She says, WP listens

WHEN THE SCHOOL ZONE IS A DANGER ZONE By Judy Mann

Schoolyard killings by enraged students armed with guns are grabbing the headlines, but schools are also the places where other forms of violence are occurring at a growing pace.

The National Education Goals panel reported that in 1996, 15 percent of teachers reported increases in threats and injuries, compared with 10 percent in 1991. The number of students victimized by violent crime increased nearly 25 percent from 1989 to 1995, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics. That translates into about 270,000 more student victims of physical attacks or robberies.

Schools across the country have initiated anti-violence programs, with varying degrees of success. Drug Strategies, a policy research organization widely respected for its work on drug prevention, has, with a grant from the William T. Grant Foundation, completed a two-year study of 84 violence-prevention programs offered in elementary, middle and high schools. The study was designed, carried out and evaluated by 15 nationally recognized violence-prevention experts.

They found that only 10 of the programs merited a grade of A; 49 received grades of C or D.

"There really are skills that children can learn that will help protect them from becoming involved: anger management, learning how to defuse conflict situations, practicing those skills in classrooms in highly interactive teaching," and role playing, says **Mathea Falco**, president of Drug Strategies. "This is not something you can really learn by having someone at a blackboard talking."

Falco cautions that violence prevention is a young field. She hopes that in three to five years, several federally funded studies will have more definitive assessments. But for the time being, this report, "Safe School, Safe Students," is state of the art.

"There are some very clear architectural changes schools can make right away, during the summertime, which can discourage aggressive behavior," Falco says, including identifying and getting rid of dark, unsupervised areas of the school.

Schools need to start by assessing their needs. A way to do this is to have all incidents reported, then make a floor plan of the school and determine where most incidents happen. A school in Georgia found that 60 percent of physical fights occurred around the cafeteria at lunch. The floor plan was changed so students did not enter and exit through the same door, and adults chatted with students rather than simply monitoring them.

Staggering class dismissal times can reduce the potential for fights. "These are all high-energy people surging through small spaces," Falco says. "The point is to think carefully about congestion of bodies.

"The broader environmental point is: Does the school endorse peaceful norms? Does it establish very clearly in everything it does that aggressive, violent responses are not acceptable and won't be rewarded? It is terribly important to make kids feel proud to be part of their school. Put up artwork and display class projects so it doesn't look like a penal institution."

Aggressive behavior and name-calling have to be stopped before they escalate. Part of what good programs do is show kids that when they see a fight about to start, they are abetting it if they don't intervene. They teach children how to intervene without risking their safety.

"When you think about the killings in the last few months, the kids knew who the assailants were. They had said aggressive things repeatedly, and nothing was done. One of the things we need to teach kids is the difference between responsible reporting and ratting. It is not ratting on a classmate if he's saying, I'm going to bring in a gun and kill everybody.' "

Norms that prevailed in earlier generations, particularly for males, need to be changed, Falco says. The idea that people who walk away from fights are sissies should be discouraged, and those who think fighting is cool should understand it can lead to death, not just a bloody nose. "We need to teach children they should walk away from fights," Falco says. "That's the cool thing to do."

"Parents can reinforce this with their children. . . . They can say if a quarrel comes up, don't engage. Just say, Perhaps you have a point,' and walk away.

"Clearly, there is going to be a big push to have violence-prevention programs," Falco says. "It's important to put into practice things we've learned that do work." These include having at least 10 to 20 sessions during the first year of a program and at least five to 10 booster sessions in the succeeding two years. Good teacher training is also critical.

What doesn't work? "Programs that focus exclusively on self-esteem," Falco says. "It turns out that gang members have very high self-esteem. Programs that rely on information only or that are too brief. An informative video once a year is not going to do anything. . . . Simply showing kids horrible, violent scenes doesn't work. It might stimulate their fascination with violence. Kids tend to think bad things won't happen to them. It might scare them, but it's not going to protect them or teach them anything useful."

Denial that a school has a problem with violence is "very great," she says. The tendency is to think it happens only in disadvantaged schools, not in our "nice schools." But the data show that it is happening all over, particularly in the large public high schools. The good news is that we have some idea of what approaches work. More bad news will come, however, if we don't implement them.

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