ED377256 1994-09-00 Gaining Control of Violence in the Schools: A View from the Field. ERIC Digest No. 100.

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ERIC Identifier: ED377256
Publication Date: 1994-09-00
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Source: ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education New York NY.| BBB32255 _ National Education Association Washington DC. Center for the Revitalization of Urban Education.

Gaining Control of Violence in the Schools: A View from the Field. ERIC Digest No. 100.

Too often in urban schools across the country, both students and teachers feel unsafe. Many have been threatened physically or verbally, or have directly experienced violence. Beyond generating fears for everyone's safety, violence in schools is diverting energy and resources from instruction. Thus, it is not surprising that one of the National Education Goals for the year 2000 is "Safe, disciplined, and drug-free schools" that offer an "environment conducive to learning." (Executive Office of the President. (1990). National goals for education. Washington, DC: Author, ED 319 143)

Most analyses of educational problems and prospects are drawn from university-based research. By contrast, this digest presents the up-to-date wisdom of public school educators whose objectivity is enriched by having to solve the problems that arise daily in today's city schools. The digest summarizes a rich day of discussion among urban educators about the causes of school violence and their possible alleviation. Held on May 19, 1994 at the National Education Association (NEA) in Washington, DC, the discussion was sponsored by its Center for the Revitalization of Urban Education, with participants that included NEA representatives from 20 major American cities.

A VIOLENT, DIVIDED SOCIETY

The celebration of violence in movies, on television, and in popular songs has turned into an epidemic of personal tragedies for people living in our Nation's cities. Exacerbated by the ready availability of drugs and weapons, violence has become a public health issue of immediate concern. Yet the sources of violence are deep and long-standing, for ours is a country sharply divided between haves and have-nots; and areas of high poverty concentration have long been susceptible to all forms of violence, from vandalism, robbery, and rape, to suicide--the ultimate violence of despair. People who grow up in poor urban neighborhoods tend to be surrounded by unemployed adults, rundown housing, a physically deteriorated environment, and the constant fear of crime. Too often their own parents are ill-prepared, neglectful, or even

abusive--children, like them. And the paucity of good role models in the community and at school contributes to young people's belief that the deck is stacked against them. Not surprisingly, these youth experience a free-floating anger, accompanied by feelings of frustration and helplessness, making them tinder boxes, ready to ignite at any provocation.

LARGE, OVERBURDENED SCHOOLS

Surrounded by violence in their homes and neighborhoods, as well as in the society at large, youth often look to the school as a haven. Indeed, the most resilient are students who can use their teachers and other staff as mentors and role models, and their time at school as a profitable refuge. Unfortunately, large urban schools are themselves often anonymous, alienating, and fraught with danger. Insofar as the schools mirror the society, they can exacerbate the problem of violence in several key ways:

IMPOVERISHED NEIGHBORHOODS, IMPOVERISHED SCHOOLS

Because schools are largely funded by property taxes, the school districts that face the toughest challenges from the students they serve are also those with the fewest funds to meet their children's needs. Schools in poor, deteriorated, crime-ridden neighborhoods tend to be physically dilapidated, overcrowded, and lacking the resources necessary for effective teaching. Not only are classes much larger than in affluent neighborhoods, but students sit at broken desks, and teachers (who are often less well paid than their suburban colleagues) must do without laboratory equipment, computers, and even the most elementary supplies like chalk and books.

Urban students are aware that their schools are rundown and poorly equipped in comparison with suburban schools, that the technology isn't up-to-date enough to prepare them for jobs or college, and that they are often distrusted and feared by the adults who work with them. When these same students are able to go to school in well-equipped, modern buildings, they score higher academically than their peers in the old rundown schools. In fact, in several cities, when old schools were renovated or new schools built, students' test scores showed marked academic improvement.

LARGE SCHOOLS AND CLASSES

The inability of teachers and other school staff to make meaningful connections with students in large schools and increasingly large classes has become a key safety issue. Adolescence is universally a precarious developmental stage, and many teenagers have limited reserves of self-esteem. Given the enormous problems urban students face, they see little hope for their future. Although urban adolescents want contact with adults, too often they are deprived of sustained relationships with caring adults in their homes and neighborhoods. Unfortunately, even elementary school teachers must

struggle against large classes to pay adequate attention to their students, and teachers in junior highs and secondary schools often see 150-200 students a day. Thus teachers inadvertently become yet another lost opportunity for connection. Without sustained contact, they cannot give their students a vision of what education can offer, or save them from self-destructive behavior. Indeed, many educators are convinced that, without reducing class size, all other attempts to ensure school safety can at best offer marginal improvement.

TEACHER ISOLATION, UNCERTAINTY, AND CYNICISM

It was once thought to be a benefit of the profession that teachers work alone in their classrooms, behind closed doors. However, teacher isolation from each other and from administrators and other school staff, as well as from parents and the surrounding community, has become an increasing liability.
The recent threats of privatization, as well as salary cuts in several cities, are only the latest signs that teachers are isolated from their communities, without necessary public support. Unfortunately, the apparent loss of support for public schools comes at a time when new tasks--from "wanding" students with metal detectors, to talking to social workers and teaching socialization skills--are being added to teachers' already stretched roster of daily responsibilities. At the same time, a national uncertainty about how to handle potential conflicts between discipline, safety, and students' rights has made teachers unsure about what parents and the larger society want them to do. Can lockers be searched for weapons without giving students sufficient warning? Is it fair to wand only "suspicious-looking" students and not others? Do students have a right, as some claim, to carry weapons for their own defense?

All these pressures have made many urban teachers feel overworked, stressed, and burned out. A cynicism mirroring that of their students is prevalent among those who can see no way out. As a teacher commented, "You have people who have been in these dilapidated buildings for years, asking for help and getting empty promises. They just give up--throw up their hands and say, 'All I can do is deal with what I've got in front of me. Don't ask me to do anything more.'"

SCHOOLS AS FORTRESSES

Despite their acute concerns for safety, few teachers feel at ease in the increasingly garrison atmosphere of inner-city public schools. Rather than offering reassurance, metal detectors and other mechanical devices, as well as security forces, are seen as providing a false sense of safety, if not a harsh symbol of the failure to create safe schools. In the words of one teacher, "The medium is the message. And the message that this gives out is that we are afraid of our students."
In fact, finding weapons on students is relatively rare. In one typical case, a search of

over 3,000 students yielded two weapons. This low rate of interception is partly because even the most sophisticated devices cannot catch all weapons entering a school. Unlike an airport, it is nearly impossible to secure every entrance to a school; those few students intent on bringing in weapons are inevitably a step ahead of the security devices, which means that enforcement activities alone cannot create a safe school.

Finally, metal detectors, wands, and security forces with guns, handcuffs, and other equipment, are taking large chunks out of already stretched urban education budgets, even as they increase, rather than alleviate, tension in schools. The garrison atmosphere is exacerbating tensions between students and school staff, who are forced to serve in policing roles. Conflicts are also emerging between teachers, who want to build trust for learning, and the security staff, whose orientation is toward control and arrests. Similarly, friction is surfacing between administrators, whose role is to promote the school and its students, and security forces, who often have no allegiance to the school but are anxious to increase their counts of weapons, violent incidents, and arrests.

NARROW, TOP-DOWN INTERVENTIONS

While security forces and mechanical devices are the most obvious and controversial responses to school violence, many schools have also taken advantage of special federal, state, and local money aimed at anti-violence programming. Unfortunately, there have been several serious problems with these funds.
First, whether directed to preventing dropouts, drugs, or violence, the money has tended to be restricted to extremely narrow and fragmented programming. Despite growing evidence, for example, that new or well-kept school buildings increase student performance and morale, anti-drug or violence money can never be used for building repairs. Similarly, the high unemployment rates in inner-cities have been repeatedly linked to crime and violence, yet job programs are rarely part of anti-violence measures. Even extra-curricular activities, after-school centers or sports programming, which are such a direct means of keeping students out of harm's way, rarely meet the tight programming restrictions of these funds. This missed opportunity is particularly sad, since student participation in sports and extra-curricular activities has decreased in the past decade.

Second, anti-violence and other youth assistance programs in schools have tended to be isolated from, and to duplicate, programming in other public agencies. In fact, competition for money in the context of overlapping services has created a territoriality and fear of sharing knowledge and resources among educators, and social service and other professionals. In this environment of competition and suspicion, teachers are rarely an active part of either program planning, or decisions about the needs of an individual student. Instead, they tend to be left out of the loop entirely, or to be given only limited and pre-designed tasks.

STRATEGIES FOR CREATING SAFER SCHOOLS

The web of educational and societal problems described above are deep and difficult to solve. Certainly, money is needed to repair schools and neighborhoods and to create jobs for youth. It has also become obvious, however, that the ways in which schools and other public agencies approach social problems must change. Educators and other professionals must make wider connections, both in human and conceptual terms. Although few believe that educational efforts, isolated from the surrounding society, can solve the problem of violence inside schools, there is widespread faith that some changes can make a difference. Moreover, a number of strategies being tried in schools around the country have improved safety and harmony.

PROFESSIONAL RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING

School violence has given new urgency to improving the recruitment and training of teachers, particularly those entering urban schools. It is not enough for recruitment to focus only on finding role models--that is, teachers of the same race/ethnicity as their students. To heal the alienation and hopelessness of urban students, teachers must be found who will live in the communities where they work, so they can help reweave the torn fabric of community between teachers, students and their parents.
At the same time, the complex nature of today's schools necessitates a wider vision of which school staff need job preparation. Training must go beyond teachers, administrators, counselors, and other professionals. It must extend to all employees, including paraprofessionals, cafeteria staff, secretaries, custodians, and bus drivers.

Finally, the content of training must be reshaped. Both immediate, in-service and long-term, pre-professional training are necessary:

IN-SERVICE TRAINING. All school staff need to know how to address the immediate problem of violence in classrooms, the cafeteria, the halls, and other school areas, including on school buses. How should an adult behave when a student has a gun? What are the most effective methods of diffusing potential conflict among students, or breaking up fights?

PRE-PROFESSIONAL TRAINING. The pre-professional training of teachers, counselors, and administrators has to be expanded to include more social analyses, so that prospective educators develop a deeper understanding of the issues that impinge on violence: poverty, the media, gun control, the changing economy and joblessness, and parenting. In addition, school staff needs to be better prepared to teach socialization skills and nonviolent conflict mediation. Finally, because the traditional isolation of professionals from one another is no longer tenable, school staff must be trained to work cooperatively with each other, as well as with professionals outside the school.

PROGRAMS TO INCREASE MUTUAL RESPECT AMONG STUDENTS AND SCHOOL STAFF

Although coercive methods may stop violence in the short run, too often they create negative emotions that start their own cycle of undesirable behaviors. An alternate approach, which develops self-respect and self-discipline in students and positive working relationships, is obviously better for both students and adults, and for the climate of the school.

Although small, unrelated programs rarely make much of a difference, school-wide interventions that have general support can be helpful. For example, a number of schools have begun to focus specifically on increasing students' self-esteem, as well as on building the socialization skills that many middle-class students learn at home. In some schools, teachers and students are asked to get to know each other, including their strengths, likes, dislikes, humor, and triggers. The object is to come to a consensus about goals, and to create an ownership of, and engagement in, the daily activities of both teachers and students. Several elementary schools are teaching students simple skills, such as how to greet each other and interact with each other in respectful ways. Finding alternatives to cross-sex and same-sex teasing is key, for teasing starts early and leads to goading, heckling, and other forms of aggression, which can be quite dangerous by secondary school. Finally, both elementary and secondary schools across the country are teaching students, parents, and school staff the many benefits and methods of resolving conflict nonviolently, including peer mediation and de-escalation skills.

EXPANDING THE ROLE OF THE GUIDANCE COUNSELOR

Although the best way to prevent school violence is to change how everyone relates to each other, a number of schools are achieving good results by adding guidance counselors and giving counselors new roles. At least as important as intervening in crises and talking to students in the aftermath of violence is classroom teaching by counselors. There, counselors generate group work and developmentally oriented activities to improve the way students feel about themselves and interact with each other, particularly during stress or conflict.

Some counselors are also working with cafeteria staff, bus drivers, and other support staff, as well as with parents. The goal is to give everyone involved in the school the same skills, language, and terminology for handling stress and conflict--to create an environment that is consistently nonviolent and nurturing.

REACHING OUT TO PARENTS

Head Start, special education, and other compensatory education programs have long

involved parents in their children's schooling. However, the growing number of "children with children" and other unprepared or overburdened parents puts new pressure on urban schools to support families, as well as teach parenting skills. Activities range from grandparent hotlines to programs that bring parents and junior high students together to learn parenting skills. In all, the point is to help parents and guardians become aware of the parenting skills they possess; enhance their skills; and expand parents' choices in their guiding, teaching, and disciplinary roles.

A number of schools are also working directly to bring parents into the school. In some, community facilitators work with parents to make them more comfortable with schools. In others, classes are held on a four-day schedule; on the fifth day, the parents and the students come to school together to participate in activities. A special literacy programs allows parents and students to learn together. And some schools are creating "half-way houses" just outside the school, where school employees, community volunteers, parent facilitators, and others all can come. There, without the fear of authority, parents can talk more freely about the needs of their children and obtain appropriate services.

TREATING THE AFTERMATH OF VIOLENCE

Students who have witnessed or been involved in violence suffer from post traumatic stress, which can include anxiety, fear, emotional constriction, attention difficulties, and sleeplessness. Thus, just as victims need counseling when they leave the emergency room, students who were bystanders to the violence need carefully led discussions to help them with their confusion, grief, and anger.

Some schools have instituted first offender programs, which usually involve four- or five-day training sessions for one parent as well as the student. Unfortunately, these programs have limited benefits, since many students involved in offenses have deeper problems, and need more serious help. However, schools are creating quite useful programs for students who have been suspended for violence. For example, the student and parent or guardian may be asked to sign a contract agreeing to joint counseling, as well as to tutoring for the youth. Then once the student returns to school, the student and parent make a one-year commitment to continue the counseling and the tutoring, and to train in mediation and conflict resolution skills.

"SAFE SCHOOL" PLANS

Simply stated, a safe school is a place where students can receive a high quality education without the threat of violence. A number of schools are developing plans and strategies to implement safe schools. These plans work best when they are generated not only by school staff, but also by parents and representatives from community groups and agencies. Although every school's plan for a "safe school" looks different, the key is developing a consensus about what everyone wants the school to be like, and the rules that everyone is willing to uphold to make this happen.

JOINING WITH THE COMMUNITY

School violence is placing new pressures on schools to reach out to police, gang intervention workers, mental health workers, social service workers, clergy, and the business community. In a city with a large tourist business, close ties to the business community have resulted in guarantees that all the culinary arts program students in the vocational school will receive jobs upon graduation. In another city, parents bringing their children into an elementary school have the option of filling out a form that is entered into the computers of all the public health agencies. Though this raises privacy issues, creating joint centers of information can enhance efficiency for both parents and professionals.

There are several advantages to strategies that connect jobs and services through the school. First, since resources need to be where the students and their parents are, schools are a natural place to consolidate services. Second, finding other agencies that provide services enables schools to put their own money back into education, where it belongs. And third, since violence is not a school problem--it is a community and societal problem--its solution has to draw in a wider circle of participation.

Finally, whatever the specific strategy, there is a need to bring back a communal feeling to the schools, and once again to root the schools in their communities. To do this, students, school staff, parents, neighbors, and other interested citizens all have to become part of the fabric of the schools--stakeholders in its future and in the future of its students.

This Digest was developed by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. RR93002016, and by the Center for the Revitalization of Urban Education, National Education Association. The opinions expressed in this Digest do not necessarily reflect the position or policies of OERI, the Department of Education, or NEA.

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Title: Gaining Control of Violence in the Schools: A View from the Field. ERIC Digest No. 100.
Document Type: Information Analyses---ERIC Information Analysis Products (IAPs) (071); Information Analyses---ERIC Digests (Selected) in Full Text (073);
Target Audience: Administrators, Teachers, Practitioners
Available From: ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, Institute for Urban and Minority Education, Box 40, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027.
Descriptors: Community Involvement, Conferences, Crime Prevention, Economically Disadvantaged, Educational Needs, Elementary Secondary Education, Federal Aid, Prevention, Public Schools, School Community Relationship, School Safety, School Security, Secondary Education, Student Behavior, Teacher Student Relationship, Urban Schools, Violence

Identifiers: ERIC Digests, National Education Association
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