learning, upbringing, and care (Article 1(14)). This means they are required to diagnose, monitor, and solve students' problems, including those that threaten their safety, and to provide an infrastructure that promotes a sense of safety.

Article 10(1) of the EL says that the authority running the school has the duty to ensure the appropriate conditions for the operation of the school, including safe and hygienic conditions for learning, upbringing, and care. The principal is responsible for the safety of students during classes, and the school's educational and preventive programme is developed in cooperation with the school staff council and the parents' council (Articles 68(6) and 84(2)). The school must diagnose the needs of students and develop and implement an upbringing and prevention programme, taking into account risk factors, psychoactive substances, and online safety (Articles 26(1–3) and 27). Ensuring safety at school also includes installing and updating internet security software. Article 108(a)(1) allows the introduction of surveillance to ensure the safety of students and employees. The decision in this regard is made by the school principal after consultation with the staff council, the parents' council, and the student government, excluding some rooms. Safety education, both online and

in the context of sustainable development, is important and in line with Article 1(15) and (21). Cooperation with institutions responsible for ensuring safety, according to Article 3(3–4), may include the support of public administration bodies and various services in conducting classes on enhancing the safety of children and young people.

### **3.2. Regulation of the Minister of National Education and Sport of 31 December 2002, on Safety and Health in Public and Non-Public Schools and Institutions**

The 2002 Regulation on Safety and Health in Public and Non-Public Schools and Institutions was issued on the basis of the statutory delegation contained in Article 125 of the EL. The provisions contained therein precisely define the duties of school principals with regards to ensuring the safe and hygienic conditions for both students' stay at school and their participation in activities outside the school grounds (§ 2). The principal is obliged to systematically inspect conditions for the use of school facilities, including the learning conditions, and to determine directions for their improvement. Such inspections must be conducted at least once a year (§ 3).

In the area of physical safety at school, the regulation's provisions focus on the procedures to be followed in the event of accidents and regulate in detail such issues as care for injured students (§ 40), notification of competent authorities and persons (§ 41), conduct of post-accident investigations (§ 43), and registration of accidents (§ 50), as well as analysis by the school principal of their circumstances and causes (§ 51). In terms of internal and external security, the regulation specifies in detail conditions for the use of school facilities, as well as for laboratories and practical vocational training locations. The school principal is required, among other things, to post an evacuation plan in a visible place (§ 5), to organize repair and installation works during students' absence (§ 6), to guarantee security on school grounds, the evenness of pavements, and lighting and wastewater drainage (§ 7), and to properly mark and secure workplaces and rooms against unauthorized access (§ 15). In addition, the provisions of the regulations address matters related to the safety of students during class breaks, the performance of repairs and installation works, and the provision of first aid kits and personal protective equipment to students (§ 14(1), (20), and (22)).

In the context of safety education, the legislature imposes an obligation on schools to disseminate safety knowledge and to form appropriate attitudes toward hazards, especially those related to the use of information and communication technologies (Article 1(21)). Despite the indicative nature of this requirement, it is an important tool to support student safety. On the issue of cooperation with institutions responsible for ensuring safety, both the Education Law and the Regulation provide for the possibility of public administration bodies and various services supporting the activities of schools in disseminating knowledge of threats to safety (Article 3(3–4)). However, there is no explicit mention of cooperation with NGOs.

In conclusion, the pieces of legislation analysed here regulate in detail issues related to safety in public schools, covering both organizational and practical aspects, with an emphasis on precisely specifying the duties of the school principal and the procedures to be followed when various types of accidents happen. They also support safety education and assume the possibility of support from government agencies and services in the area of safety. However, there are no direct references to the issue of ensuring the psychological safety of students.

### **3.3. The extent of student safety in schools based on analysis of the statutes of elementary schools in Białystok**

According to the provisions of Article 98(4) of the EL, school statutes play an important role in determining the goals and tasks of educational institutions, taking into account the principles of safety. An analysis of the statutes of elementary schools in Białystok showed that each of the documents deliberately emphasizes the performance of the school's basic functions, especially those relating to education and care. The educational and preventive programme and the provision of safe conditions for students are key elements of those functions. Particular emphasis is placed on respecting school health and safety regulations, which include both the physical and the mental dimensions of students. Educational safety is defined as concern for the health and mental balance of students through the broad prevention of threats to which school-age children may be exposed. In the context of regulations applicable to public schools, it is therefore important to consider and highlight the issues listed below, which directly affect the safety of schools and their students.

#### **3.3.1. The entities required to ensure the safety of students at school**

Ensuring the safety of students during school activities is entrusted to the principal, teachers, school psychologists, or school counsellors, as well as other school employees. The principal is responsible for the overall safety of students during school and extracurricular activities, including outings and trips. Teachers, especially class teachers, are charged with key tasks related to the protection of the life, health, and safety of students, as well as compliance with health and safety regulations. The school counsellor coordinates safety activities in situations where there is no direct threat to the health or life of students and deals with problems such as conflicts, violence, cyberbullying, and substance abuse. The school psychologist, on the other hand, implements preventive measures relating to addiction and other problems of young people. The analysis of school statutes showed that there are extensive structures responsible for safety, such as safety coordinators and occupational health and safety officers. Their task is to initiate measures to improve security, analyse needs, monitor the state of safety, develop emergency procedures, and educate the school community about safety rules.

Students also have a role in maintaining safety by following the rules on school grounds, reporting accidents, and countering violence and demoralization. School statutes specify consequences for those students who disregard safety rules, including the possibility of lowered grades for inappropriate behaviour. Ultimately, the system of punishments and sanctions ranges from a reprimand given by the class teacher or principal, through informing parents, to a possible transfer of the student to another school, especially in cases of serious offences such as physical violence, drug use, or a criminal act. Ensuring school safety involves a comprehensive approach that combines legislation with specific measures implemented in the school environment.

### **3.3.2. Ensuring physical and psychological safety**

Legislation on safety in public schools covers a variety of issues in the areas of both physical and mental health. School statutes clarify the provisions of that legislation and often place them in detailed chapters, such as 'Student safety', 'Safety on school grounds during classes', and 'Occupational health and safety'. The statutes differ significantly in terms of the topics they cover. In particular, their provisions govern the care provided by teachers, prohibitions on bringing dangerous objects to school, teachers' duties in emergency situations, and rules for using the sports field or organizing school events. Issues relating to teachers' responsibility for students' safety, procedures to follow during a fire or in the event of a threat of crime, and rules for the use of mobile phones and electronic devices are also within the scope of these statutes.

In addition, school statutes include specific procedures, such as those to be followed in the event of special threats or in the event of threats to students that involve crime and demoralization. All elementary schools have upbringing and preventive programmes that cover issues of addiction, threats posed by civilization, and social risks. In addition, provisions on internet use, blocking access to content that is dangerous to students' development, and adherence to rules on the use of mobile phones and other electronic devices are common in school statutes. Sanctions for failing to follow these rules include warnings, asking parents to attend meetings with school staff, and even devices being taken away by teachers.

### **3.3.3. Ensuring internal and external security**

In the area of internal and external security, the statutes of several schools provide for the use of video surveillance on school grounds; cameras are installed both inside and outside school buildings. Camera recordings can be made available upon written request to authorities responsible for the supervision of public order. In addition, with the approval of the principal, these recordings can be made available to those involved in the investigation of incidents; the video materials are recorded and viewed in designated areas of the school, or in the principal's office.

### **3.3.4. Providing safety education**

In the context of safety education, few school statutes include as part of their tasks the need to disseminate safety knowledge and develop appropriate attitudes toward threats and emergencies, or promotion of the issue of the safety of children and young people among students, teachers, and parents. In some cases, this task may be performed by a health and safety officer or a safety coordinator. For example, one school organizes regular training for teachers on dangerous student behaviour and the dangers brought by the advancement of civilization and cultural changes.

### **3.3.5. Cooperation of schools with institutions responsible for ensuring safety**

In this context, school statutes provide information on cooperation in the areas of teaching, upbringing, care, prevention, and innovative activities. Few of them identify specific bodies and institutions, such as the Psychological and Pedagogical Counselling Centre No. 2 in Białystok, the Specialized Counselling Centre for Children and Young People with Emotional Disorders, the Child and Family Protection Centre, the Municipal Family Assistance Centre in Białystok, the Crisis Intervention Centre, the ETAP Prevention and Therapy Centre for Adolescents and Adults, the Stumilowy Las Sociotherapeutic Day Care Centre, the Nazaret Sociotherapeutic Day Care Centre, the Pomóż Im Foundation, the Nasz Dom Society, the police, the municipal guard, the fire department, Roman Catholic or Orthodox parishes, or primary care doctors.

Some statutes indicate cooperation with a court of law, especially with probation officers caring for students and their families. In addition, there are mentions of cooperation with the police in the field of education about various threats, the liability of minors for committing criminal offences, and safety rules, as well as risky behaviour and ways to avoid it. The police can assist schools in solving difficult problems on school grounds, including through direct intervention. In some schools, the safety coordinator or the health and safety officer is responsible for working with the local community and institutions that support schools in their efforts to improve student safety. These institutions include the school superintendent's office, the police, the prosecutor's office, the juvenile court, and others that can assist schools in solving safety problems.

Table 1 summarizes the results obtained from the document analysis. The data is provided in absolute numbers and percentages relative to all 44 statutes of the public primary schools regarding the individual criteria.



Table 1. The degree of alignment between the statutes of public primary schools in Białystok and SDG 4a.

Criteria	Specific issues	Number of statutes of public elementary schools	Percentage of statutes (n=44)
<b>Ensuring physical and psychological safety</b>	General provisions	19	43.18
	Specific provisions including: – rules on the use of mobile phones and other electronic devices – the implementation of prevention programmes	7	15.91
		3	6.82
<b>Ensuring internal and external security</b>	In the form of video surveillance and its rules of operation	7	15.91
<b>Providing safety education</b>	General provisions	8	18.19
<b>Cooperation of schools with institutions responsible for ensuring safety</b>	General provisions	44	100.00
	Specific provisions including cooperation with: – police – juvenile and family probation officers	4	9.10
		2	4.54

Source: compiled based on document analysis

## Conclusions

The examination of literature on the implementation of the SDG 4a in the context of the safety of elementary schools in Białystok reveals an existing gap in scientific knowledge. It was therefore necessary to conduct a study to fill that gap, especially regarding the scope of the shaping of safe educational facilities. These results will hopefully not only expand our knowledge, but also contribute to the development of the research area in other localities and even internationally. This exploratory approach can inspire others by emphasizing the importance of the adaptation of global ideas at the local level – in accordance with the principle of ‘Think globally, act locally’ (Klekotko et al., 2018, p. 24). At the same time, it can help promote local innovation on the global stage.

The Education Law of 2016 precisely defines the scope of the protection of student safety in schools. It imposes numerous responsibilities on the principal, teachers, and school employees, as well as the students. In particular, it focuses on the protection of children from accidents, the harmful effects of drugs, inappropriate content on the internet, and inappropriate use of mobile phones. This leads to the conclusion that it comprehensively fulfils the criteria we established for assessing the implementation

of SDG 4a. The 2002 Regulation is a complementary act that broadly and specifically regulates aspects of student safety in schools; however, it should be noted that issues related to ensuring the psychological safety of students are omitted. This leads to the conclusion that the Regulation largely, but not fully, meets the criteria for assessing the degree of implementation of SDG 4a.

The analysis of school statutes shows that, in most cases, they include detailed provisions concerning various aspects of student safety (43.18% of all statutes), primarily addressing physical safety and cooperation with external institutions and authorities (100% of all statutes). It is worth noting that issues related to safety education (18.19%) and internal and external security (15.91%) are rarely mentioned in these documents.

Based on the obtained research results, it is possible to partially confirm the hypothesis that the national level and the statutes of public elementary schools are only minimally aligned with SDG 4a during the period of the research. The result of the dogmatic analyses and the empirical research is the identification of issues that require regulation to achieve a higher level of SDG 4a implementation in Poland. Further efforts are needed to explore innovative solutions, such as best practices, which could enhance the safety of elementary schools, particularly in the context of psychological aspects. Additionally, effective cooperation with the school's local social environment, including non-governmental organizations, is undervalued, even though they can provide innovative solutions in this area.

Further dogmatic research in this area is required, particularly in connection with the enactment of the amendment to the Act of 13 May 2016 on Preventing Sexual Crime and Protecting Minors, which includes Chapter 4b on Standards for the Protection of Minors. The aim of this future research should be to determine the extent to which national and international standards are implemented by schools in their statutes, which will allow for an assessment of their impact on the safety levels of elementary schools.

Furthermore, recognizing the importance of the issues discussed, more empirical research would deepen the knowledge obtained from the studies in additional areas that require investigation. For instance, there could be more in-depth analysis of the impact of education on students' actual safety, with a focus on the effectiveness of educational programmes and the role they play in shaping students' safety attitudes and awareness. Additionally, it is worth exploring how schools are cooperating with local authorities and organizations to implement innovative school-safety solutions. Another research area covers the role of technology, especially modern educational tools and monitoring systems, in ensuring safe learning conditions. In addition, it would be useful to conduct comparative studies between different cities or regions to identify local peculiarities and best practices in school safety. A final but equally important direction for further research is to analyse the effectiveness of measures implemented by schools in the context of the prevention of the risks of addiction to

new technologies. These areas provide the foundation for future research that can make a significant contribution to improved safety practices in public schools.

#### REFERENCES

- Białystok Oficjalny Portal Miasta. (n.d.). *Publiczne jednostki oświatowe. Szkoły podstawowe* [Public educational units: Elementary schools]. Retrieved 8 January 2024, from [https://www.bialystok.pl/pl/dla\\_mieszkanow/edukacja/publiczne\\_jednostki\\_oswiatowe/szkoły\\_podstawowe-1.html](https://www.bialystok.pl/pl/dla_mieszkanow/edukacja/publiczne_jednostki_oswiatowe/szkoły_podstawowe-1.html)
- Díaz-Vicario, A. (2017). Practices that promote comprehensive school safety. *New Trends and Issues Proceedings on Humanities and Social Sciences*, 3(1), 304–312.
- Ferguson, T., & Roofe, C. G. (2020). SDG 4 in higher education: Challenges and opportunities. *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education*, 21(5), 959–975.
- Flannery, D. J., Fox, J. A., Wallace, L., Mulvey, E., & Modzeleski, W. (2021). Guns, school shooters, and school safety: What we know and directions for change. *School Psychology Review*, 50(2–3), 237–253.
- infuture institute. (2023). *Wpływ trendów na cele zrównoważonego rozwoju* [The impact of trends on the Sustainable Development Goals]. infuture institute.
- Kitamura, Y. (2019). Safety education from the perspective of education for sustainable development (ESD). In Y. Kitamura, T. Omomo, & M. Katsuno (Eds.), *Education in Japan* (pp. 221–237). Springer.
- Klekotko, M., Jastrzębiec-Witowska, A., Górlach, K., & Nowak, P. (2018). Think locally and act globally: Understanding human development in the era of globalisation. *Eastern European Countryside*, 24(1), 111–141.
- Ministry of Development and Technology. (2023). *Realizacja Celów Zrównoważonego Rozwoju w Polsce, Raport 2023* [Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in Poland: Report 2023]. Ministry of Development and Technology.
- Ministry of National Education and Sport. (2002). Regulation of the Minister of National Education and Sport of 31 December 2002, on Safety and Health in Public and Non-Public Schools and Institutions (consolidated text: Journal of Laws of 2020, item 1604).
- Portal Oświatowy. (n.d.). *Bezpieczeństwo w szkole* [Safety at school]. Retrieved 8 January 2024, from <https://www.portaloswiatowy.pl/narzedzia/akty-prawne/bezpieczenstwo-w-szkole-733>
- Sejm of Poland. (2016a). Act of 862 of 13 May 2016 on Preventing Sexual Crime and Protecting Minors (consolidated text: Journal of Laws of 2024, item 560).
- Sejm of Poland. (2016b). Act of 14 December 2016, Education Law (Journal of Laws of 2017, item 59; consolidated text: Journal of Laws of 2023, item 900).
- Shabalala, L. P., & Ngcwangu, S. (2021). Accelerating the implementation of SDG 4: Stakeholder perceptions towards initiation of sustainable community engagement projects by higher education institutions. *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education*, 22(7), 1573–1591.
- Singh, A. K., & Singh, B. (2022). Role of education in Sustainable Development Goals. *The Electrochemical Society Transactions*, 107(1), 11685.

- United Nations. (2015). *Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. United Nations, A/RES/70/1. [https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A\\_RES\\_70\\_1\\_E.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A_RES_70_1_E.pdf)
- Write, C. (2019). Commonwealth engagement in education: Prospects in the era of SDGs. *The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs*, 108(4), 423–433.
- Zhu, R., & Reed, E. (2023). School safety: What effective strategies are elementary schools currently using to ensure student safety? *Inquiry@Queen's Undergraduate Research Conference Proceedings 17*. Retrieved 8 January 2024, from <https://doi.org/10.24908/iqurcp16322>