The Safe Schools – Better Schools Program: Predicting School Violence

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ABSTRACT

Violence-prediction strategies can reduce incidences of violence in our schools. One model for achieving such a result is the Safe Schools – Better Schools program implemented in the Milwaukee (Wisconsin) Public Schools. The strategies include: collecting and analyzing data, identifying problem students, and identifying problem teachers.

Interest in predicting school violence stems from a desire to prevent it rather than attempt to control it after it occurs (Daniels, 2012; Juhnke, 2011; Lassiter, 2010). Ideally, if teachers and school administrators could determine the conditions that cause violence and the types of students most likely to engage in it, as well as those teachers whose behavior precipitates violence, timely corrective interventions could be initiated to prevent its occurrence (Bynum, 2010; Gallant, 2011; Hoffman, 2012; Hulac, 2011; Langman, 2011; Marsico, 2011; Melvin, 2011; Merino, 2011). This approach would be far better than waiting for violence to erupt and then having to deploy resources to quell the incident.

Predicting School Violence

Predicting violence in schools is not impossible. In fact, school administrators in the Milwaukee (Wisconsin) Public Schools are using a school-violence tool that has enabled them to reduce attacks against teachers and other students by almost 38% in five years. The program, entitled "Safe Schools - Better Schools," allows school security officials to identify behavior problems in schools and provide resources immediately to prevent violence from occurring. School security officials in the Milwaukee Public Schools are taking a proactive stance (Bear, 2011). They plan in advance and anticipate problems.

In the Milwaukee Public Schools, where reported violence has decreased from

5,400 cases in 2004-2005 to 3,325 in 2008-2009, the program has a three-pronged strategy. The three-pronged strategy to predict violence includes: collecting and analyzing data, identifying problem students, and identifying problem teachers (National Alliance for Safe Schools, 2010).

Collecting and Analyzing Data

Information on violence and discipline problems reported by teachers is collected, using standardized incident-reporting forms, and analyzed by computer. School administrators then look at where incidents are occurring, their frequency, and whether specific schools, teachers, or locations within schools are showing a pattern of repeated incidents. For example, if a particular school building is having difficulty during the beginning of school or at dismissal, then additional security officers can be marshaled to patrol the school during those times (Marques, 2012; Queen, 2011; Meltzer, 2011; Thompson, 2011).

Identifying Problem Students

Milwaukee Public School administrators believe that little is accomplished by simply punishing students who are referred frequently to principals for acts of violence or disciplinary problems. Additional resources are provided to these disruptive students, such as counseling, referrals to social agencies, or assignments to alternative school programs. The Milwaukee Public Schools (National Alliance for Safe Schools, 2010) and other school districts provide a variety of alternative programs for weapon-carrying students (Gerdes, 2011); those prone to violence, including bullying and cyber bullying (Coloroso, 2011; Drew, 2011; McCaw, 2012); as well as those students with other behavior or learning problems (Yell, 2009).

Identifying Problem Teachers

Identifying problem teachers may sound a bit negative. But some teachers actually precipitate student violence. Much assault behavior on the part of students can be diminished with good psychological preparation of teachers and consistent support of school policies and procedures (Cohen, 2011; Meltzer, 2011; Teach for America, 2011). Milwaukee public school administrators observe that a disproportionate number of discipline referrals are made by a few teachers in a school. Typically, 3% of the faculty is responsible for about 50% of the discipline referrals. In response, school principals arrange for teachers with classroom-management problems to attend the school district's Professional Development Academy in order to learn how to handle students (Bear, 2011; Lane, 2011; Melvin, 2012; Persiani-Becker, 2012; Queen, 2011). On-site follow-up relative to effective management techniques designed for unique populations is also available through the Academy (Nelsen, 2012; Teaching for America, 2011). Another important part of the program is to develop "school teams" consisting of teachers, parents, university professors, and school administrators from various school sites (Omer, 2011). These individuals agree to be part of a team. The team approach helps prevent cases from being thrown out of court for an improperly prepared case (Alexander &

Alexander, 2011; Shariff, 2010). Teams of educators working together can prevent that from happening. Milwaukee public school administrators claim that the Safe Schools - Better Schools program will work with schools of any size or type: urban, suburban, or rural (National Alliance for Safe Schools, 2010). The program provides a planning system for administering school security resources.

Conclusion

Violence-prediction strategies can reduce incidences of violence in our schools. One model for achieving such a result is the Safe Schools − Better Schools program implemented in the Milwaukee (Wisconsin) Public Schools. The strategies include: collecting and analyzing data, identifying problem students, and identifying problem teachers.

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