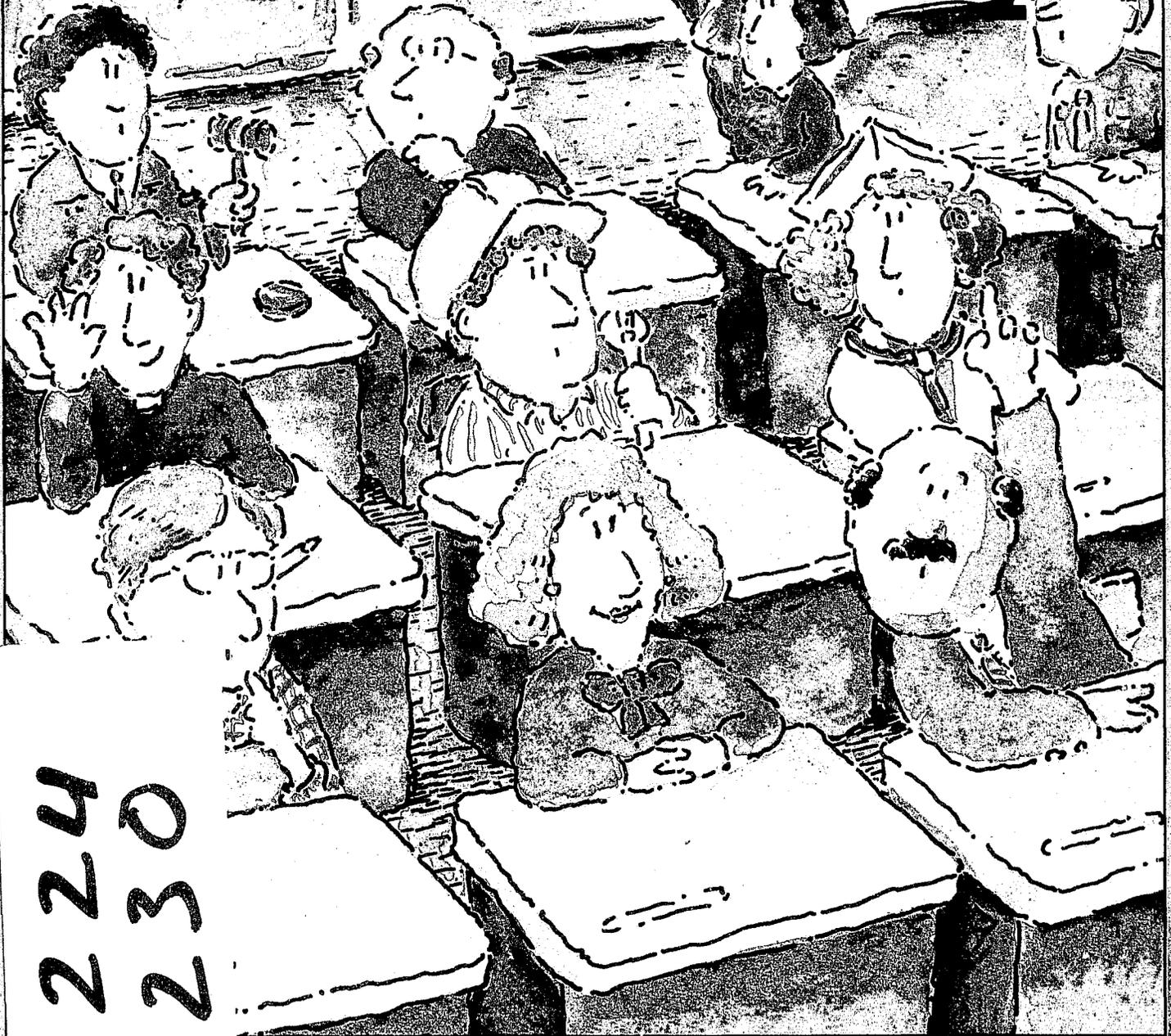


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*Better to give and receive: Students and neighbors  
learn to share resources to benefit their communities.*

# School Safety



119224  
119230

Crime: Close  
and personal

Building  
respect

U.S. Department of Justice  
National Institute of Justice

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## School Safety

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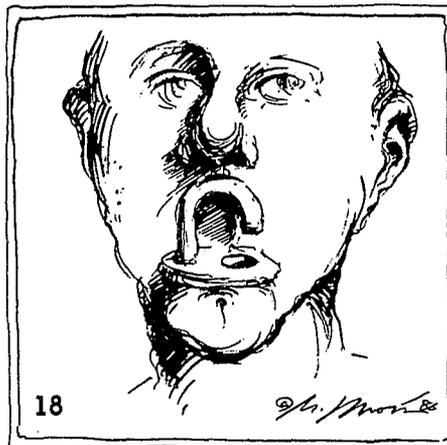
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### About the cover:

Schools are benefiting from a resurgence of community involvement — from private citizens, commercial businesses and public agencies — stimulated both by positive school-public relations and, unfortunately, by a series of crime-related crises. Illustration by Deborah Zemke, Copyright © 1988, NSSC.



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BY STEPHEN GOLDSMITH

*Until juvenile records are uniformly shared among professional educators, law enforcers and social workers, youths will continue to beat (and get beat by) the system.*

## Information as prevention

"Labeling" — either in name or practice — was the dreaded catchword of the 1960s and 1970s, and it still affects the way most juvenile agencies approach the sharing of information. Fear of labeling so paralyzes juvenile decision makers that the result has been a fragmentation of information, obligating well-intentioned persons to make decisions with a minimum of information.

Several years ago I attended a presentation made by a Jacksonville, Florida, police official who had been involved in one of the original SHODI (Serious Habitual Offender, Drug Involved) programs funded by the federal Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. He demonstrated with color-coded transparencies the bits of information that various governmental agencies knew about troubled children, but which previously had not been shared.

The welfare agency, police and schools each possessed different pieces of information. Consequently, opportunities for early intervention were missed. Loeber and Loeber's research supports similar anecdotal experiences of school and law enforcement authorities. In a 1986 article in *Crime and Justice*, they write, "Younger children usually present

less serious and less numerous conduct problems. . . . When unfavorable conditions fostering child conduct problems have existed for a long time, it probably is more difficult to reduce both the inappropriate parenting and the children's behaviors."

School officials who don't know that a child is abused, or that he or she has been arrested or been a victim of a crime, don't have enough information to determine whether the school fight or single marijuana cigarette is important. Similarly, the prosecutor is less likely to make the right charging decision on a minor matter if he is unaware of severe truancy and school drug problems on the part of that juvenile.

The proposition seemed too appealing to be argued: police, prosecutors, school counselors and welfare workers would make better decisions if they had more information. I proposed an information sharing system that would involve the criminal justice and welfare systems and the schools. The system would access an earlier program that computerized the services offered and the costs incurred by the juvenile treatment furnished by various agencies. Everyone seemed to agree that his institution could handle the information but that sister agencies could not. Some school administrators provided an even more curious response: they knew their social workers could evaluate the data without

inadvertently harming the students, but they were not sure about the teachers.

Larger questions, such as who would get the information, what would be done with it, and what rules of confidentiality would apply, were discussed. In 1988, an agreement was finally reached and a contract to establish the Juvenile Information Exchange Project was approved by the Indianapolis Public School Board and signed by the superintendent, police chief, sheriff, prosecutor, juvenile court judge and director of the welfare department.

The Community Service Council, a planning and information agency affiliated with the United Way, now coordinates the project, replacing the original leadership of the prosecutor's office. The project includes school social workers, juvenile court probation personnel, prosecutor juvenile intake and diversion counselors, and welfare caseworkers.

### **Mission**

The mission of the project is to promote the timely sharing of accurate and adequate information so that professionals can more effectively respond to children and prevent escalation of inappropriate behavior.

### **Target population**

Youth meeting the following criteria became the affected population:

*Stephen Goldsmith is prosecuting attorney of Marion County, Indiana, which includes the state capital of Indianapolis.*

- those in elementary, junior or high school within the school jurisdiction;
- those with cases in the juvenile justice system, whether court, police or prosecutor; and
- those involved with the County Department of Public Welfare with ward status.

#### Information to be shared

Although the range of information involved remains greater than spelled out below, the original project proposed to share the following:

- whether a truancy or educational neglect case has been referred for filing;
- which children are the victims of crime;
- the status and disposition of any delinquent act;
- whether a youth is engaged in a prosecutor-based "diversion program";
- the status of any probation case;
- the status of wardship cases;
- whether child abuse has been reported and any disposition information on such cases;
- whether a student has committed a crime or possessed drugs on or around school property; and
- a comprehensive list of juvenile service providers, their programs and costs, and contact personnel.

While efficiently exchanging the above information, the project *did not* create an integrated data base. That step may very well prove necessary, but it provoked fearful apprehensions on the part of the anti-labelers.

#### Method

Of almost equal importance to determining what data to exchange is the question of how to exchange it. There are nearly 50,000 youths in the system, with 7,500 cases of abuse, 7,000 referrals for delinquency, and hundreds of additional school-based incidents. As the possibilities of better use of the information grew, from making more informed counseling decisions to learning



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that a student's detention was the reason for a truancy problem, it became clear that telephone exchanges would not be sufficient.

Therefore, we are currently discussing installing a network of electronic mail systems, and fashioning rules to share information in agency data bases. The online electronic exchange of information will greatly increase usage.

#### Law

Indiana law presented some obstacles to data sharing. However, since the persons using the information were professionals associated with law enforcement, the court, welfare or the schools, agency heads were willing to interpret laws and procedures broadly. The juvenile court judge became the key player. Both by policy and by court order, he could make available much of the data.

There is little dispute that later interventions with troubled or delinquent youth are more difficult. A great deal of research has been done on which life events indicate that a youth might develop problems in the future. We should identify every event that becomes known to a government official and that signifies the child is having a problem so that intervention is early and comprehensive.

Fragmented information forces the system to delay its response. The delay means more victims if the youth is a chronic offender, or more intractable problems if he is troubled. Careful information sharing and carefully tailored responses help reduce the problem. We must put to rest the concept that fragmentation and ignorance of critical events leads to better decision making. □