

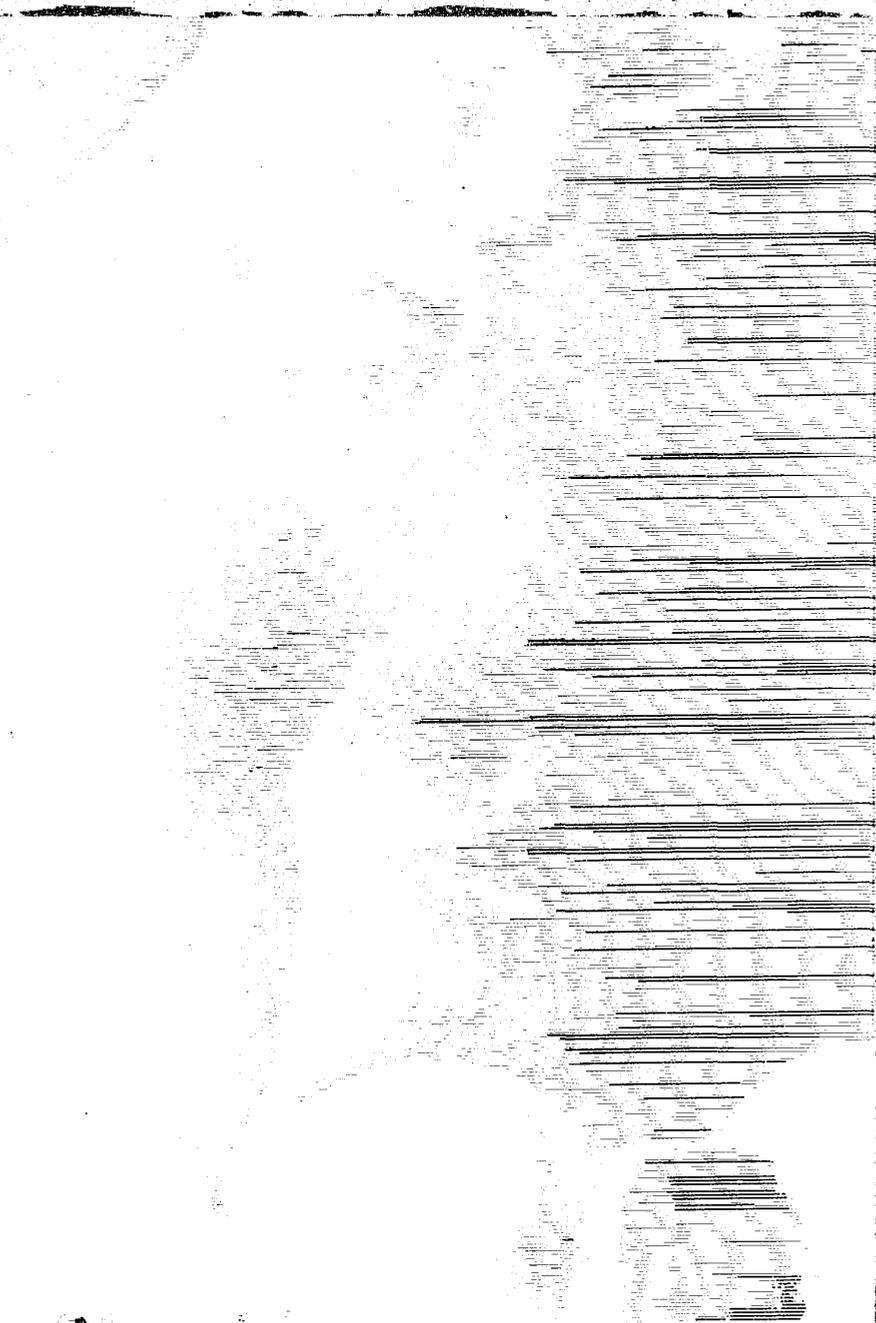
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Case Study

Preventing School Violence

By Dana S. Libby

"Fairfax Police have arrested 14 juveniles and eight adults on charges that include assault by mob, attempted malicious wounding, destruction of property and disorderly conduct. Most of those arrested are students at the school."

In the past, when students got into trouble, they received detention or a suspension. Hardcore cases might be expelled, but school administrators handled the situation themselves—they rarely, if ever, called the police.

Today, the police routinely respond to educational institutions, as students commit serious acts of violence and even murder. This article examines recent incidents at a suburban Virginia public high school and demonstrates how law enforcement agencies can work with school administrators and the community to quell the violence that plagues American schools.

JUST ANOTHER SUBURBAN HIGH SCHOOL

The school is 1 of 21 public secondary schools in Fairfax County, Virginia, a suburb of Washington, DC. During the 1992-93 school year, this high school enrolled 2,073 students in grades 9 through 12. As in many public schools, the students represent a variety of races and ethnicities. Fifty-two percent are white; 26 percent, Asian; 12 percent, Latino; and 10 percent, African-American. Over 40 percent of the students speak English as their second language.

In September 1992, as part of its community policing approach, the Fairfax County Police Department assigned individual officers to act as liaison at each high school and middle school in the district. Each officer would make regular, informal contacts with students and staff at each school to provide general law enforcement and crime prevention information, to investigate unreported criminal acts, and to gain awareness of any ongoing problem within the school community. Liaison officers generally devoted only 5 hours per week at their assigned schools.

In addition, due to the students' diverse backgrounds, the department made available to all school administrators the services of the Community Liaison Unit. The six ethnically diverse officers assigned to the unit had been specially trained in various problem-solving and mediation techniques, in order to approach community conflicts with nontraditional solutions. These skills would prove beneficial in the months to come.

VIOLENT FACTIONS

In recent years, violence in the school had risen sharply. The school requested police service 72 times during the 1988-89 school year, 90 times during the 1991-92 school year, and 112 times during the 1992-93 year. By 1992, school administrators and police realized that two distinct ethnic factions had formed within the school population: One African-American and one Latino. The Latino students asserted that the African-American students, who had previously outnumbered the Latino students, had failed to respect them properly. Once Latino students outnumbered the African-Americans, several Latino students implied the school was now "theirs." In addition to these two groups, others, including Korean, Vietnamese, and white students, became involved in the conflict.

As the 1992-93 school year progressed, low-level, largely verbal disputes grew increasingly violent. In October, a minor altercation in the lunch room escalated into a fight involving 40 to 50 primarily Latino and Korean students. Later in the year, a white student was arrested for carrying an 8-inch knife in a concealed shoulder holster, and a Latino student was arrested for possessing a 24-inch machete. Both of these students claimed to have armed themselves out of fear of being assaulted by a group of African-American students.

CLIMACTIC ENCOUNTER

Then, in January 1993, an off-campus incident illustrated just how serious the situation had grown. A late-night dispute arose among five students in the parking lot of a local fast-food restaurant. One hour later, the same students encountered one another on a public roadway, each group in separate automobiles. They stopped and exited their cars. After several moments of heated discussion, a Latino student

produced a 9-mm handgun and placed it against the head of an African-American student, who pushed the gun away and began to walk back to the passenger side of his vehicle. As he entered the car, he was struck in the knee by one of approximately four shots fired by the Latino student.

THE MORNING AFTER

Investigators initially encountered difficulty identifying the suspect, who was known only by a nickname. However, when the suspect arrived at school the following Monday, officers were waiting. A group of African-American students also waited to confront him. As officers reached the suspect, widespread fighting broke out between 40 to 50 Latino and African-American students. After controlling the students, the police arrested the suspect on felony charges. They also arrested other students for disorderly conduct and assault related to the fights.

Despite the principal's removal of 50 of the student aggressors, acts of vandalism and violence occurred throughout the rest of that day and week. Students spray-painted graffiti on the school building and on cars, assaulted teachers, and attacked other students. Both the police and school administrators realized that these actions required an immediate response.

COMBINED RESPONSE

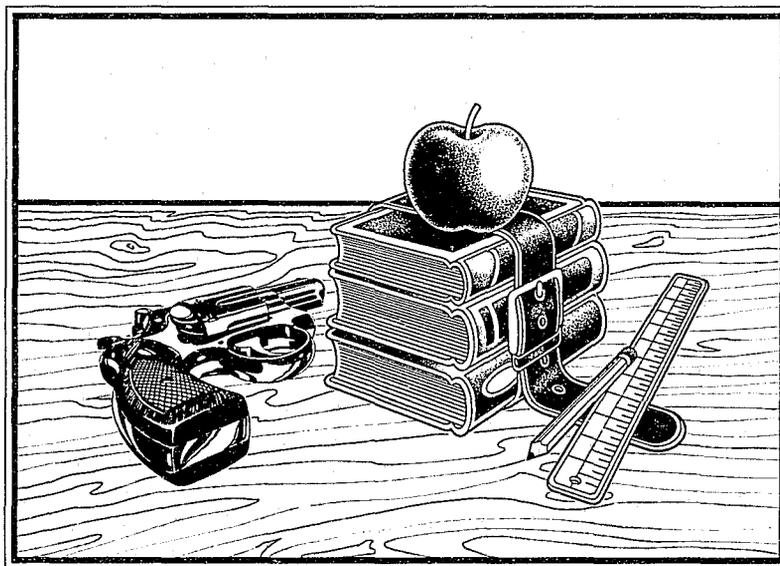
By the Police

In addition to reactive measures taken in response to the law-breaking, the police instituted a number of initiatives to avert further violence and to resolve

some of the underlying problems. These initiatives included assigning a patrol officer to the high school full time and imposing a policy generally described as "zero tolerance for violence."

This policy allowed patrol officers to exercise the

maximum legal response to criminal acts occurring at the school, especially those that occurred in the officers' presence. As a result, instead of releasing offenders into their parents' custody as they might have done previously, officers now took the youths directly before the court. Based on the officers' testimonies, the accuseds' records, and the



high level of violence at the school, a number of these students were placed in the Juvenile Detention Center until their trial dates. Such actions by the courts served to remove sources of violent behavior from the school.

In addition, recognizing that continued arrests served only as a short-term solution to the violence, officers from the department's Community Liaison Unit began to work with the school administration and the students to mediate the underlying disputes. Professionally trained, the mediators followed a specific process to improve relations between the two groups of students and, later, between the students and the staff.

By the Administration

The school administration also took decisive and effective action to solve the rapidly emerging problems. They moved quickly from administrative sanctions to criminal charges when the former proved ineffective. If the courts released students, the school

would suspend anyone arrested for violent acts. If these students attempted to return to school, the police arrested them for trespassing.

Furthermore, the administration provided facilities for mediation sessions and helped the police financially to offset the costs of providing personnel for the violent acts that had been occurring at the school. In this way, the school clearly contributed to the successful resolution of this situation.

By the Community

The Fairfax County Police involved the community from the very beginning. Three days after the shooting, police department representatives, the high school principal, school board members, and the area school superintendent met with 350 to 450 parents, students, and residents of the surrounding community to discuss the problems. The audience was given a detailed presentation on each incident.

In this "town meeting," the principal and a police department representative explained the "zero tolerance for violence" philosophy, the aggressive use of criminal and administrative sanctions to suppress violent acts, and the use of mediation to resolve problems. Members of the panel then addressed issues of concern and answered questions raised by the audience.

THE MEDIATION PROCESS

Without mediation, the police response would have been limited to reactive, punitive means, with no real, long-term solution to the conflicts that had erupted within the school. To begin, school staff members identified Latino and African-American student leaders to represent their peers. The staff chose two African-American males, one of whom had been the shooting victim, two African-American females, two Latino males, and two Latino females. These students were seen as positive, new leaders for their groups. After they expressed a willingness to

participate, their parents granted written permission, and the sessions began.

First, liaison officers met with each group separately. The officers explained the mediation process, outlined the ground rules, and addressed confidentiality regulations. The students also discussed their feelings on a variety of issues, which allowed them to "blow off steam."

Next, the Latino and African-American students met in a series of discussion sessions that emphasized multiculturalism, prejudice reduction, anger and stress management, and positive leadership and ethics skills. The students negotiated everything—including which group would speak first. Until they agreed on one topic, they would not move on to the next. Students discussed what they perceived to be the reason for violence at the school; each group felt the other group did not treat them with respect.

Although mediators *suggested* options, they did not recommend solutions or coerce the students to come to terms. In three 2-hour sessions, the students came to a consensus. They completed and signed a memorandum of understanding in which they agreed:

- To go to specific teachers with problems
- To attempt to use verbal skills to resolve conflicts
- To try to understand the cultures of different people and to respect their values
- To use conduct to promote mutual respect between the administration and the students.

The students then broadcast the results of the sessions to their peers via the public address system and urged them to end the violence.

The students successfully mediated their differences through direct communication, which eliminated false perceptions of one another as individuals and as members of a particular ethnic group. The value of these sessions became even more apparent when the Latino and African-American students combined efforts to mediate with members of the school faculty

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Mediation Tips

Mediation—Participant Ground Rules

- Do not interrupt
- No name-calling or put-downs
- Be as honest as you can
- Work hard to solve the problem

Mediation—Mediator Guidelines

- Let the person vent
- Don't get defensive
- Paraphrase
- Solve the problem together
- Keep talking

Source: Community Mediation Center, Harrisonburg, VA.

over issues of respect between the administration and the student body.

RESULTS

Although the police arrested an additional 13 students from the time of the town meeting in February to the end of the school year, there were no further incidents of large-scale disorder or fights. By April, the special mediation activities had concluded, and the patrol officer assigned to the school full time had returned to a normal level of liaison duties.

Successful resolution of this potentially deadly situation depended on two factors: Well-established, close cooperation with the school administration and full dissemination of all legally permissible information to the community and the media. The high level of cooperation that existed between the police department and the school administration allowed for a coordinated and effective response. Communication with the media and the community reduced the spread of inflammatory rumors, avoided allegations that the news was being covered up, and developed a high level of public support and confidence for the coordinated response of law enforcement and the school administration. Absent these two factors, the situation would not have been resolved as quickly.

One minor difficulty the department encountered was the lack of intelligence concerning these ethnically based groups and a hesitation to identify them clearly for what they are—emerging gangs. However, the violent events of the past taught the department the value of gathering data on these youth gangs.

CONCLUSION

When the safety of their children is at stake, parents do not care who gets the credit; they demand effectiveness. Law enforcement officers and school administrators must work together to establish a strong foundation of mutual trust and cooperation. In this way, they react swiftly and surely to acts of violence by students.

Furthermore, they can prevent such situations from occurring. When this happens, school administrators can concentrate on their mission of providing a good education to their students. ♦

Endnote

J. Comiteau, "Annandale High Sets Meeting to Explain Brawls," *Fairfax Journal*, February 8, 1993.

Major Libby serves in the Criminal Investigation Division of the Fairfax County, Virginia, Police Department.
