

Academic: School safety a joint effort

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KUALA LUMPUR: Recent cases of student distress, bullying, emotional breakdowns and even tragic outcomes have exposed serious gaps in how schools and adults respond to youngsters' struggles, says Assoc Prof Datuk Dr Monna Ong Siew Siew.

The Tunku Abdul Rahman University of Management and Technology (TAR UMT) academic said the lack of coordination between schools, families and support groups is depriving many students of timely assistance during periods of distress.

“These cases remind us that academic pressure, digital exposure, social comparison, misinformation and relentless expectations are no longer occasional concerns, but everyday realities affecting our young people,” she said.

Ong said many students suffer in silence out of fear of stigma or judgement while teachers are often overwhelmed and lack basic mental health first-aid skills.

“Warning signs such as withdrawal, silence and irritability are easily missed, especially in a busy school environment.

“For too long, we believed school safety was about discipline, fences, CCTV cameras

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or rules.

“But the world has changed. A safe school is not only one that protects the physical body, it must also protect the mind and heart,” she added.

Ong was speaking at a youth dialogue, titled “From Their Eyes: Student Voice Matters”, at TAR UMT yesterday.

The event was held to brainstorm and gather insights for the Safe School 2.0 initiative, a joint effort by academics from TAR UMT and other higher learning institutions

to address psychological well-being and safety issues in Malaysian schools.

Ong said the initiative is a research-driven and policy-oriented effort to strengthen Malaysia's school safety framework through a more holistic and evidence-based approach.

It rests on three main pillars – psychological safety, digital safety literacy and an accessible mental health support system for students, she noted.

“It is a vision of schools where students do not have to cope alone, where help comes early and where every student feels respected, protected and valued,” she added.

On the dialogue, Ong explained that it was created as a “listening space” rather than a lecture, with students regarded as key stakeholders in shaping the Safe School 2.0 proposal.

She also called on adults to rethink how school safety is measured.

“Let us imagine a Malaysia where safety is not measured by metal gates but by the warmth, empathy and humanity within our schools,” she said.

She added that insights gathered from the dialogue and subsequent engagements would be used to refine the Safe School 2.0 initiative, which the team aims to submit to the Education Ministry in the first quarter of 2026.