School Violence Prevention Fact Sheet

Recent tragedies in schools have motivated policy-making that is attempting to put an end to senseless violence. However, reactionary legislation that focuses on school building safety (e.g., security guards, metal detectors, surveillance cameras) or exclusionary discipline (e.g., suspension, expulsion, arrest) may have limited effectiveness, and may actually contribute to a climate of danger, fear, and distrust in school (APA, 2008; Nolan, 2011). Zero tolerance policies and repeated suspension of students with behavior problems does little to change anti-social behavior, and may fuel school failure and delinquency.

Because the causes of violence are multi-faceted, prevention strategies require a more thoughtful approach that operates on multiple levels. **Research indicates that universal, school-based prevention programs that promote social support, mental health, and student engagement would improve schools safety and reduce violent behavior.**

Mental Health

Preventing violence requires comprehensive, school-wide efforts to create nurturing environments rather than short-term solutions. Comprehensive programs like Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) include general supports for all students as well as more specialized and intensive services for students with special needs. Such programs proactively teach and reinforce emotional self-awareness, self-esteem, and appropriate behavior, and they create opportunities for students to practice new social-emotional competencies.

School counselors, psychologists, and social workers are critical in helping school staff assess and respond to students with special needs as well as potential threats to student safety. Partnerships with community health centers would facilitate information-sharing regarding vulnerable youth.

Social Support

Students are shaped by their social contexts. When the Subcommittee on Youth Violence (2013) identified risk factors for rampage shootings, social alienation and rejection from close-knit peer groups were critical indicators. Students' sense of connectedness in schools and relationships with caring adults can protect at-risk youth against becoming involved in aggression and violence (Gregory et al., 2010).

Interventions promoting social support, from bullying prevention and mentoring programs to athletic and arts and service-learning opportunities, can foster positive relationships between youth and older peers and adults. Such programs can build self-esteem and social skills, increase trust in school, and create a sense of community within schools. School staff, students, and parents much but involved in such initiatives as key partners.

Student/Family Engagement

Facilitating marginalized students' engagement in school requires special attention. Engagement in academics, social activities, and problem-solving or decision-making fosters an inclusive school culture where students feel safe and respected. Such an environment acts as a protective factor against involvement in violence. Research shows that engagement in afterschool programs decreases involvement in delinquent behavior, increases academic achievement, and improves students' attitudes about themselves.

There is growing evidence that family-based programs can improve relationships outside of school and lower the risk of violence. Seminars that focus on child development, communication skills, and nonviolent problem-solving may help families thrive. It is important to recognize family and community assets in order to build on capacities to resist violence, and foster healthy development long-term.

Conclusion

While the government works to address school safety in the aftermath of tragedy, strategies should not promote fear, but rather help restore the trust and sense of connectedness that keeps students safe. Students are safest in schools where they feel connected with adults and peers, and where they trust adults enough to share their problems.

Comprehensive approaches to violence prevention must address social contexts, implement behavioral expectations fairly and consistently, and support positive child development. Although teaching and implementing pro-social behaviors may be more challenging than relying on exclusionary and punitive measures, it is much more effective in preventing future delinquency. If we continue to develop and test these kinds of prevention programs, we can facilitate widespread adoption of successful strategies.

References

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