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School Efforts to Reduce Violence

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Schools are involved in many efforts to reduce bullying and other forms of violence. Various prevention and discipline strategies can play a useful role if well implemented. However, the most important strategies for reducing violence involve building strong relationships among students and between staff and students as well as having good programs of instruction in the school.

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Matthew Gladden
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Schools are among the safest places in our communities for children. Even so, bullying and other forms of violence do occur in schools, and public concerns about violence generally have led schools to introduce a variety of programs and measures to try to prevent violence.

Three main strategies have been used: prevention, discipline and environmental. Prevention and discipline strategies assume that violence emerges from students' aggressive impulses and problems outside the school. Prevention programs address the problem by training students in skills such as anger management and conflict negotiation. Discipline strategies increase surveillance, security and punishment in order to control or deter violence. Environmental strategies attempt to reduce violence by building stronger school communities.

Prevention

A variety of courses and programs aimed at anger management and conflict resolution are used in schools. Programs that are longer than just a few sessions, that are reinforced across grade levels and are taught using interactive techniques such as role modeling tend to be more effective (Office of the Surgeon General, 2001). Students primarily learn social skills by observation and experience, so programs that are not supported by the overall culture of the school are less likely to be successful. Good practice needs to be modeled as well as taught (Lantieri & Patti, 1998). Many prevention programs are not well

implemented, either, which reduces their impact (Gottfredson et al., 2000). A growing belief is that effective strategies require a schoolwide prevention plan, early intervention in problems, and intensive intervention for those students with chronic behaviour problems.

Discipline

Research evidence confirms that greater consistency in discipline policies spurs reductions in school violence (Gottfredson, 2001). However students must also see the policy as fair and consistent. Having a sound policy does not ensure effective and consistent implementation all across the school. Specifically, heightened security and more punitive discipline do not appear to be effective. These programs may also diminish teachers' involvement in violence prevention by suggesting that this work belongs to a specialist elsewhere in the school.

Zero tolerance policies have proved problematic in several respects. Originally intended to deal with severe violence, these policies may lead to high rates of suspension for minor offences. In general, punishment alone does not change behaviour and can increase misbehaviour. Suspensions may weaken students' connection to school and worsen their academic performance. Successful reintegration after an offence is a critical but often overlooked task, and depends on whether the offender believes that the punishment has been fair.

"Our extensive work in school discipline over 15 years has proven to us

that behaviour and problems worsen when the solutions or consequences are based on formulas rather than circumstances, motivations and needs.” (Curwin & Mendler, 1997, x.)

Moreover, zero tolerance policies are often applied inconsistently within schools. Students’ academic performance can affect the way they are disciplined. Considerable evidence shows higher rates of discipline and suspension for minority students even for equivalent offences.

Environmental strategies

Violent behaviour emerges from an interaction between people’s personality and their environment. It is important to consider not only students’ behaviour, but how the school environment may inhibit or worsen the chance of violent behaviour. Although young people from backgrounds of abuse or deprivation are more likely to be involved in violence, the vast majority of youth from such backgrounds are NOT violent, indicating that a positive environment can produce prosocial behaviour. Students’ connection and attachment to school predict decreased involvement in violence, and efforts to improve school climate may have a larger impact on violence than student-focused efforts such as prevention programs.

Safe schools are more likely when teachers and all adults in the school view teaching respectful behaviour as part of their job. An ethic of caring is associated with students being more committed to school and less likely to be involved in violence (Learning First Alliance, 2001). A positive relationship between each student and at least one caring adult in the school is also related to stronger student commitment to the school. When adults know students well, minor incidents are less likely to escalate.

Effective discipline also involves actively engaging students academically and reducing levels of alienation. A strong academic focus also prevents behaviour and discipline from becoming the primary focus of the school. Using prosocial approaches to teaching and learning can be helpful. Cooperative education practices in classrooms have shown promise in reducing violence and bullying. Good extracurricular activities may also strengthen student engagement. It is important to combine high levels of caring with high levels of academic expectations (Lee et al., 1999). Much research shows how important it is as well to recognize and respect students’ diverse backgrounds in schools though practices such as mentoring, good communications and the monitoring of disciplinary and academic practices for potential bias.

Physical aspects of the school may also be important. Violence is most likely in crowded spaces within the school such as hallways, playgrounds or lunchrooms, where heightened security by cameras or guards is less effective than monitoring by adults whom students know and trust. More generally, the more students see these public spaces as communally 'theirs', the greater the degree of safety.

Conclusion

Schools are, on the whole, very safe places for young people. Still, in the face of societal violence, reducing and preventing violence is a whole-school effort. Prevention efforts and effective discipline practices can very successful if the whole faculty is committed to applying and modeling them instead of just teaching them in a course. However programs will be much more effective if the school also has a positive climate, strong teaching and learning efforts, and good personal relationships among adults and with students.

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This is a brief review of a complex body of educational research. Since no brief review can capture the subtleties and qualifications reflected in the larger works, readers are urged to consult the references which have been cited. The views expressed in this notebook are those of the author. The sponsors welcome your comments on this issue and your suggestions for future issues of Educators' Notebook.