



NEWS BRIEF

Center for the Prevention of School Violence North Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention

JUST WHAT IS “SCHOOL VIOLENCE”?

Recent years have seen more attention placed upon the “problem” of “school violence” with increasing numbers of efforts directed at the prevention of “school violence.” In most people’s minds, concern about violence in schools is warranted as the occurrence of one violent incident is one too many. But what are people thinking about when they think one “violent incident” is one too many; or, in other words, just what is “school violence”?

One of the greatest challenges with regard to “school violence” may involve actually defining what is meant when the term is used. After all, a “problem well defined is half solved;” one that is not well defined is destined to linger. The most likely picture that comes to mind when the term “school violence” is used is that of a school shooting incident. Media images of such incidents leave little to the imagination and generate the impression that the term “school violence” in some ways equates to the school shooting incident. What is critical to note from the knowledge gained from high profile violent incidents which have occurred in recent years is that school violence involves much more than violence sparked by the firing of a gun. Many incidents which involve gun violence, in fact, are reflective of the culmination of other incidents which lead up to the ones which involve guns.

According to the Center for the Prevention of School Violence in the North Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, a resource center and “think tank” on the issue, “school violence” is “any behavior that violates a school’s educational mission or climate of respect or jeopardizes the intent of the school to be free of aggression against persons or property, drugs, weapons, disruptions, and disorder.” The Center’s definition is recognized by the National Criminal Justice Reference Service (http://www.ncjrs.org/school_safety/school_safety.html) and is based on review of the materials which are increasingly being generated about “school violence.” The definition attempts to capture the idea that school violence takes many forms and that defining school violence only in terms shootings means that the problem of such violence is destined to linger.

Relying heavily on the “violence continuum” created by Jim Bryngelson of CARE (Courtesy and Respect Empower), the Center’s definition takes into account precursor behaviors that have been identified as leading up to more violent behaviors. These behaviors include: put downs; insults; threats; trash talk; bullying; and pushing. As one advances from one type of behavior to the next, the level of violence increases with fighting, sexual harassment, stealing, drinking and drugs, weapons, vandalism, hate crimes, gangs, hostages, rape, murder, and suicide completing the continuum. Even though the order of the behaviors on the continuum may differ depending on one’s viewpoint, the progressively destructive nature of the named behaviors evidences that violent incidents occur at the end of a journey that starts with much milder behavioral concerns.

That is why the Center’s definition focuses on “any behavior that violates a school’s educational mission or climate of respect.” To pursue efforts directed at *preventing* “school violence,” such efforts should address milder behaviors and not be limited to keeping guns out of the schoolhouse. What efforts need to address is the entire range of behaviors. Preventing a school shooting really begins with correcting children who are putting down each other on the elementary school playground. It means setting expectations in a middle school with regard to the inappropriateness of students insulting each other. And it means that bullying in any of the forms it manifests itself at the high school level should not be allowed and that bullying victims, by-standers, and even bullies themselves must be focused upon in prevention efforts.

What all of this really means is that efforts which are directed at school violence prevention must focus on a broader definition and understanding of what constitutes school violence. Trying to prevent school violence only in terms of physical security measures which are designed to keep guns and other weapons out of schools is not enough. Although such measures have their place, to prevent school violence from occurring, a whole range of measures must be employed to address the whole range of behaviors that may violate a school’s educational mission or climate of respect. With such an approach, the “problem” of “school violence” is better defined and, therefore, less likely to linger. The one violent incident that constitutes the “one too many” has a better chance of being prevented, and the problem of school violence is more likely to be solved.