



## FACT SHEET #1: Overview of School Violence Prevention

November, 2008 (Revision)

Matthew J. Mayer, Ph.D., Rutgers University

### BACKGROUND

- While declining from the mid-1990s through the year 2000, school violence and disruption has reached a somewhat lower, fairly stable plateau in recent years, with particular problems remaining in lower level acts of aggression, including bullying. Problems also remain with theft, gangs, and drug activity.
  - In 2005, about 1.5 million secondary students experienced crime at school (theft/violent crime).
  - In 2005, about 10% of males and 6% of females in grades 9-12 reported having been threatened or injured with a weapon on school property during the past year.
- School responses have varied from greater focus on control and containment methods (metal detectors, guards, etc.) and exclusionary forms of discipline (especially suspension), to more comprehensive programming, using a data-driven preventative approach.

### KEY ISSUES

#### School violence prevention addresses several related areas:

- Responding to risk factors across ecological levels: individual, peer, family, school, & neighborhood.
- Providing a balanced approach that improves students' investment and bonding to school while also providing a school-wide system of rules and behavioral expectations that are communicated and implemented in a firm, fair, and consistent manner.
- Offering general supports for all students as well as several levels of more specialized and intensive supports for a smaller percentage of students with greater needs.
- Collecting and analyzing data to identify needs areas and drive responsive school practices.

### RESEARCH SUMMARY

#### What DOES Work Well:

- Several meta-analyses have demonstrated effectiveness of universal and targeted school violence prevention programs, when well implemented.
- Early intervention programs that ameliorate emerging problems in the academic and social-emotional-behavioral domains can greatly help to reduce future problem behaviors.
- School-wide behavioral expectations taught with multiple methods and reinforced consistently over time help more students embrace pro-academic and pro-social behaviors.
- Programs identified in the CSPV Blueprints Program, such as The Incredible Years and Multisystemic Therapy, as well as other programs such as Steps to Respect and Second Step reduce problem behaviors.
- Cognitive-behavioral interventions for anger/aggression can reduce aggressive behaviors.
- Structured team-based threat assessment can help schools respond thoughtfully to potential threats.
- Embedded opportunities to practice newly learned behaviors (e.g., anger management) in the daily context of life at school help students internalize these desired behaviors, displacing negative behaviors.

#### What Does NOT Work Well:

- Profiling approaches to identify potentially dangerous students don't work and hurt innocent students.
- Zero tolerance policies do very little to prevent or reduce school violence.
- Physical security measures such as metal detectors as a stand-alone approach do not reduce overall levels of violence and disruption at schools, though weapon-carrying may be reduced.
- Repeated suspension of students with behavior problems does little to change anti-social behaviors and often accelerates a negative cycle of school failure and delinquency.
- Primarily punitive disciplinary approaches that neither teach nor reinforce appropriate behavior are not very effective at changing student behavior.

## SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

- Create a school violence prevention leadership team at school that includes an administrator, parent, clinical member (school psychologist or social worker, if available), several teachers, paraprofessional, front office staff member, law enforcement/security personnel, and support services staff member (e.g., cafeteria/bus driver).
- Develop a comprehensive, multi-faceted program that addresses the following areas:
  - General safety and security procedures and threat assessment
  - Comprehensive needs assessment (including academic support needs for at-risk students)
  - Crisis management
  - Collection and analyses of data from multiple sources, such as the use of school climate surveys and office referrals
  - School-wide behavioral expectations taught with multiple methods and reinforced consistently as part of a school-wide behavioral management system with structured proactive approaches
  - Familiarizing staff with what students are taught so adults know when to use teachable moments to prompt and help students use newly learned behaviors in everyday situations at school
  - Development of social, emotional, and behavioral competencies among all children
  - Specific additional social-emotional-behavioral support services for students at higher risk
  - User-friendly and efficient channels of communication with students and families to address specific indicators of potentially problematic and/or dangerous emerging situations
  - Promoting student attachment and bonding with the school entity where marginalized students are supported through new and innovative initiatives to help them successfully engage in academic and/or social relationships in school
  - Partnerships with allied service agencies to address needs of students with multi-agency involvement in a coordinated manner
  - Ongoing school staff training with at least 80% staff buy-in to the school's prevention program
  - Periodic leadership & school-wide meetings to review data and modify programming as needed

## CAUTIONS

- Avoid simplistic analysis and reactive responses to troubling situations that require a more thoughtful approach; avoid the temptation to take extreme measures to promote appearances of control.
- Avoid excessively homogeneous grouping of students with antisocial behaviors in small intervention groups, which may result in a mutual reinforcement and escalation of antisocial attitudes and behaviors.
- Avoid over reliance on exclusionary (e.g., suspension) and punitive measures, which tend to be relatively quick and easy to implement, compared to the much more challenging task of teaching and reinforcing pro-social behaviors.

## RESOURCES FOR MORE INFORMATION

- <http://www.colorado.edu/cspv/blueprints/model/overview.html>  
Colorado Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence (CSPV) Blueprints Program
- <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/crimeindicators/crimeindicators2007/>  
(Indicators of School Crime and Safety 2007; National Center for Educational Statistics)
- [http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis\\_safety/](http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety/)  
(National Association of School Psychologists School Safety and Crisis Resources)
- Cornell, D. G., & Sheras, P. L. (2006). *Guidelines for responding to student threats of violence*. New York: Cambium/Sopris West.
- Jimerson, S.R., & Furlong, M.J. (Eds.). (2006). *Handbook of school violence and school safety: From research to practice*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Earlbaum.
- Mayer, M. J., & Leone, P. E. (2007). School violence and disruption revisited: Establishing equity and safety in the school house. *Focus on Exceptional Children*, 40(1), 1-28.

The Consortium to Prevent School Violence (CPSV) is non-profit group of researchers, practitioners, and other stakeholders who are focused on advocacy that promotes effective implementation of positive school violence prevention practices, and fostering technical assistance, information dissemination, and professional development based on high-quality scientific research. CPSV promotes open access where stakeholders in schools and surrounding communities are an integral part of the Consortium's work.