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SAFE SCHOOLS OVERVIEW

NSSC RESOURCE PAPER

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SAFE SCHOOLS OVERVIEW

Problems of crime, violence and drugs are extending from our streets into our schools at an alarming rate. Not only must America's educational institutions address these serious concerns, but they are also being forced to deal with suicide, child abuse and lack of discipline.

The days when student-related school problems consisted mostly of a few playground squabbles and some kids playing hooky are long gone. School attendance and student discipline continue to be major concerns, but they are now only part of a long list of issues that must be addressed to assure safe and effective schools for the nation's elementary and secondary school students.

Education is a major part of our lives and it affects the entire country. More than \$203.8 billion of our tax dollars was spent on public education during the 1989-90 school year. The amount spent per student averaged \$4,896 in 1989-90, according to the National Education Association.

State by state expenditures ranged from \$2,733 per student in Utah to \$8,439 per student in New Jersey. Other figures from the U.S. Department of Commerce show that individual states spend from about 20 percent to 42 percent of their budgets on education. Some states now spend in excess of half their budgets on education at all levels.

More than 2.35 million teachers are employed to teach the 40.5 million elementary and secondary students in the nation's public and private schools.

In recent years, America's education system has been in the public spotlight as the result of various critical reports. Although purely academic issues are largely the focus of such reports, it is important to note the quality of a child's education can be severely affected if the child is not in a safe and welcoming learning environment.

Research indicates that schools with positive climates usually demonstrate continuous academic and social growth, trust, respect, high morale, change and improvement.

CRIME AND VIOLENCE

Maintaining a safe and positive environment is often a difficult task, especially when considering the following findings of a 1978 study of school crime and violence by the National Institute of Education (NIE):

- * Approximately 282,000 students are physically attacked in America's secondary schools each month.

- * Almost 8 percent of urban junior and senior high school students missed at least one day of school a month because they were afraid to go to school.
- * Approximately 5,200 of the nation's 1 million secondary school teachers are physically attacked at school in a month's time.
- * Estimates of the annual cost of school crime, including vandalism, run from about \$50 million to \$600 million. The best estimate of the yearly replacement and repair costs due to crime is about \$200 million.

A more recent study by The National PTA estimates vandalism at about \$600 million a year -- more than the nation's total annual expenditure on textbooks.

The first National Adolescent Student Health Survey, conducted during the fall of 1987, also confirms that crime and violence are serious problems for today's students. The study, which surveyed approximately 11,000 eighth-grade and tenth-grade students in 20 states, revealed the following statistics:

- * More than one-third (34 percent) reported that someone threatened to hurt them, while 14 percent reported being robbed and 13 percent reported being attacked at school or on a school bus at least once during the past year.
- * Almost half of the boys (49 percent) and about one-fourth of the girls (28 percent) said they had been in a fight at least once during the last year.
- * Four out of 10 boys (41 percent) and nearly one-fourth of the girls (24 percent) reported that they could obtain a handgun. Three percent of the boys surveyed said they had brought a handgun to school, and 23 percent of the boys said they had carried a knife to school at least once during the past year.

DISCIPLINE

The American public has long regarded discipline as the most important problem facing schools. In 16 of the past 22 annual Gallup Polls on education, the public identified discipline as one of the top problems facing today's schools. Discipline was ranked second in the 1986, 1987, 1988, 1989 and 1990 polls, narrowly trailing student drug use, and "lack of proper financing" was rated first in the 1971 poll.

This should come as no surprise since discipline problems can range from class-cutting and verbal abuse of teachers, to attacks on students and robberies.

Concern over the discipline problem is shown in various polls and surveys:

- * About 39 percent of U.S. teachers say that discipline is "a fairly serious problem in the schools," according to the 1989 Gallup Poll of teacher's attitudes toward public schools. Eleven percent feel that discipline is a very serious problem.
- * In a 1987 U.S. Department of Education survey, 19 percent of the public school teachers questioned said they felt there was "much more" disruptive behavior in their schools than five years before; another 25 percent indicated there was "somewhat more" disruptive behavior now. Almost one-third of the teachers surveyed stated they had seriously considered leaving teaching because of student misbehavior.
- * Of students polled nationwide, 14 percent rated improving discipline as the "single most important action my school could take to improve my education," according to a 1984 survey by U.S. News & World Report.
- * A 1985 survey conducted by the National Association of Secondary School Principals shows that 16 percent of high school principals rate discipline as the number one problem.

NIE's 1978 study of crime and violence found that a systemwide disciplinary policy appears to reduce the incidence of crime, while higher crime rates are found in schools where students feel that discipline is unfairly administered -- such schools are usually characterized by weak disciplinary policies, according to the study.

"Poor discipline policies can breed unsafe schools," says Albert Shanker, President of the American Federation of Teachers. "Safe schools require the development and enforcement of uniform discipline codes."

Mary Hatwood Futrell, president of the National Education Association, notes that the "discipline problem" does not stand in isolation from instructional issues. "It's the total school environment that determines the level of civility in the classroom," says Futrell.

BULLYING

Few memories of childhood may be as powerful as that of the class bully and his hapless victims. The bully--big, strong, seemingly intrepid--was always on the lookout for opportunities to pick on vulnerable children, usually smaller than himself.

Schoolyard bullying is a significant and pervasive problem. Based on extensive research conducted by Dr. Dan Olweus, professor of psychology at Bergen University in Norway, 15 percent of

schoolchildren are involved in bully/victim problems. One in 10 students is regularly harassed or attacked by bullies.

In a separate, 22-year study, psychologist Dr. Leonard Eron of the University of Illinois-Chicago, Rowell Huesmann and other colleagues found that young bullies have about a one-in-four chance of having a criminal record by age 30. Other children have about a one in 20 chance of becoming adult criminals.

International authorities on schoolyard bullies and victims gathered in May 1987 at Harvard University for a "Schoolyard Bully Practicum," sponsored by the National School Safety Center to develop a comprehensive, multifaceted bullying prevention program for the United States. The Practicum was the first such meeting of prominent researchers, psychologists, and school, law enforcement and public relations practitioners.

Practicum participants identified a wide range of strategies to help educators and others control or prevent bullying. First, assess the scope of the problem through a questionnaire answered by teachers and students. Communicate clear and consistently enforced behavior standards, closely monitor playground activity and be visible on campus. Also, watch for symptoms of bullying victims such as withdrawal, decline in study habits or grades, anxiety, and cuts, bruises or torn clothing. The key, though, is for everyone--educators, law enforcers, parents and students--to better understand schoolyard bully/victim problems and work together to prevent this emotional and physical suffering among youth.

DRUG/ALCOHOL TRAFFICKING AND ABUSE

Drug traffic and abuse are serious concerns for educators. In fact, the American public considers the use of drugs the biggest problem facing public schools today, according to the 1990 Gallup Poll.

More than half (51 percent) of America's teen-agers have used illicit drugs at least once before they finish high school and more than one-fifth have used drugs other than marijuana, according to surveys by the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

Alcohol abuse also continues to be a problem. By the time they are seniors, nine out of 10 students have tried alcohol.

Teen-agers themselves say drug abuse is the biggest problem they face, with peer pressures ranking second and alcohol abuse coming in third as the leading causes of concern, according to the 1989 Gallup Youth Survey.

Concern about drugs has risen from 27 percent in 1977, when teen-agers also named it as the top problem facing their generation, to 60 percent in 1989.

A 1989 survey of high school seniors by University of Michigan researchers showed that although a long-term downward trend in overall drug use among young people is continuing, the United States still has the highest rates of drug abuse among the world's industrialized nations. For the third year in a row since the annual study began in 1978, a significant drop in cocaine use was measured. The number of high school seniors reporting cocaine use in the year prior to the survey fell from 7.9 percent in 1988 to 6.5 percent in 1989.

Although not illegal, tobacco is a drug and is used frequently by teen-agers. "In the long run, smoking cigarettes will probably cut short the lives of more of this group of young Americans than will the use of all the other drugs combined," says Dr. Lloyd Johnston, director of the Michigan study, which is funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

About one in five high school seniors currently is a daily smoker, according to the study, with more than 60 percent of these smokers going through at least half a pack of cigarettes daily.

A recent report found that more people worldwide will die as a result of diseases related to smoking and smokeless tobacco than any other preventable cause of death, including war and famine.

GANGS

Gang members today are much younger than those in years past. "Members of our gang unit are finding children 8, 9 and 10 years old involved in a wide range of street activity," said Sherwood Williams, a deputy police chief in Chicago. Police know that money often lures juveniles into gangs. It's not unusual, for example, to find kids who are 9, 10 and 11 years old making \$200 a week being lookouts for crack cocaine houses.

According to FBI statistics, children (not necessarily all gang members) under the age of 15 were responsible for 201 murders in 1988, as well as 1,372 rapes, 11,345 aggravated assaults and 6,470 robberies. And although nearly one-third of all juveniles are arrested once in their lives, only 7 percent are responsible for 70 percent of all crime committed by youths. This trend has prompted forward-thinking schools and communities to develop early prevention programs, strategies and curricula aimed at grades 3, 4 and 5. There is unanimous agreement that this type of early prevention is the most effective way to stem gang activity.

The importance of prevention cannot be overemphasized. Once in a gang, the odds are overwhelmingly against a boy (or girl) ever leaving it. Youths who try to leave are threatened; indeed, many affiliate with gangs because in their neighborhood it is, while dangerous, seemingly the best protection from other thugs.

"The gang problem is more serious in some cities than it is in others," says Irving Spergel, a professor at the University of Chicago, School of Social Service Administration, who is engaged in a three-year effort funded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention to uncover some successful strategies in dealing with gang problems. "It is particularly serious in places like Chicago, Los Angeles and in surrounding smaller communities. Probably the most serious problems are on the West Coast. There is a growing problem in New York City and there are emerging gang problems in cities where there have never been gang problems, such as Seattle, Portland, Atlanta, Miami and Phoenix."

Los Angeles, considered the nation's "gang capital," has an estimated 95,000 gang members involved in at least 840 different street gangs. A new record of 570 gang-related killings occurred in Los Angeles County during 1989, although the total number undoubtedly is higher since that figure does not include all areas in the county. The number of gang-related deaths in Los Angeles County was 452 in 1988.

In an alarming new trend, members of Los Angeles gangs have begun to spread their violence and drug trade to smaller cities throughout the United States. The Drug Enforcement Agency in 1988 confirmed the presence of Los Angeles street gang members in 49 cities. Youth gangs are presenting a growing law enforcement problem in cities with populations under 250,000.

The trend of gang involvement in drug dealing is disturbing, and it especially concerns law enforcement officers. With its money-making potential, drug trafficking is turning more gangs into highly organized criminal organizations whose operations span the nation. Schools are often used as drug distribution sites as well. These drug operations significantly increase the likelihood of serious violence and weapon use on campus.

HIGH DROPOUT RATES

The dropout problem in America's schools is also serious cause for concern for the entire nation since the country's economic health is very likely affected by the large number of uneducated and under-educated youths who grow up to comprise a large part of our adult population.

The dropout rate is about 29 percent nationally, which means that more than one in every four students entering high school will not graduate.

Compared to the general public, dropouts are more likely to face unemployment, menial jobs and reliance on public assistance. Consider the following:

- * Unemployment is significantly and consistently greater for school dropouts. For example, 1989 U.S. Department of Labor statistics show a 17.1 percent unemployment rate for workers

20-24 years old who did not complete high school compared to 9.7 percent for those in that age group who have a diploma.

- * Almost a third of California families receiving Aid for Dependent Children have a head of household who did not complete high school.

The importance of addressing the school dropout problem is clearly illustrated in the words of U.S. Senator Arlen Specter (R-Pennsylvania). "Job prospects for dropouts are worse than bleak," according to Specter. "Dropouts who are fortunate find their way into dead-end jobs. The unfortunate ones find their way into prison."

TRUANCY AND DAYTIME BURGLARY

On any given school day about one out of 10 elementary school students and one out of five high school students is absent from classes. While most student absences are due to illness or other legitimate reasons, many absent students are no doubt truant.

Several short-term studies in various communities throughout the nation indicate a link between truancy and daytime delinquency and suggest that eliminating truancy may be an answer to decreasing community crime.

In 1978, the Department of Public Safety in Rohnert Park, California, instituted a program to reduce truancy and juvenile crime in the community. During the program's first year in operation, daylight burglaries in Rohnert Park decreased 48 percent. Current estimates of Average Daily Attendance (ADA) funds recovered since the program began exceed \$1.5 million. Cumulative community savings from reduced crime loss due to daytime burglaries, theft and vandalism are estimated at \$500,000.

SCHOOL SAFETY LAW

We are living in a time when the law has become the vehicle for attempting to settle countless conflicts formerly resolved by other means, or merely left unresolved. It is not surprising, therefore, that education law has become increasingly important in our society.

Prior to 1900, the U.S. Supreme Court dealt with only nine educational cases. But during the 20th century the Court has already decided more than 50 cases, including the famous 1954 decision in Brown v. Board of Education that declared segregated public education was inherently unequal and therefore unconstitutional. It has been necessary for the legal arm of the courtroom to extend into the classroom to ensure due process and other constitutional protections for students.

The U.S. Supreme Court has decided several significant cases directly affecting campus climates. Most recently, in New Jersey

v. T.L.O. in 1985, the Court ruled on the propriety of student searches. In 1986, the Court dealt with the nature and extent of disciplinary duties and First Amendment rights in schools. (See Bethel School District v. Fraser.)

California voters have recognized the "Right to Safe Schools" with the 1982 passage of "The Victims' Bill of Rights" which states: "All students and staff of primary, elementary, junior high and senior high schools have the inalienable right to attend campuses which are safe, secure and peaceful."

It is important that educators throughout the nation be aware there is always the potential for litigation as a result of their actions, inactions and policies. Former U.S. Chief Justice Warren Burger underscored this issue in January 1986 when he declared, "The serious challenge of restoring a safe school environment has begun to reshape the law." Thus, while the possibility of litigation should not prevent educators from doing their jobs, it should be considered so that the reasons and background for each decision can be articulated and supported.

CHILD SAFETY

The wide array of problems that school officials deal with also includes suicide and child abuse. These are social and emotional issues that deeply affect our children. The following facts indicate the serious need for action to deal with these problems:

- * Suicide is the third leading cause of death among 15- to 24-year-olds (after accidents and homicide).
- * More than 5,000 young people between the ages of 15 and 24 kill themselves each year--an average of one suicide every 90 minutes--according to the American Association of Suicidology.
- * In 1984 there were 1,712,641 children reported as abused and neglected, according to the American Humane Association. A study conducted in 1988 by the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect found an estimated 1.25 million incidences of child abuse and neglect. According to a 1985 survey of the general population, which included both reported and unreported cases of child abuse, approximately one million children are the victims of physical abuse each year. (Family Violence Research Program, University of New Hampshire)

The suicide rate for the 15-24 age group has tripled since 1970. Suicides of younger children, ages 10-14, doubled between 1980 and 1985. While no single reason can be found for this alarming increase in the loss of America's youth, various studies have suggested that the demands and pressures of today's society have pushed some students over the edge.

Besides depression and lack of achievement, drug and alcohol use is also seen as a factor in suicides.

Teens who commit suicide today are 10 times more likely to be drunk or high on drugs than their counterparts 20 years ago, according to a recent report presented to the American Academy of Child Psychiatry.

Satanic-influenced heavy metal rock songs are also being pointed to as contributing to the rising rate of suicide. It is vital that educators and law enforcers address the problems of troubled and endangered children.

SCHOOL SAFETY PARTNERSHIPS

While many school officials are making concerted efforts to address some or all of these problems, it is important to recognize that issues of this magnitude and complexity require community solutions--especially since problems on school campuses reflect problems in the community.

Numerous resources are available to aid in addressing these problems. However, intensive interagency communication and cooperation are necessary to make those resources work.

School and law enforcement leaders across the nation must actively focus joint attention on providing safer schools with increased attendance and improved discipline, as well as environments that are free of drugs and alcohol.

The National School Safety Center brings together public, private and academic resources throughout America to provide a central headquarters to assist educators, law enforcers, lawyers, government officials and the public to ensure all our schools are safe, secure and tranquil places of learning.