

School Safety Update

The Newsletter of the National School Safety Center

May 2000

NAAG Report: "Bruised Inside: What Our Children Say About Youth Violence"

State Attorneys General under the sponsorship of the National Association of Attorneys General (NAAG) met and listened last year to professionals on school safety and youth violence. These professionals told us how children who witness domestic violence are far more likely to become violent adults. They told us about the nurturing a child needs in his or her early childhood. They told us about the dire consequences of not receiving that nurturing. That information helped us begin to understand youth violence in our country, and laid the groundwork for our current efforts.

This year, we turned to the students, teachers, administrators and parents who live everyday with the fear of unthinkable violence, and work hard everyday to overcome it. Overwhelmingly, students from across the country told us during our listening conferences that the primary cause of youth violence lies in the home. The second cause, nearly all of them said, was the way students treat each other, and they cited bullying, "dissing," harassing and outcasting as major contributors to youth violence. Parents, teachers and administrators generally confirmed the students' observations.

Turning to solutions, while the students usually welcomed whatever physical security measures their own schools had already enacted and discouraged any that were not already present at their schools, they also said youth violence would not be solved or significantly reduced until its root causes were addressed. Recognizing there is no one solution to the problem, the people who came to our listening conferences spoke highly of such efforts as peer mediation, after-school programs, and training to prevent bullying.

In *BRUISED INSIDE: What Our Children Say About Youth Violence*, we chronicle these meetings with our youth, and with their parents, teachers, and

school administrators, and describe our findings based on these meetings. We recommend steps that can be taken by parents, youth, schools, communities of faith and others to help prevent youth violence. (These recommendations are summarized below.) Finally, we describe state-by-state the efforts that Attorneys General are already making to curb youth violence.

We at NAAG hope the report will contribute to the national conversation about youth violence. We hope, in particular, that it will strike some as significant that the chief law enforcers of the states find that law enforcement by itself cannot possibly solve or prevent youth violence. Instead, we as a society need to get at the root causes of youth violence. We need to pay far more attention to how we raise and nurture our children, how we listen to them and what we hear, how we teach them to deal with problems, how we act as role models for them, and how we make them feel part of a community of people who care for and support one another.

WHAT WE CAN DO TO HELP

As many have said, youth violence is not a problem that the government can solve. Although there is much that Attorneys General, schools, and others can do to help, the answer lies ultimately with the parents and students who make choices everyday whether to participate in the culture of violence, to take steps to overcome it or just to let it be. And while the primary responsibility lies with parents and students, the rest of us can surely help to keep our children safe and secure.

What follow are our recommendations for steps all of us can take to help solve the problem of youth violence in America today. It is our belief that many policymakers have missed the mark by focusing on seemingly simplistic solutions that ignore the realities of what our children and their parents are dealing with in the year 2000. What we offer are practical solutions for parents,

students, schools, communities of faith, and other interested members of the community—and, yes, government officials—who want to take steps to make our children safer.

What Parents Can Do

Parents can make the biggest difference. Most Attorneys General are parents, and we understand the unique challenges of being a parent in this new century. We recommend that parents do the following:

- Accept responsibility for raising one's children.
- Listen to and hear our children.
- Spend time with them.
- Set boundaries.
- Instill values including respect for others.
- Acknowledge that all parents may sometimes need help, and take the initiative to get that help, such as by taking parenting classes.
- Meet regularly for advice, information and support with other mothers and fathers, especially the parents of one's own children's classmates and friends.
- Get to know and keep in touch with the children's teachers—to learn valuable information about one's children's behavior in school, as well as make it easier for teachers to understand situations and issues with which the children may be struggling.
- Be supportive of teachers and school officials when they find it necessary to discipline your child. If you disagree with the discipline, express that disagreement directly to the teacher instead of undermining your child's respect for the teacher.
- Pay attention to the movies and television shows your children watch, the video games they play, and the music they listen to. Set aside a week and watch television together, noting what shows the children watch, then talk with them about the shows' content

and the messages they send about behavior and values.

- Create a community of support for the child, working with friends, one's own immediate and extended family, schools, community organizations, and communities of faith.
- Find the time to serve as mentors, coaches and after-school supervisors of others' children. Many parents not only find the experience rewarding, but learn they can make an enormous difference in the lives of the children they work with.

If all parents took these steps, most of our other recommendations would be unnecessary. We endorse the primacy of the family, but we also recognize that our schools are overflowing with children who do not get the love, support, guidance and acceptance they need from their families. We have no intention of trying to replace families with government programs, but we also believe it is important, at a minimum, to provide a safe atmosphere for all of our children. This cannot be accomplished without attacking head on the root causes of violence. To that end, we must do our best as a community to provide some support, some structure, and a place to go for the lost, lonely, unguided youth in our midst.

What Our Youth Can Do

Again and again in our listening conferences, young people said, "It's up to us." Indeed, youth violence is a problem that teens themselves can go a long way toward solving. To our youth, we make the following recommendations:

- Take responsibility for your own behavior.
- Respect others. As one student told us, "make acceptance cool."
- Break the vicious cycle of bullying and dissing. Make a decision not to participate in outcasting, bullying, intolerance or acts of violence.
- Do all you can to influence your peers and younger children against violence.
- Volunteer to be peer mediators to resolve disputes in your own schools.
- Serve as mentors to younger children, many of whom respect, revere and follow the example set by teenagers.

- Serve as a civil rights worker in your own school if such programs are available.
- Finally, break the deadly code of silence. To protect yourselves, your peers and everyone else present in the school environment, recognize that the mature response is to report to school authorities peers and others who bring weapons to school, participate in acts of violence or other crimes, or threaten to do so.

What Our Schools Can Do

While it is clear from our listening conferences that schools are not the cause of youth violence, it is equally clear that schools can do much to help solve the problem. We make the following recommendations for schools:

- Take responsibility for making your school safe.
- Post school resource officers on campus.
- Train teachers to recognize early warning signs of violent youth.
- Beef up physical security measures—including some combination of ID badges, uniforms or dress codes, closed campuses, security cameras and metal detectors.
- Recognize and attack head-on the root causes of this violence, including intolerance, bullying, and unresolved conflict.
- Provide constructive outlets for the anger that many students inevitably bring from home, whether such activities focus on athletics, the arts, or other outlets. Among other things, these programs recognize that every child has a need to belong and be accepted, and that for many this need is not fulfilled at home or in their neighborhood.
- Offer full-day kindergarten.
- Provide after-school programs where children can play and work together on worthy projects.
- Encourage peer mediation and mentoring.
- Intervene in high-risk or volatile situations in the schools.
- Identify early the elementary students who are likely to cause future trouble and work with them to head off violence.

- Institute policies and procedures to deal with hate-based violence.
- Teach students not to engage in bullying but rather to respect their peers' differences.
- Provide protection to teachers and other school officials for taking legitimate disciplinary actions.
- Foster a sense of community and a sense of trust so strong as to overcome the culture of bullying and even the code of silence.
- Teach students how to set personal and career goals and develop strategies to accomplish those goals.
- Provide more counseling and mental health services in school. Several teachers and administrators with whom we spoke said counseling needs to be available beginning in elementary school. They recommended identifying the troubled youth early on—experienced teachers all say they know who most of them will be—and offering services to them in partnership with parents and community organizations.
- Create a safety plan encompassing all these elements, taking care to include parents, teachers, students, police, fire fighters, emergency managers, communities of faith, and interested members of the community in making and executing the plan.

What Communities of Faith Can Do

Communities of faith can be marvelous sources of people, energy, role models and values. They sometimes offer an array of after-school, athletic, arts, community service and other programs that not only occupy young people's time, but also inculcate good values, teach valuable interaction skills, and expose them, again, to positive, caring adult role models.

By their very nature, communities of faith also offer ongoing, inclusive programs for instilling positive values of altruism and responsibility. Communities of faith can also provide a ready supply of positive adult and peer role models. For communities of faith that choose to join us in this endeavor, we recommend that they:

- Take responsibility to provide our youth with a connection to a community of caring individuals and families.

As pre-existing communities that include networks of friends and families and are typically centered around values of altruism, mutual support and community service, faith communities are particularly well set up to provide young people with the connection to a larger community that so many of them crave.

We encourage communities of faith to join us in our efforts. We also encourage individuals and families who belong to a community of faith to turn that community's attention toward this effort to reach out to our youth.

What Community Organizations Can Do To Provide Resources to Youth

Members of the community who care about children but are not parents, teachers, or administrators can nonetheless help solve the problem. We recommend that they:

- Volunteer to help with after-school programs, which help reduce youth violence in a number of ways. Such programs provide a relatively safe place for a child to go. They often provide harmless enjoyment and beneficial physical exercise. They keep young people occupied. And of course they provide sustained attention from positive adult role models.
- Volunteer for peer mediation programs, which survive and sometimes thrive on volunteer help from members of the community. Experts all say that whether a child becomes a productive, socialized adult turns largely on whether he or she has at least one adult who provides that child sustained, positive attention. Our listening conferences affirmed the value of these programs.
- Volunteer to tutor and mentor children.
- Coach teams.
- Teach useful skills that children might not otherwise learn.
- Supervise arts programs.
- Raise or contribute needed funds.
- Serve on boards and committees.
- Act as a big brother or sister.
- Spend some time with kids and provide a role model of an adult who cares about them in a positive way.

What Communities Can Do To Provide Resources for Parents

One theme we heard was that communities should do more to help parents. We recommend the following for communities that want to help:

- Come together to address how you can do more for parents who want to do the right thing but need help making decisions about their children.
- Simply bring parents of children the same age together regularly to discuss their children and the issues they face.
- Provide a hotline to give information and advice to parents.
- Allow schools to serve as centers for parents to gather and help one another. In that regard, the school we visited where the YMCA had moved right into the school might serve as a model. Most parents' lives revolve around their children, and most children's lives revolve around school, so it makes sense to bring services for children into the schools.
- Offer early childhood care and education programs: prenatal care, training for at-risk mothers, quality child care, community-based intervention for troubled families, and expedited permanency planning for children removed from abusive homes.

What Law Enforcement and the Justice System Can Do

As Attorneys General, we value those who work with us in law enforcement for their wealth of experience, their unique knowledge of the problem of youth violence, and their pragmatism. There are a myriad of ways law enforcement can help with the task of reducing youth violence. We recommend that law enforcement agencies:

- Offer anonymous tip lines on which students and others with knowledge may report threats, harassment, bullying, display of weapons in school, and other suspicious activities under the cloak of anonymity.
- Educate young people about youth violence and its prevention, and the importance of respecting others.
- Recommend that policymakers reform the juvenile justice system in part to ensure that early acts of juvenile de-

linquency trigger meaningful consequences for the offender.

- Share important information on violent juvenile crimes with the offenders' schools so the schools can protect their students and employees. To the extent the law bars such sharing, recommend to policymakers that laws be modified to permit the reasonable exchange of information.
- Train police officers in: school violence, how to handle interactions with school administrators, teachers and students, how to conduct school security assessments, and how to assess and respond to school-related threats.
- Supervise school grounds and develop a school resource officer (SRO) program.
- Develop working partnerships with area schools. Consult with school officials about school safety and help them make safety plans. Provide examples of when to call the police. Help screen employees and staff-like volunteers.
- Reduce truancy by working with schools, parents, and students who are truant. Visit the truants' homes to see if their parents have been abusive or neglectful. Enforce truancy laws.
- Provide assistance to children who are victims of crime or witnesses to crime.
- Work with schools and relevant social service agencies to ensure that a young offender is given access to resources and every opportunity to reform.
- Enforce laws against illegal gun sales and educate parents on firearm safety, including the proper storage of weapons in the home.

While the climate in each state will dictate what is possible on this point, law enforcers should recommend to policymakers that they do all they can to ensure that any access by juveniles to knives, firearms and other deadly weapons is supervised, age-appropriate and responsible.

Adapted with permission from the National Association of Attorneys General. The complete report, BRUISED INSIDE: What Our Children Say About Youth Violence, is available on-line at www.naag.org.

Public worries grow even as schools become safer

Despite overwhelming evidence that violent crime by young people is declining inside and out of schools, public fears about youth and youth violence are growing, according to a new report.

The report, released jointly by the Justice Policy Institute and the Children's Law Center, found:

- **The number of school-associated violent deaths is small and not increasing.** School-associated violent deaths decreased 40 percent from 1998 to 1999, from 43 down to 26 in a population of 52 million American students. In 1999, there was a one in 2 million chance of being killed in one of America's schools.
- **Yet Americans' fears about school violence increased.** Despite the declines in violence, seven out of 10 Americans in recent surveys said they believed that a shooting was likely in their school, and Americans were 49 percent more likely to express fears of their schools in 1999 than in 1998.

"As Americans take time to reflect on lessons learned from the shootings at Columbine High School, this report offers a great deal of hope for parents, school administrators and young people," states Justice Policy Institute Director Vincent Schiraldi. "The data reminds us that our young people are neither school-house assassins nor the kids on the other side of the yellow tape, weeping over the deaths of their classmates. Our kids are the ones playing soccer, going to dances and doing the other normal things kids do. They don't need us to turn their schools into prisons, they need our support to live healthy, happy lives."

The report, release on April 12, 2000, just before the first anniversary of the tragedy at Columbine High School, draws on recently released data from the Centers for Disease Control, the National School Safety Center, the Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the U.S. Department of Justice and the Applied Research Center. The report also analyzes public opinion polling by the *Washington Post*, *USA Today*, the *Wall Street Jour-*

nal and the *CBS Evening News*. The researchers also conducted a separate analysis of case law concerning school liability.

Some of the report's other findings include:

- FBI arrest data indicate that there was a 56 percent decline in juvenile homicides from 1993 to 1998, and a 30 percent decline in overall juvenile crime. Nearly two thirds of poll respondents (62 percent) believe that juvenile crime is on the increase.
- 3.1 million youth in America were suspended or expelled from school in 1997, or nearly 6.8 percent of all students. This is up from 3.7 percent of students in 1974.

The report made three recommendations for reducing school violence and bringing public opinion closer to reality. First, it recommended that the media infuse contextual data about school safety into their reporting on school shootings so as not to "lead to a sense of unnecessary panic."

Second, the report recommends that schools heed the research demonstrating effective methods for creating safe, nurturing atmospheres for learning. Recent research has found that schools in which students clearly understand the rules against violence experience fewer violent incidents than schools which rely on metal detectors and locker searches for security.

Third, the gun industry should be regulated. Americans need to stop focusing exclusively on bringing guns to school and address the more fundamental question of how kids get guns in the first place.

School House Hype: Two Years Later, co-authored by Kim Brooks, Vincent Schiraldi and Jason Ziedenberg, can be found at the Justice Policy Institute web site at www.cjcj.org. The Justice Policy Institute is a research and public policy organization in Washington, DC. The Children's Law Center is a nonprofit legal service center in Kentucky dedicated to the protection of children's legal rights. The research for *School House Hype: Two Years Later* was funded by a grant from the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Index of federal resources on school violence

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released "Inventory of Federal Activities Addressing Violence in Schools," a listing of more than 100 projects involving some 10 federal departments and more than 25 agencies.

This inventory was compiled in the aftermath of last year's Columbine school shootings in Littleton, Colorado to answer the question of what the federal government is doing to respond to violence in our nation's schools. This is the first-ever listing of federal projects that support strategies to help reduce violence in schools and that acquire and disseminate information about violence in schools.

The inventory summarizes federally supported data collection and analysis, evaluation, research, research synthesis, program and resource development, and technical assistance.

The federal agencies identified their current and recently completed activities that either directly address the problem of violence that occurs on school property, on the way to or from school, or at school-related events, or indirectly address school violence by focusing on precursors of violence, factors associated with violence, or mechanisms for preventing violent behavior.

Despite the fact that the great majority of schools are violence-free, highly publicized recent school shootings-especially those involving multiple victims-have raised public concern about the safety of schools. This inventory was begun as an effort to learn more about the federal government's response to the need for information about school-related violence.

The inventory was published as in the April 2000 issue of the *Journal of School Health*. Copies are also available online at <http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dash>.

13th Annual Teen Survey reveals mixed responses: Most teens feel safe from violence at school

Although the nation's schools actually are safer than ever, the legacy of the killings at Colorado's Columbine High School one year ago in April looms large in the minds of America's teens, according to a nationwide survey of students conducted by *USA WEEKEND*.

Conducted in the fall by *USA WEEKEND* in partnership with *Teen People* magazine and *Channel One*, a TV news program for schools, *USA WEEKEND's 13th Annual Teen Survey* was taken by 129,593 students in grades 6-12 from urban, suburban and rural schools, public and private. They took the survey in *USA WEEKEND*, at the magazine's web site, in *Teen People*, and through *Channel One*. *USA WEEKEND's Annual Teen Survey* is the largest survey of its kind, though nonscientific because the respondents were not polled at random but rather chose to respond.

The majority — six in 10 — of those who responded to the magazine's survey believe it is possible a violent event on the scale of Columbine could occur at their school.

Perhaps most surprising is the portrait students paint of school today as a place where insult too often turns to injury. Students report that it is small things — a slight, a look, a shove, a dispute between couples — that can erupt into arguments, fistfights or worse, rather than bigger problems, such as gangs or racial conflict. The fear voiced by many students interviewed, and reflected in the survey results, is that "stupid things" easily can trigger something worse.

Beyond physical threats or incidents, students cite an array of problems contributing to their fears and anxieties, so familiar in the wake of the rampage at Columbine: fellow teens who can't handle their anger, disputes among cliques, distracted parents, a culture that romanticizes violence and, ominously, easy access to weapons. Almost half of the respondents reported having a gun in their home, and of those, more than half say they can get their hands on it.

Among all students who took the survey, with or without guns at home, four in 10 say a teen in their community could

In the past year at school, have you ...

- Seen schoolmates getting picked on? **91 percent**
- Seen schoolmates argue loudly? **85 percent**
- Seen schoolmates physically fighting? **74 percent**
- Been threatened physically? **29 percent**
- Been hit, not in fun? **25 percent**
- Been sexually harassed? **19 percent**
- Been robbed of something worth more than \$10? **18 percent**
- Been in a physical fight? **14 percent**

What would be the single best thing your school could do to make you feel safer?

- Send "bad" kids to alternative schools **40 percent**
- "Conflict-resolution" classes **22 percent**
- Metal detectors at all doors **20 percent**
- More security guards or hall monitors **18 percent**

What are the most common causes of problems at your school? (Multiple answers allowed.)

- Stupid things (e.g., bumping into someone, looking at someone wrong) **75 percent**
- Girlfriend/boyfriend conflict **45 percent**
- Drugs or alcohol **30 percent**
- Expensive clothing/belongings **23 percent**
- Race/ethnicity **21 percent**
- Outsiders starting trouble **19 percent**
- Gangs (in school) **16 percent**

Source: *USA WEEKEND*

get a gun within a day — a stark reminder of Columbine shooters Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, who simply had older friends buy guns for them.

The findings of the survey confirm that students live daily with what experts observe: disrespect, bullying, alienation and intolerance of the sort that are said to have helped fuel the murderous rage of Harris and Klebold, which left 13 dead.

Blaming the media

Since Columbine, America's violent media culture has come under increasing attack as an underlying villain behind the violence. According to the results of the survey, teens can be added to the chorus of critics. About half of the respondents blame movies, video games, the Internet and TV for promoting violence among their peers.

About one in 10 teens who responded to the *USA WEEKEND* survey admitted they have visited a hate or bomb-making site on the Internet (among boys, it's one in eight). Columbine killer Harris had a web site that detailed the size of his pipe bombs and the targets of his fury.

Beyond media influences, many teenagers say the heart of today's problems faced by students — as well as the solutions — is at home.

Finding answers

Perhaps it is not surprising that many teens simply want to expel the problem. Four in 10 respondents favor sending troubled students to alternative schools. By contrast, teaching students to handle and defuse anger and conflicts is favored by only about one in five; one in five also say they want metal detectors in schools.

The picture is not all bleak. Seventy-one percent of responding students say that they personally feel safe from violence in school. Forty-eight percent respond that the Columbine High School shooting "made me think, but it didn't make me feel afraid."

Visit www.usa.weekend.com for more information about teens' responses. Adapted with permission from the survey report written by Patty Rhule, © 2000 USA WEEKEND.

Training volunteer chaperones for safe field trips

Several years ago, the faculty at Parkview Elementary School in Carpentersville, IL, became concerned about student safety during field trips and decided to develop consistent procedures and training for conducting such trips.

According to the faculty, some field trips were quite expensive because the cost of the volunteer adult chaperones was built into the students' fees. During other trips, parents who attended as chaperones were required to pay their own costs. Sometimes non-chaperoning parents were permitted to drive along and attend the field trip with their children. This often caused confusion for everyone—teachers, students and parents—regarding who was a supervisor and who was not. Occasionally, parent volunteers were turned away to keep the cost of a trip down, but doing this caused hard feelings.

After holding several meetings and collecting information, the faculty decided that two aspects of field tripping needed clarification. The first was deciding how chaperones would be selected for school trips and communicating this information to parents. The second concerned the behavior expectations for both the supervising teachers and the parent chaperones.

The faculty decided to design a parent workshop that would become a prerequisite for serving as a chaperone. No parent, grandparent, or guardian could chaperone a field trip unless they first attended the training workshop. The one-hour workshop was offered in two time slots early in the school year: once immediately following school hours and once again during evening hours. Faculty members conducted the workshops, which focused on the need for training as well as the expectations and procedures for chaperoning a trip.

The first "Field Trip Parent Workshop" was held in the fall of 1995. There was an outstanding turnout, in part because the workshop was required prior to attending field trips. Many parents were confused and unhappy at being asked to attend. By the end of the workshop, most, if not all, appreciated the information they gained. The proactive ap-

proach to student safety seemed to outweigh any negative feelings.

Since the first workshop, Parkview has not required any re-training of chaperones and has accurately maintained the list of trained chaperones. The workshop is now conducted each fall and has become a part of the annual back-to-school activities.

A field trip is a working, learning, and fun experience for children. It is part of the school experience, and expectations remain the same on the trip as in the classroom. Chaperones need to model these expectations, and faculty members have the responsibility to clarify expectations to ensure consistency for all students.

Early in the workshop, parents are told how teachers choose the number of chaperones. A minimum of one chaperone for every 10 students is required, but that ratio varies greatly depending on the age of the children and the type of the trip. A 10:1 ratio may be appropriate for fifth-graders attending a play, but inappropriate for first-graders visiting a wildlife preserve. The number of chaperones may also be limited by bus-seating capacity, destination limits (i.e., tickets available for a play), type of supervisory responsibilities needed, as well as the cost of the trip. Chaperone costs are now uniformly included in the students' field trip fees, therefore every attempt is made to balance adequate supervision with the lowest possible costs for the children.

Chaperones are told what they should expect from the teaching staff. All chaperones should be given a list with each student's name, address, and phone number in case of an emergency. (To protect confidentiality, this information remains in a sealed envelope until it is needed.) The school's address and phone number is provided in writing as well. Teachers must provide chaperones with clear time lines, including expected arrival and dismissal times. If students are divided into small groups, individuals need to be introduced, and chaperones need to be provided with a written list of their names. Name tags on outer clothing is forbidden for the sake of students' safety, but all students carry a card in their pocket listing their name, address and phone number.

The majority of the workshop consists of discussing expectations for the chaperone upon their arrival at school, on the bus, at the destination and on the return to school. These expectations sometimes seem obvious, but clarifying them for parents has also greatly clarified them for Parkview teachers. Discussions regarding expectations focus on safety, fairness and consistency for the sake of the children.

Expectations for chaperones include:

- being on time/adhering to schedules;
- refraining from bringing pre-school siblings or other children on the trip;
- wearing a watch;
- staying with the students at all times;
- using appropriate language;
- bringing pencil and paper;
- taking student attendance often;
- following bus regulations;
- enforcing the teacher's rules; and
- refraining from loaning money or purchasing treats for students while on the trip.

During the workshop, instruction is also given for using the emergency radio on the school bus, procedures for exiting the bus during an emergency, appropriate supervision in public restrooms, managing disrespectful students, administering first aid, caring for ill children, and properly supervising lunchtime activities.

Finally, chaperones are clearly informed that the school day ends when the teacher dismisses students from class at the end of the day and not upon the return of the bus to school. This particular instruction has stopped parents from asking teachers to take their own children directly home.

Parkview Elementary has had no problems during field trip since it began offering this training. All adults on school field trips have the same working knowledge when it comes to student safety. All have the needed student information in case of a bus accident or tragedy. Most importantly, all students can learn, have fun, and remain safe during their field trip.

Submitted by Cathy Gillette-Rastenis, principal, Parkview Elementary School, Carpentersville, IL.

Strategies to consider in critical incident management

It is extremely important for school administrators to have procedures in place that will help coordinate the response to critical incidents. Because the context in which such incidents occur varies significantly, each incident will require some degree of discretionary judgment and personal assessment. However, the following actions are noteworthy of consideration as schools and school districts develop their own policies and procedures for handling various incidents.

- Evaluate the situation. Can this person be approached or controlled without the use of force? How many individuals are involved? What kinds of weapons do they have? What is their demeanor? Is negotiation an option?
- Remain calm to avoid escalating the incident's intensity.
- Get help immediately from whatever source is possible. This may involve calling the principal, another teacher or staff member, the school police or law enforcement. (Law enforcement is the ideal choice when a serious weapons/hostage situation is unfolding.)
- Notify local law enforcement. Once law enforcement has been called, someone from the school should stay in continuing communication with them to advise law enforcement officials of new developments.
- When notifying the police about a firearm incident, advise them to use a code word on their radio communication so that the media or other non-law enforcement personnel who may be monitoring the police channel will not become alarmed and begin flooding the school with calls or with their presence. This can also be important to preclude the media from arriving at the campus before the police. Any information that is placed on the local airways could create further crisis problems for the district.
- Meet law enforcement officials at a pre-designated location so that they can be promptly escorted or directed to the crisis area. A campus floor plan should be available. Some schools are providing law enforcement with online or computerized footprints of the

school.

- Secure the perimeter. It is important to prevent other students, staff or visitors from entering the high-risk zone.
- Evacuate the area. Individuals who can be safely removed from the vicinity should be accounted for and directed to promptly leave.
- Isolate the offender from other innocent bystanders or potential victims. For instance, ask the offender to go to another location or attempt to dismiss the audience.
- Negotiate, if possible. Sometimes you may not have the opportunity to negotiate. However, if you are still talking, most likely you will have an opportunity to buy some time. Find out what the individual wants. However, do not make promises you cannot deliver. Tell them that you will see what can be done and then work toward a resolution. Your commitments must be perceived as sincere and believable.
- Look for a place to dive or jump. Your negotiations may not always be effective, be thinking about a potential escape plan for yourself and others.
- Avoid heroics.
- Don't threaten or intimidate.
- Keep a safe, non-intimidating distance.
- Keep your hands clearly visible.
- Avoid abrupt or sporadic movements.
- Turn the command over to the police once they arrive. The role of the school administrator is to facilitate. Work with law enforcement to develop a plan. This plan may include further evacuation of individuals within the affected crisis area, disarming the perpetrator or removal by force, if necessary.
- Provided there is no imminent bomb threat, utilize any two-way communications capability that may be available between the front office and the crisis scene. Being able to monitor what is happening over the intercom, Internet, or radio systems can be very helpful.
- Notify other classroom teachers to either to evacuate or to secure their rooms in a lock-down mode.
- If students or teachers are to hold their

position, advise them to stay away from windows, drop to a protected or prone position and wait for the all clear signal. Closing curtains or blinds can make it more difficult for a gunman to know if there are additional potential hostages. Keep the blinds or windows open in an area where the hostage situation is taking place. This will help law enforcement to monitor and respond to the situation.

- Assign school custodial, maintenance or support staff the job of securing the building doors so that other individuals will not compromise the crisis scene by their presence. They should position themselves in a safe place where they can maintain radio communication with the emergency response staff.
- Once the situation has been safely resolved, sound the "all clear" signal over the public address system.

Follow-up Activities

- Identify witnesses and obtain complete statements.
- Turn evidence, particularly firearms, over to law enforcement officials.
- Provide a complete written report of the incident to law enforcement.
- Meet with faculty and staff and give them a briefing on what happened and what the next steps will be.
- Meet with students who were affected by the crisis to inform them about the incident.
- Provide crisis counseling and assistance to students and staff who may require such support.
- Develop an appropriate restitution, counseling and training program for any student perpetrator. Work closely with the probation office and the courts in developing appropriate behavior and education plans.
- Review all strategies and tactics utilized during the crisis to determine what could have been done differently and how future responses could be improved.

Prepared by Ronald D. Stephens, executive director, NSSC.

Zero tolerance ≠ zero common sense

Zero tolerance policies have taken on a new level energy since the Columbine tragedy. More and more schools are adopting zero tolerance policies against bomb threats and assaults. School systems across the country are developing “no-nonsense” threat assessment protocols to send messages to students that such behavior will not be tolerated.

In some areas, prosecutors are lending credence to such protocols by actively prosecuting students and others who fictitiously or otherwise terrorize schools. For example, in San Antonio, Texas, school officials invited the county’s chief prosecutor to come to the school to instruct educators about how to properly document such threats so that the incidents can be effectively prosecuted and thus deterred.

Despite the widespread use and success of zero tolerance policies against violence, threats of violence, drugs and weapons in school, such policies do not mean that educators should use “zero common sense” in evaluating threatening situations. Discretion and judgment are still an important part of the equation. Students must be provided with due process and a hearing.

In the wake of the Columbine shootings last Spring, many school systems were quick to jump on the popular bandwagon of implementing zero tolerance policies for all kinds of unwanted student behaviors. In the rush to appease the public outcry for safer schools, “zero tolerance” became the catch-all strategy for what school systems were going to do to prevent any further atrocities from occurring on campuses across America.

But as zero tolerance became more popular during the last year, it became apparent that their application was much more cumbersome than the sentiment behind them. Zero tolerance policies equalize the sanctions for all offenses versus making sanctions equitable. This is often difficult for parents and students to accept. For such policies to be successful, they must be perceived as fair.

Some school systems found themselves placed in the position of having to enforce zero tolerance policies for inci-

dents that they never saw coming when they initially implemented the policy. In some cases, the application of the policy seemed misguided and even ridiculous. Who wants to expel a five-year-old for bringing a toy gun to school or for playing cops and robbers on school grounds during recess? Who wants to expel a student because his or her mother innocently packed a table knife to use with the lunch she prepared for her child to eat at school that day?

Once an infraction occurs and an allegation is made, zero tolerance policies embrace the concept that the offender is guilty until proven innocent. Such a process flies in the face of general practice. Furthermore, most zero tolerance policies do not provide for any appeal mechanism. Chinks are beginning to appear in the armor, and the zero tolerance process is changing. For example, under Pennsylvania law, the superintendent of each school district is now vested with discretionary power to over turn expulsion decisions based upon the merits of the case.

As schools and communities are able to distance themselves in time from the unspeakable brutality of Columbine, these zero tolerance policies are being revisited. Such policies are being refined to be less heavy handed and unyielding, allowing for more discretion to review incidents on a case-by-case basis.

Some school systems that support zero tolerance are adding escape clauses and qualifiers to zero tolerance policies. For instance at Latrobe High School (Latrobe, PA) the school policy states that “if a student inadvertently takes a weapon into a school building or onto school property or onto a school bus ... and upon discovery of the weapon immediately surrenders it to the bus driver, a teacher, or any employee of the school...” such action may serve as a defense to mitigating the otherwise mandatory sanction of expulsion.

Zero tolerance of society’s ills at school — including violence and disruption — is an appropriate and successful posture for schools and communities to assume. The outpouring of such a stance, namely the policies that bridge the gap between theory and practice, must be well

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planned, thoughtfully executed, and clearly communicated to effectively serve their intended purposes. Once in place, such policies must be regularly evaluated and revised to meet their stated objectives.

--Ronald D. Stephens, NSSC