

NYSCSS

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RESEARCH BRIEF

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The Impact of Legislation on School Safety: A Policy Examination in Selected New York State Districts

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During the 2001-02 school year, The New York State Center for School Safety conducted surveys of school personnel within districts in a selected county in New York State. A descriptive research design was employed. The purpose of the surveys was to explore the impact of the newly created Schools Against Violence in Education (SAVE) legislation on New York State Schools. Specifically, the Center studied what, if any, behavioral changes could be attributed to the legislation. The Center also surveyed educators' attitudes and beliefs in relation to SAVE. How were schools responding to the legislation?

The national agenda, along with several concepts were explored prior to undertaking this impact study. Policy definition as well as policy creation was first examined. Also, the Center had to find out what school personnel consider violent behavior. It then sought to explore how the national agenda impacts New York State schools.

DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT:

Are New York State schools safe places? Data was collected and analyzed in the areas of extent and type of violence, perceptions of violence, and compliance with the legislation. Data collection methods included surveys and archival data. Three surveys were employed: superintendent, educators, and building administrators. Archival data were culled from the Basic Educational Data System reports (BEDS) (New York State Education Department, 1999, 2000, 2001), the 2000 Census, Communities that Care surveys (Developmental Research and Programs, 2001), the New York State Education Department, and the New York State Center for School Safety records.

Educator participants were randomly selected from eight school districts (10% random sample was drawn from each school district, N = 1,223). All administrators were included in the sample. Subjects included 121 educators and 9 superintendents. Superintendents completed a 16-item survey that asked them to indicate the types and extent of violence in their district. Building administrators completed a 20-item survey that investigated what was considered to be violent in relation to student behaviors. All 6th, 8th, 10th and 12th grade students completed the Communities that Care survey in May, 2001. This data was used to examine student attitudes and

behaviors. District wide safety plans were also reviewed for compliance.

FINDINGS:

The Violent Incident survey administered to principals and assistant principals had a 76% return rate. Responses indicate a degree of variability in defining what behaviors are considered violent. Table 1 shows these results.

Behavior	Not Violent At All	Somewhat Violent	Extremely Violent
Verbal Jousting	5.8	76.4	2.9
Name Calling	2.9	76.4	2.9
Swearing At Other Students	2.9	76.4	5.8
Teasing	11.7	50.0	5.8
Verbal Harassment	0.0	52.9	20.5
Sexual Harassment	5.8	32.3	35.2
Pushing To Be First On Line	2.9	76.4	5.8
Pushing on Lunch Line	5.8	61.7	5.8
Bullying	0.0	38.7	35.2
Fist Fighting	2.9	5.8	64.7
Carrying a Weapon	5.8	0.0	76.4
Throwing An Object	5.8	41.0	29.4
Throwing Paper	23.5	26.4	2.9
Talking Back to Adult	11.7	32.3	2.9
Yelling in the Halls	38.2	35.2	0.0
Disrupting Teaching by Calling Out	47.0	23.5	2.9
Drug Use	14.7	23.5	2.9
Sports	35.2	35.2	0.0

The Assessment of School Violence completed by Superintendents had a 100% return rate. Bullying was reported “as somewhat of a problem” across all enrollment categories (small, medium and large schools). Racial and ethnic conflict (K-6) concerns were noted by small and medium districts. Six districts reported racial and ethnic conflict (7-12) concern across all enrollment categories.

Larger schools reported greater numbers of incidents but also reported a greater number of students enrolled in program. Six of the nine districts indicated that violence in K-6 schools is a concern. All but one 7-12 school reported that violence was somewhat of a problem in their school.

Educators’ responses seemed to indicate that, overall, they have a clear understanding of the requirements of the SAVE legislation. Responses related to educators’ attitudes toward the SAVE legislation were somewhat mixed. There were also a greater number of neutral responses, which may indicate unwillingness or inability to understand the legislation fully, as well as its impact on educators and school districts. Educators were next queried about behaviors and activities related to the legislation. Responses seemed to indicate that educators believed that SAVE has had little impact on changing inappropriate behavior.

A great deal of time, energy and person power has been spent on areas related to safety plans, safety teams and codes of conduct as per the SAVE legislation. The majority of responders indicated that their codes of conduct had been modified as a result of SAVE. Safety teams and safety plans were also indicated, by the majority of participants, as being updated and in place.

Although a slight majority of participants believed that violence prevention was a priority in their schools, they also stated that their schools did not offer multiple violence prevention programs. The use of research or science-based prevention programs was also questionable.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

The data appears to indicate that there is variation in how violence is defined as well as line staffs understanding, beliefs, attitudes and behaviors regarding the SAVE legislation. Little agreement was found between administrators regarding what constitutes violence. It seems as though the legal and educational communities are operating under two different sets of definitions. Before schools can be expected to legislate consequences appropriately, we need to first bring these two groups together to arrive at some sort of consensus.

An additional concern surrounding interpretation of these behaviors lies in how and when schools chose to report these incidents. Some schools may report all while others report few. The reasons for lack of reporting are as numerous as the interpretations of the behavior under consideration.

Public perception, loss of employment, state takeovers (new guidelines as a result of the No Child Left Behind Act), and pupil transfers are a few of the reasons schools may choose to underreport incidents. There is much talk of penalties and discipline for problem schools but much less in the form of resources and assistance in addressing and correcting the problem.

Others have difficulty in reporting incidents due to ambiguity. Definition agreement appears to be the concern here. Districts are genuinely confused regarding when a fistfight should be reported as an assault. Schools in New York State have a long and strong history of local control. Many of these types of

decisions are left to the discretion of local authority. In order to assist schools in this area, the State Education Department along with the New York State Center for School Safety have developed trainings in the area of Uniform Violent Incident Reporting. These trainings will help districts define the parameters of what is to be reported. Districts are encouraged to regionally develop a set of uniform definitions and responses.

One of the problems with policy is related to problem definition. It appears as though New York State, like many other states, has responded with solutions in the form of policies prior to clearly defining what the actual issue or problem is.

School administrators are most often confronted with behaviors that are categorized as low-level acts of aggression. All but one superintendent in the current study indicated that bullying was a concern in their buildings. Building level administrators (principals and assistant principals) considered bullying to be somewhat or extremely violent. If that is the case, and central office as well as building administration believes this to be so, then why are schools not dedicating more resources to addressing bullying?

In general, educators indicated that they understood the SAVE legislation. This in part may be attributed to the statewide work done by the New York State Center for School Safety. The Center was commissioned to develop and implement the 2-hour training course that was required per the legislation and regulations that followed. The Center along with its regional partners, Coordinated School Health Network, delivered training on the SAVE legislation across the state. Center staff trained colleges and university representatives statewide. Regional trainings as well as school-based trainings were held throughout the year. The training is now also available online through a local community college.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

Due in part to all the media frenzy surrounding school violence we are left wondering if we had indeed gone overboard in defining what is considered violence in our schools and in turn how we will address it. Has the pendulum begun to swing? Are behaviors such as pushing in line grounds for filing an assault charge? Is a peck on the cheek in kindergarten a sexual assault? When we over-report behaviors or include everything in our definition of what is violence, we trivialize true acts of violence.

Although violence prevention was indicated as a priority by many of the participants, violence prevention programs in districts are occurring at minimal levels. It appears as though the idea of violence prevention is important but the actual implementation of strategies is weak.

When activity is occurring it does not appear to center on research based programming. Schools are still grappling with this issue even after years of being asked to focus on things such as the federal Safe and Drug Free Schools Principles of Effectiveness. Although schools are educational institutions, they are not always current in the area of academic research.

Finally, the SAVE legislation is a relatively new initiative in New York State. It may be too early to get an accurate picture of how the legislation is impacting local districts.

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