

## School Violence in America's Schools

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### ABSTRACT

**Growing violence, bullying, and chaos in classrooms are a regular part of the school day for an increasing number of students. Frequently, the violence in a community spills into the schools. Although the situation in some schools and neighborhoods is more serious than in others, creating a safe and disciplined learning environment is a challenge for all schools.**

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Growing violence, bullying, and chaos in classrooms are a regular part of the school day for an increasing number of students (Ayers, 2009; Barter, 2012; Carlson, 2011; Davis, 2011; Ellis, 2011; Espilage, 2011; Lane, 2011; Ludwig, 2011; Scott-Coe, 2011; Shapiro, 2011). Consider some of the obstacles that are facing our schools. Gunshot wounds are one of the leading causes of death among high school students in the United States, second only to motor vehicle deaths (Gerdes, 2011; Langman, 2011; Marsico, 2011). Fifteen percent of all students report the presence of gangs in their schools (Arnold, 2010; Bynum, 2010; Soliz, 2010). Forty-four percent of all teachers report that student misconduct interferes substantially with their teaching (Davis, 2011; Gallant, 2011; Hettelman, 2011; Kentley, 2011).

Frequently the violence in a community spills into the schools (Benbenishty, 2011; Heitmeyer, 2011; Hoffman, 2012). Although the situation in some schools and neighborhoods is more serious than in others, creating a safe, disciplined learning environment is a challenge for all school principals (Chavis, 2011; Lunenburg & Irby, 2006; Melvin, 2012). Increasing the graduation rate, improving student achievement in challenging subject matter, and ensuring the ability of our students to compete in a world economy, and carry out their responsibilities of citizenship will be much more difficult to achieve if our schools and neighborhoods are unsafe for our children (Lunenburg & Irby, 2000).

Whether urban, suburban, or rural, several questions can be asked to help understand how the school may be affected by violence, bullying, and class disruptions: How many students feel unsafe at school? Are acts of violence frequent? What are the overall incidents of bullying in schools? Are student disruptions of class perceived to be a problem by teachers and students? What violence is committed that relate to race, class, and gender? Answers to these questions can provide valuable clues to what kinds of

problems exist in our schools, and what school principals can do to make our schools violence-free, bullying-free, and disciplined environments conducive to learning?

### **School Violence and Classroom Disruptions**

There has been a plethora of research and professional literature dealing with violence and discipline problems in our schools. A number of studies and reports bear directly on the questions posed earlier. I have chosen several reports/studies for examination here on the basis of their recency and their importance to school administrators. Some of these reports have been highly visible while others are less well known.

#### **School Violence**

1. The Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup polls on education over the past decade have cited lack of discipline and school violence as the worst problems confronting the public schools (Gallup, 2009). Some authorities point out that public perception of the frequency of violent acts may be exaggerated somewhat by intense media attention when incidents of school violence do occur, and that most of the nation's schools are safe. (National Education Goals Panel, 2000).
2. The number of crimes committed at or near the 85,000 U. S. public schools was estimated at more than 3 million annually, with 185,580 people injured (National Crime Survey, 2004). On any given day, it was not uncommon for students to carry guns to school. However, since the emergence of zero tolerance policies and some state's enactment of the Weapon-Free School Zones Act, the number of dangerous weapons brought to school has decreased significantly (Alexander & Alexander, 2011).
3. Nearly 6,000 violent incidents occurred in New York City schools alone in 2007, an increase of 15% from the previous year (New York City Board of Education, 2008).
4. Surveys of principals from more than 1,500 school districts conducted by researchers from Xavier University in Cincinnati revealed that violence is not solely a problem of urban schools: 64%, 54% and 43% of principals in urban, suburban, and rural areas, respectively reported that violence had increased in their schools during the past five years (Xavier University, 2005).
5. Approximately 40,000 students are physically attacked in America's schools each month. Approximately 8,000 of the nation's more than two million school teachers are physically attacked at school each month (National Schools Safety Center, 2008).
6. Estimated annual costs of school crime, including vandalism are between \$50 million and \$700 million. Estimates of yearly replacement and repair costs due to crime are about \$250 million (National School Safety Center, 2008).
7. About one in four students nationally report having very serious problems in their school with: hostile or threatening remarks among different groups of students, including bullying and cyber bullying; physical fights among members of different groups of friends; threats or destructive acts other than physical fights; turf battles among different

groups of students; and gang violence (Anthony, 2011; Friedman, 2011; Guillian, 2012; Jones, 2011; McCaw, 2012; Merino, 2011; Shariff, 2010).

### **Age.**

Age appears to be an important factor affecting the level of social tension and violence during the middle and high school years. Beginning in ninth grade, there is a steady decline in the proportion of students who report having serious problems with each of the aforementioned social problems. In contrast to eighth graders who see these as very serious problems, less than half of twelfth graders express the same level of concern (U. S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). Perhaps as students get older, they merely get more accepting and tolerant of social tension and violence in school.

In a 2004 study (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2004), 11 % of 8th graders admitted that they had brought a weapon to school at least once during the previous month, such as a gun, knife, or club. Percentages increased significantly from the previous year for both 8th and 12th graders, and 3-4% of the students at each grade reported that they habitually carried a weapon to school ten or more days in the previous month. Data from state surveys conducted the same year showed that in 20 of the 24 participating states and territories, at least 10% of public high school students reported carrying a weapon on school property at least once during the previous month (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2004). However, since the emergence of zero tolerance policies by school officials and several state's enactments of the Weapon-Free School Zone Act, the number of dangerous weapons brought to school has decreased significantly in recent years (Alexander & Alexander, 2011; Kafka, 2012).

### **Size of school.**

Urban students are more likely to report having serious problems with hostile remarks, physical fights, threats or destructive acts, and gang violence than suburban or rural students. African-American and Hispanic students are twice as likely than white students to report experiencing very serious problems with turf battles and gang violence (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2009).

One in five students report that the level of violence has decreased over the past year, yet an equal proportion report that it has increased. Two in five believe that there has been no change in the level of violence over the past year. A larger percentage of students in urban schools report a decrease in violence than students in suburban or rural schools. The proportions reporting an increase in violence are consistent (1 in 5) across geographic areas (Ayers, 2009; Larson, 2011; Merino, 2011).

### **Teachers and the educational system.**

When teachers are supportive, encouraging, and caring about students' futures, students report less social tension and violence in their schools. Among those who give their teacher "As" on treating them with respect, smaller percentages report serious

problems with each of the following, compared with those who give their teachers “Ds” and “Fs”: hostile or threatening remarks among different groups of students; physical fights among members of different groups of friends; threats or destructive acts other than physical fights; and turf battles among different groups of students (Lane, 2011; Melvin, 2012; Omer, 2011).

Students are more likely to report a decrease rather than an increase in violence when they are satisfied with the quality of education and the lessons they learn from teachers on tolerance. Students who rate the quality of education high are more likely to report decreases than increases in violence over the past year, while conversely; low raters are more likely to report increases than decreases. Students are more likely to report a decrease in violence compared with all students when their teachers do a good job of teaching tolerance (Yell, 2009).

### Conclusion

Growing violence, bullying, and chaos in classrooms are a regular part of the school day for an increasing number of students. Frequently, the violence in a community spills into the schools. Although the situation in some schools and neighborhoods is more serious than in others, creating a safe and disciplined learning environment is a challenge for all schools.

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