

Preventing School Violence

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ABSTRACT

Violence in America has increased substantially in the past few years. It is not surprising that the level of violence in public schools is increasing as well. Violence in schools is endangering the health, welfare, and safety of students and teachers. Strategies for preventing school violence include: toughening weapons laws and dealing effectively with violent students.

Violence in America has increased substantially in the past few years (Canada, 2011; Chasin, 2008). In fact, the reported violent crime rate in the nation has increased by more than 35% in the last 10 years (Flannery, 2007; Ford, 2009; Garland, 2010; Larson, 2011; Lewis, 2008; Wright, 2011). That rate of increase in such a short period is greater than in any comparable period in history, or at least since reliable records have been maintained by the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Reports. During that same period, the number of reported arrests of young people, 16 years of age and under, for violent offenses increased by 100 percent (Ayers, 2009; Bynum, 2010; Daniels, 2012; Gerdes, 2011; Heitmeyer, 2011; Hoffman, 2012; Lassiter, 2010; Merino, 2011; Soliz, 2010).

It is not surprising that the level of violence in public schools is increasing as well. Violence in schools cannot be separated from the larger problem of violence in communities. Studies have shown that the conditions of schools are strongly influenced by the conditions of their neighborhoods (Benbenisty, 2011; Lassiter, 2010). Violence in schools is endangering the health, welfare, and safety of students and teachers. Students cannot learn and teachers cannot teach in an atmosphere in which fear and anxiety prevail (Bulach, Lunenburg, & Potter, 2008; Kupchik, 2011). Some ways of preventing school violence include: toughening weapons laws and dealing with violent students (U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

Toughening Weapons Laws

School leaders should advocate for state legislation and school board policies that address violence in schools. Tough measures have already been implemented in most states for dealing with violent behavior, especially possession of weapons and initiation of a parent responsibility law for minors possessing weapons. School leaders can be strong advocates of such legislation and school board policies.

Establish Weapon-Free School Zones

Many states have enacted the Weapon-Free School Zones Act (Alexander & Alexander, 2011; Kafka, 2012). School Boards in these states have made their schools weapon-free zones. Efforts to do so have involved the school, home, community, law enforcement, and health services (Meltzer, 2011; Omer, 2011)). Strategies would include apprehension, prevention, intervention, education, counseling, and student and public awareness programs (Daniels, 2012; Hulac, 2011; Juhnke, 2011; Lassiter, 2010).

The following is a concise statement suggested by the National School Boards Association.

The Board of Education determines that possession and/or use of a weapon by a student is detrimental to the welfare and safety of the students and school personnel within the district. Possession and or use of any dangerous or deadly weapon in any school building on school grounds, in any school vehicle, or at any school-sponsored activity is prohibited. Such weapons include but are not limited to any pistol, revolver, rifle, shotgun, air gun or spring gun; slingshot; bludgeon; brass knuckles or artificial knuckles of any kind; knives having a blade of greater than two inches, any knife the blade of which can be opened by a flick of a button or pressure on the handle, or any pocketknife where the blade is carried in a partially opened position. The possession or use of any such weapon will require that the proceeding for the suspension and/or expulsion of the student involved will be initiated immediately by the principal. (National School Boards Association, 2010, p. 2)

In addition to a written school board policy, the following state legislation is typically enacted to provide for weapon-free schools: Make it a felony to knowingly and willfully bring a firearm on school property; make it a felony for any person to knowingly allow a minor to carry a weapon to school; and some states have included the following provision: provide that any person convicted of bringing a firearm on school property will lose his/her driver's license.

Limit access by minors to handguns.

To provide for limited access by minors to handguns, weapon-free school zones legislation: make it a misdemeanor for any person to allow a minor to have access to a handgun without the consent and supervision of a parent, guardian, or other responsible

adult; make possession of a handgun by a minor without the consent and supervision of a parent, guardian, or other responsible adult a misdemeanor.

Deal with Violent Students

Students cannot learn when they are in fear of harm from their classmates. Teachers cannot teach in an atmosphere of fear for their own safety, as well as that of their students (Lunenburg, Bulach, & Potter, 2008). In order to provide for a safe and secure learning atmosphere for children, school districts must be able to expel violent students; transfer violent students to alternative schools; report violent offenders to law enforcement officials; require court counselors to confer with school officials; expand immediate school actions; and take privileges away from students.

Expel violent students.

Most state statutes provide that a school board can expel a student, age 14 or older, only if he/she has been convicted of a felony *and* the student's continued presence in the school constitutes a clear threat to the safety and health of other students or staff. State statutes should be amended so that when the principal and the superintendent can prove a student is a clear threat to the safety and health of other students or employees, the school board has the option of expelling the student, even though no felony has been committed. School officials are encouraged to use long-term suspension and alternative schools or programs in lieu of expulsions.

Transfer violent students to alternative schools.

Under compulsory attendance laws, states have a duty to provide an education for all of its children, even those deemed violent by the juvenile justice system. There have been numerous instances when a violent student is placed in a regular school setting and the results have been disruptive and even dangerous. In order to provide a safe and secure setting for all children and teachers, school districts must be able to transfer to another institution, juveniles who have been categorized as violent by the courts or whose presence poses a clear threat to others within the school. Transferring a juvenile to an alternative school for long-term supervision is a viable option to expulsion. The state fulfills its duty to provide an education; the school is made safer by removing the violent juvenile; the community is not burdened by juveniles who have been suspended from school and roaming the streets; and the juvenile is provided a safe and structured setting in which to continue the educational process. For juveniles awaiting trial for violent acts, this approach would provide a supervised situation while preventing the juvenile's continued presence at a school from becoming disruptive.

Due to the expense of alternative schools, such placement should constitute a last step in a continuum of services for violent students. Placement should be temporary, with the goal being to return the student to the regular school setting at the appropriate time. While the format of alternative programs varies from small informal programs similar to home bound instruction in some systems to more formal school settings in larger systems, the focus must be on providing a strong academic course of study with therapeutic

emphasis. Other service agencies such as Public Health, Mental Health, Social Services, Juvenile Justice, and so forth must be an integral part of the team providing the alternative education program. School districts should consider using Drug Free School funds, dropout prevention funds, juvenile justice and delinquency prevention funds, community-based alternative funds, in-school suspension funds, average daily membership positions, basic education program positions, and contributions from other agencies to staff alternative programs.

Report violent offenders to law officials.

School violence is a community problem, not just a school problem (National School Boards Association Council of School Attorneys Staff, 2009). Violence in the schools will be stopped only when the schools join with local law enforcement, parents, juvenile court counselors, and other agencies to work together to solve the problem (Hulac, 2011; Omer, 2011). In order for law enforcement to be involved in curtailing school violence, school administrators must report to law enforcement all felonies and misdemeanors involving personal injury, sexual assault, possession or use of weapons, possession or sale of drugs occurring on school property. Schools can appropriately handle misdemeanors, which do not involve violence, sexual assault, weapons use, firearms or drugs without calling on law enforcement for help.

Require court counselors to confer with school officials.

Juvenile court counselors should be required to confer with school officials, the juvenile and the juvenile's parents or guardian whenever the minor is ordered to attend school as part of his probation after adjudication of a crime of violence. Juvenile court counselors should be given the resources needed to work more closely with the schools. The state's Juvenile Code should provide that minors placed on probation and required to attend school must maintain a passing grade.

Expand immediate school actions.

School districts should take immediate actions to make school safer. These actions should address a comprehensive approach to prevention, intervention, and crisis management (Daniels, 2012; Hulac, 2011; Juhnke, 2011; Lassiter, 2010). Use of school security officers, peer mediation, crisis intervention teams, and the development of policies and procedures governing student behavior are encouraged (Marques, 2012; Meltzer, 2011; Omer, 2011). The following recommendations will expand immediate school actions:

1. A student's right to park on school property can be conditioned upon agreeing to have his vehicle searched at any time by school officials.
2. Metal detectors, cameras, lights, hand-held radio communications, and other security measures may be installed.
3. Cooperative arrangements with local law enforcement should be arranged to put trained resource officers in schools that need them.

4. Parent training and involvement programs should be established or strengthened.
5. Peer mediation and conflict resolution programs for students and teachers should be established.
6. Rules governing student behavior should be established, communicated, and enforced.
7. Warrants against students who commit violent acts in schools should be sought.
8. Rewards for information leading to the confiscation of weapons, drugs, firearms, and other dangerous items should be offered.
9. Anonymous reporting of weapons or drugs on school property must be encouraged.
10. Taking book bags to lockers should be restricted.
11. Intruder drills and other crisis management drills to ensure that students and other school employees are prepared for emergencies should be held periodically.

Take privileges away from students.

School administrators must have the authority to act immediately in ways that restrict meaningful student privileges. No appeal of these actions should delay the implementation of the action. A prompt and meaningful response to student misconduct is an effective way to produce desired conduct (Lane, 2011; Nelsen, 2012; Thompson, 2011).

The department of education in each state needs to adopt procedures to enable school administrators to:

1. Suspend school bus transportation privileges for students who commit acts of violence.
2. Suspend parking privileges on school grounds of students who commit acts of violence.
3. Assign to an alternative school, students who commit acts of violence.
4. Remove from extracurricular activities (athletic and academic) students who commit acts of violence.
5. Restrict attendance at extracurricular activities of students who commit acts of violence.

Conclusion

Violence in America has increased substantially in the past few years. It is not surprising that the level of violence in public schools is increasing as well. Violence in schools is endangering the health, welfare, and safety of students and teachers. Strategies for preventing school violence include: toughening weapons laws and dealing effectively with violent students.

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