

School Safety

Help  The Violence!



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BY JOSEPH D. DEAR, KATHLEEN SCOTT AND DORIE MARSHALL

The California Commission on Teacher Credentialing's School Violence Advisory Panel examines the problem and offers solutions.

An attack on school violence

Violence is a public health and safety condition which results from individual, socio-economic, political and institutional disregard for basic human needs. Violence includes physical and nonphysical harm which causes damage, pain, injury and fear. Violence disrupts the school environment and results in the debilitation of personal development which may lead to hopelessness and helplessness.

So determined the School Violence Advisory Panel of the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing.

In February 1992, responding to a charge by the California legislature to take a leadership role in addressing school violence, the Commission appointed a diverse advisory panel composed of students, county and local school personnel, and representatives from higher education, professional organizations and the community at large. The Commission is the policy board authorized to set minimum competency

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standards for the training of all professional educators, including teachers, administrators and pupil personnel service specialists.

The three major components of the panel's work included developing a set of assumptions and philosophy statements; determining a data collection strategy; and making recommendations to the Commission. After working together for more than 18 months to develop appropriate recommendations to the Commission and other state agencies, this 20-member panel has nearly completed its study of school violence.

Assumptions adopted by the panel

Certainly one of the most challenging tasks for the group was developing a common set of assumptions to which each member of the panel could agree.

The assumptions that guided the panel as it moved forward with its work were:

"Our society is increasingly violent. Violence is a public health and safety condition endemic in our society. Therefore, we assume:

- The historical development of this society has been based on violence, and violence continues to be a cultural norm.
- Society is diminished when an individual is damaged by violence.
- Violence is reciprocal and communicable. Violence is contagious. It is transmitted by overt, indiscriminate

aggression and in subtle, unintentional ways.

- Violence is not the human condition. It is a learned behavior which is preventable.
- Violence cuts across all lines of culture and ethnicity and is not exclusive to any single group or class.
- Prevention of violence requires education of and by all segments of society. It requires a reassessment of how conflict is viewed and resolved.
- Individuals should be educated to understand that they have choices in the way they behave and express their feelings and that they are responsible for the consequences of their actions.
- Effective resolution of violence requires early intervention that respects the integrity and dignity of all concerned.
- In order to establish safe schools, school personnel need to be increasingly aware of the nature and implications of violence upon schools and should be trained in ways to deal effectively with that violence."

Data collecting activities

Data collection activities were both extensive and comprehensive. Surveys were developed and administered statewide to education professors, credential candidates and recently credentialed school teachers, administrators, counselors, psychologists and social workers. School

board members and state teacher credentialing and licensing directors from all 50 states were also surveyed. In addition, more than 360 college and university teacher training program coordinators from throughout the United States responded to a survey about the preparedness of their students to address school violence.

Panel members held focus group meetings in 11 different counties throughout the state. Over 600 students, parents, teachers, administrators, support staff, law enforcement personnel and other community members participated in these small group discussions during January 1993. The coordinators of the focus groups used data gathering techniques adopted by the panel. Included were series of specific and open-ended questions, discussed in small group settings, to obtain a candid reality check of key issues among participants. Many site visits were augmented by individual, unplanned and unscripted encounters to further validate and enhance input opportunities.

After all the data was collected, the panel enlisted six graduate students from the Division of Social Work at California State University, Sacramento, to analyze all questionnaire data, assist in the review of pertinent literature, assess programs currently in operation and seek advice from known experts in the field. In return, each graduate student used the data as a basis for a master's thesis.

Preliminary findings by the panel

News media coverage of school violence has increased over 300 percent in the past two years. With this kind of continuous exposure, it becomes easy to justify shifting valuable and limited resources from academic and educational purposes to pay for armed security, metal detectors and self-defense seminars for school staff.

The plight of education today is not necessarily on a self-destruct course as many TV commentaries and news reporters might suggest. There is hope on the horizon for schools. Students and

educators alike appear to be optimistic about their own particular school, even though they feel that violence is on the rise.

Preliminary results from this study seem to indicate that, contrary to popular opinion and other literature reviews, students, teachers and other educators do not feel that violence in their school is a big problem.

The Commission's study results also show that teachers and other educators worry comparatively little about their own personal safety in school. These findings were consistent among all edu-

cators — teachers, administrators, and pupil personnel service specialists — from California and throughout the United States. These same findings were consistent among credential candidates and credential program coordinators whose field experiences were completed at all grade levels in public schools across the nation.

This is not to say, however, that all is well and that violence does not exist on school campuses. It does seem to indicate, though, that the situation is still manageable and not completely out of control.



These same educators reported violent acts at school as common occurrences. They tended to accept some forms of violence in schools as a "natural way of life," and they did not consider these acts to be an extensive problem when compared to events they see and hear almost daily on the news.

These same teachers and other educators felt very strongly that special training to address school violence is needed for both themselves and others. They felt unprepared to address violence in the school and acknowledged that they had received little or no training in their credentialing programs.

It was not surprising to find, from data derived from focus group meetings, that where the academic performance is high and relationships among students and staff are good, schools are safer and violence is minimal. Focus group participants (especially the students) seemed to agree that school safety and nonviolence are natural byproducts of a school where the vast majority of people genuinely care about one another and are committed to working together as a team toward a common educational goal.

Prominent panel findings

- The most unexpected finding was that very few educators saw violence as a sizeable problem in their school, a common perception nationwide, and even fewer worried about their own personal safety. The vast majority, however, thought that all educators should be trained to address school violence.

(A 1993 survey published by *Executive Educator* asked school administrators whether or not school crime was increasing nationwide. Ninety-eight percent indicated that it was. They were also asked if violence was increasing within a district near them; 63 percent said yes. These administrators were then asked if it was increasing within their own district. Thirty-nine percent said yes — an interesting yet significant drop from 98 percent nationally to a 39 percent local perspective.)

- In response to the question, "How ad-

equately does your program prepare K-12 educators to effectively address violence on school campuses?" more than 50 percent of the 362 college and university training program coordinators from throughout the United States indicated "unprepared" as compared to less than 4 percent who indicated "prepared."

- Almost 80 percent of these college and university training program coordinators said that they currently provide no training in school violence to their teacher candidates, even though 71 percent of those responding said that special training is needed.

- None of the 50 states nor the District of Columbia currently require any special training for teachers regarding how to address school violence. Three states, Florida, Georgia and Nebraska, require such training for special education teachers. (In October, 1993, the governor of California signed a bill that now requires training in school violence prevention for all California educators.)

- Veteran teachers and recently credentialed teachers alike claim to be more unprepared to address school violence than their counterparts in school administration and support roles.

- More than 80 percent of the recently credentialed teachers, administrators and support personnel stated that they received no special training to address school violence.

- Nearly 90 percent of those surveyed indicated a need for violence prevention training.

- Only about half of those responding indicated that school violence prevention/intervention programs had been implemented at their school.

- Among the school board members surveyed, 37 percent worry daily about violence occurring at schools in their district, and more than 70 percent worry about violence at least weekly. Specific incidents about which school board members worry most are: punching or kicking; grabbing or shoving; student/staff insubordination; cursing; ethnic or racial conflicts; and intimidation by gangs.

- More than 35 percent of the school board members felt that school personnel in their district were prepared to effectively address violence on school campuses, while only 10 percent indicated that school personnel in their district were unprepared. An obvious difference of opinion exists between school board members and school personnel about staff preparedness to address school violence.

Focus group discussions

Following is a summary of findings for focus group meetings. Four questions were asked in each group:

- What violence have you or your children experienced at school?
- What caused the violence?
- What can be done about violence at your school?
- What training do educators need to address school violence?

- *Violence experienced.* The most violent activities personally experienced by focus group participants in their schools were fights, gang-related activity, verbal abuse and teasing, the brandishing of weapons, racial incidents and various kinds of assaults.

- *Causes of violence.* Causes of school violence mentioned by focus group participants included a lack of information about ethnic and cultural groups, gangs and gang activity, media influences (movies, television, music and video games), a lack of values and respect, low self-esteem, untrained staff, dysfunctional families, and a lack of self-discipline and/or coping skills.

- *What can be done?* Focus groups recommended the following means to address school violence:

- implement multicultural curricula;
- involve community agencies and law enforcement in school partnerships;
- enforce discipline policies consistently and fairly;
- show concern and interest in students;
- improve both internal and external communication;
- teach conflict resolution, problem solv-

ing and crisis intervention skills to students and school staff;

- hire more counselors, social workers and pupil personnel service staff;
- teach discipline, respect, values and responsibility;
- increase parental involvement;
- educate parents about school violence issues; and
- offer students peer tutoring, peer counseling and support.

• *Training needed for school staff.* Focus group participants recommended staff training strategies to address violence. Included were training in:

- multicultural sensitivity and awareness;
- conflict management and resolution;
- listening and other counseling skills;
- classroom management and discipline;
- mediation;
- reality-based experiences in a variety of school settings/grade levels; and
- communication, human relations and interpersonal skills.

Teachers should be trained to make subject matter relevant to student experiences. Life skills, problem solving, ethnic sensitivity and personal responsibility can be integrated into regular academic curricula. An administrator's best weapons against school violence are organizational, relational and communication skills that inspire teamwork toward clearly defined goals.

Next steps

The next step for the panel is a return to the 11 sites where focus groups met. There the panel will share its findings and tentative recommendations with school district personnel, parents, community representatives, and college and university credential program coordinators from the 72 institutions that train educators for California schools.

The panel will then report its formal recommendations to the Commission. New curriculum standards will need to be developed, as will a formalized training curriculum. This process will be reviewed and updated on a regular basis.

California Commission on Teacher Credentialing School Violence Advisory Panel

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