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ABSTRACT

If the findings of recent research are any guide, the dollars that are now spent on security devices and personnel, and the educational time now lost by involving teachers and administrators in expanding security programs, would be better spent on strategies for making schools more humane places in which learning can take place. We should look for opportunities to encourage practices like core teaching and cohort teaching, for providing smaller school and classroom settings, and for training teachers and administrators to take advantage of these settings for personalizing and individualizing instruction. Local, state, and national policies should be sought that can provide young people the opportunities, including access to employment, that will allow them a successful transition into society. It is critical to remember that the goal of education is to humanize our schools and our society, to rid them of fear, and to encourage positive and constructive interaction between and among young people and adults. If our methods betray our purpose, we will have gained little in the long run, and we will have set the stage for a still more violent future for America's next generation. (Author/PGD)

STUDENT VIOLENCE AND VANDALISM: SOME ANSWERS TO A SERIOUS PROBLEM

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I come to you today from The National Urban Coalition, an urban action, advocacy, and information organization whose primary purpose is to discover and demonstrate approaches to solving the problems of urban neighborhoods. The Coalition network brings together representatives of business, labor, minorities, mayors and leaders of civic, community, and religious organizations through its local affiliates and cooperating organizations in over 30 cities across the country. The national and local coalitions conduct program and advocacy activities in the areas of education, employment, economic development, national urban policy, and housing and urban revitalization.

Our work in the area of urban education has concentrated on issues such as school finance reform, urban education policy, career education, bilingual/bicultural education, and the development of model programs for successful education in the urban environment. We are convinced that rational school policies can make a difference for the school performance and life chances of students, and that excellent programs can work -- and are working -- in urban schools. We recognize, too, that a prerequisite for excellence in education is school safety, for little learning can take place in an atmosphere of chaos and fear.

The focus of my presentation today will be on the findings of recent research concerning the causes of and potential solutions to student violence and vandalism, specifically as such findings are related to school policies and practices which can be altered to produce more peaceful and productive learning environments.

Concern over school violence has mounted steadily in recent years. Since 1968, discipline in the schools has been high on the list of concerns expressed by citizens in the annual Gallup Poll of Public Attitudes Toward Education. In the 1978 poll, discipline was the number one concern cited by the Gallup respondents. In 1975, the Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency concluded that the level of violence and vandalism in schools was reaching "crisis proportions which seriously threaten the ability of our educational system to carry out its primary function." [1]

The massive "Safe Schools" study released last year by the National Institute of Education[2] was a response to the mounting demands from educators, legislators,

and parents for guidance in identifying the causes of and potential solutions to the problem of school violence. That study indicated, as have many others, that violence in schools is not solely or even mainly an urban problem. The incidence of school violence and vandalism is increasing most rapidly in suburban school districts, and is experienced in rural schools as well. The costs of such incidents are estimated to exceed $500 million each year across the nation. The social costs are much greater.

In response to the perception that young people are "out of control," demands for stricter discipline have in some cases resulted in social policies for the treatment of youth which are, at best, ineffective, and at worst, inhumane. A 1977 Supreme Court ruling upheld the use of corporal punishment in a case where two young students had been beaten so severely with a wooden paddle that one of them lost the use of an arm. A review of the case in Newsweek noted that: "There appear to be signs of growing support for (corporal punishment) ... perhaps because of the disturbing wave of violence in the schools." [3]

Other "get tough" policies toward children are deemed by many to be realistic and necessary. In New York, for example, the Governor has adopted a fiercely punitive policy to deal with juvenile offenders. Now in New York, a teenager who commits a violent crime may be tried and sentenced in the same court and with the same severity as a 30-year-old felon. Writing in The Washington Star, Scott Spencer remarked, quite accurately I think, that this sort of policy "cancels the very idea of childhood as well as our collective responsibility to the children in our midst. In the self-serving spirit of the times, we are claiming that beneath us is a mutant generation, a generation of children who are not really children at all." [4]

The perception that acts of violence committed by youth are primarily the result of societal permissiveness and, hence, must be met by stricter punishment is formed by an incomplete picture of the context of such violence. Violent acts committed by students in school occur within the broader context of violence in society. Since 1961, the rate of violent crime in the United States has more than

doubled. Youth crime rates tend to fluctuate with the health of the economy and the availability of jobs.[5] Currently, about 1 out of every 3 teenagers who wants employment can expect to be denied this major vehicle for "growing up into" society.

At the same time, violence committed against children by adults is on the rise. It is estimated that between 10 and 20% of all childern are the victims of child abuse or neglect each year, and that the percentage is increasing,[6] along with the incidence of teenage and child alcoholism, drug addiction, and suicide. (In the past decade, the rate of childhood suicide has more than doubled. It is now the third leading cause of death for children under the age of 18, following accidents and murder.)[7]

Add to this picture of violence committed by and against youth the fact that the average American teenager has witnessed about 18,000 television murders, not including muggings, fights, robberies, rapes and beatings, by the time he or she has graduated from high school, and it becomes clear that school violence occurs within the context of social violence and neglect.

Social policies which are insensitive to children's needs for protection and care, and to the needs of youth for a dignified transition into the social structure through meaningful employment, do little to encourage rational behaviors on the part of young people. Constant protrayal of violence as a tool for resolving conflict does little to prepare young people for constructive interactions with other human beings. Similarly, the increased use of security devices and personnel in schools as a response to student violence treats only the symptoms, not the causes, of student unrest. If schools are to effectively combat the influences which promote violent behaviors in children, we must seek methods which are compatible with our goals.

A recent report of the New Jersey School Boards Association prepared by the Committee to Study Violence in the Public Schools concluded that, "psychological, emotional, and social injury in schools occurs as a result of words and actions lacking in sensitivity."[8] The Committee urged greater sensitivity in all dealings between and among school personnel and students. While this

is an admirable goal, it may seem difficult to determine how to implement policies which promote sensitivity in schools. However, recent research findings suggest several avenues for accomplishing this type of goal. The findings indicate that practices which have the effect of personalizing schools and decreasing school bureaucratization reduce student violence and vandalism.

The NIE Safe Schools Study found that certain characteristics are common to secondary schools with low rates of student violence. These schools tend to be small. They have fewer students in each class, and teachers teach fewer students each week. Students in these schools consider school discipline as being fairly administered, feel that classes teach them what they want to learn, and feel that they can influence what happens in their lives rather than feeling that things happen to them which they cannot control.[9] These characteristics point to situations in which students and teachers know each other well, and in which there is opportunity for a two-way flow of information concerning student needs and concerns.

One of the important benefits of small school size is the fact that students are generally known by all school personnel in a small school setting. In addition to the more personal atmosphere which exists in such schools, the recognition factor has been reported as important to reducing student violence in a number of studies. Alternative schools and other structures which establish semi-autonomous units within schools are often found to decrease levels of student violence by decreasing the feelings of student isolation and alienation which so often lead to violent acts.[10]

The issue of class size and organization of classes is an important one in light of the popular belief that the number of students in a class has little or no impact on student achievement or other student outcomes. Over the past decade, a number of studies which used entire schools as the unit of analysis found little relationship between class size and educational outcomes. However, other research, which is based on less aggregated data, has indicated the importance of small class size for a productive learning environment.

In a study of the Baltimore City Public Schools, Furno and Collins found

a significant achievement advantage for pupils in smaller classes.[11] Mayeske's reanalysis of the Coleman data uncovered a consistent association between pupil-teacher ratios and pupil achievement across all grade levels, with the most significant correlation at the junior high school level.[12] A recently released national study of day care funded by HEW reported that young children in smaller groups both learned more and behaved more positively.[13] And a current experiment conducted by the Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development suggests that large reductions in class size improve learning and student behaviors in numerous ways. The researchers report an immediate improvement in classroom atmosphere, fewer discipline problems, less anger and tension on the part of teachers, and increased individualization of instruction.[14]

The NIE Safe Schools study findings on the amount of teacher-student interaction time are equally important. The findings indicate that, particularly in junior high schools, the more time spent by teachers with a given group of students (or the fewer different students seen by a given teacher), the lower the level of student violence. This is an even more influential factor in reducing violence for urban and suburban junior highs than is class size.[15] Some strategies for achieving greater student-teacher interaction time include core teaching -- where each teacher teaches several subjects to the same group of children for a larger block of time each day -- and cohort teaching -- where the same teacher is "promoted" with his or her class each year. Both of these strategies promote sensitivity by allowing teachers and students the time to know each other and to develop trusting relationships, and by allowing teachers the time to clearly identify the learning needs and styles of their students.

It is no mystery that levels of student violence are typically higher in secondary schools than elementary schools, and are highest in junior high schools. At a time when young people are seeking answers to questions of personal identity and are most in need of a stable, humane environment, we thrust them into the bureaucratic, impersonal monster which we call the junior high. In that institution, a student in a large urban or suburban school system may see as many as 6 to 8 teachers each day, may be one of over 1,000 students

trying to establish an identity and gain attention, and may have no place to call his own except a hall locker where he hangs his coat. A teacher in that setting may see over 150 students each day in class periods of less than 45 minutes each, and will be responsible for the teaching and attendant paperwork for each of those students. At the end of three or four months, that teacher may start a new semester with an entirely different set of students just at the point when some rapport had been established with at least a few of the first group. Is it any wonder chat students in this type of setting feel out of control and frustrated by their school environment?

Interesting enough, the NIE study also indicates that school factors have a greater influence on the levels of violence in junior highs than do other background factors, such as the crime rate in the community. School policies and practices can make a significant difference in the quality of the learning environment regardless of the school's location or community characteristics.

The implications of these findings are extremely important for school board members who have responsibility for policy-making and resource allocation. It is difficult and may seem impossible in this era of shrinking resources to justify cuts in class size, for example, as a means of beginning to re-personalize schools to decrease student violence. In a time when mandated services of various kinds absorb larger shares of each year's operating budget, it may be difficult to find the flexibility to introduce new organizational modes which may decrease school size or allow greater opportunities for students and teachers to interact. Nonetheless, it seems to me that we must seize every opportunity to extricate ourselves from the current situation in which security and vandalism costs compete more strenuously each year with educational costs.

As the NIE report noted, when school resources must be directed toward security; "the price for such security can frequently deplete resources or create conditions detrimental to making schools effective learning organizations and environments for providing socialization and cultural competence to young people." [16] Furthermore, the use of security devices and personnel was not found to have any positive association with lower crime levels in schools. The dollars which we now spend on security devices and personnel, and the educational time which we

now lose by deploying teacher and administrative time to increase security measures, would be better spent on strategies for making schools more humane places in which learning can take place. We should look for opportunities to encourage practices like core teaching and cohort teaching, for providing smaller school and classroom settings, and for training teachers and administrators to take advantage of these settings for personalizing and individualizing instruction.

We should, in addition, make it our business as educators to advocate policies on the local, state and national levels which will ensure the adequate care and protection of children and youth, and which will provide them with access to employment and other opportunities to allow them a successful transition into the society-at-large.

It is critical to remember that our goal in all of our endeavors is to humanize our schools and our society, to rid them of fear, and to encourage positive and constructive interaction between and among young people and adults. If our methods betray our purpose, we will have gained little in the long run, and we will have set the stage for a still more violent future for America's next generation.

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Endnotes

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