

LAW ENFORCEMENT MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE

INCREASED VIOLENCE IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM
FROM 1970 TO 1993

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ABSTRACT OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

This research paper discusses the increase of violence in the public school system between 1970 and 1993. Several causes are reviewed including the non-traditional family and lack of parental involvement in the school, coverage of violent topics by the mass media, and economic disadvantage.

The underlying themes of the paper are that increased violence is the result of erosion of traditional school authority sources, that handguns are appearing more frequently on campus, and that court changes and the effects of juvenile arrest affect treatment of the problem. The paper also discusses metal detectors as a symptomatic approach to violence and the introduction of both traditional police and in-house police into the school system.

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INTRODUCTION

Increased violence on public school campuses has increased dramatically over the last two decades. The offenses of simple assault, robbery, and theft of yesteryear pale in comparison to the violent offenses of murder, aggravated assault, and assault with a deadly weapon on the campuses of today. Where once students settled differences with fistfights after school, they now, at times, wage war with knives and guns during the schoolday. Where once students had to answer to parents for infractions of school rules, the parents are not now notified if the student is a legal adult because of privacy issues.

Although most school still take a reactive approach to violence on campus, a movement is afoot to solve the problem with advance planning and education. School leaders taking a proactive stance believe that school safety is a shared responsibility between staff and students, and part of the solution is to eliminate opportunities for violence to occur. They believe that increased violence in today's schools are a reflection of society as a whole. Alfred Dean, Director of Security in the Philadelphia Public School System, has taken such a stance with his 190,000 member student body and security staff of 1200:

"A school is a microcosm of the community in which it is located, so we must take a systemic, holistic approach to student violence...We recognize that the inundation of

weapons in schools is a manifestation of a more serious problem in the community or home." (Rotondo 1993, 40-48).

The school administration often abdicates its traditional role of supervision for fear of infringing on students' legal rights and the risk of litigation. University of Miami English professor Robert Hosmon even filed a petition in circuit court asking that the Dade County, Florida, "violence-ridden school system be declared a public nuisance." (Lentz 1980, 175).

The objective of public schools before 1970 was to prepare students for a career by teaching a range of basic subject matter including history, mathematics, and English. Dress codes were strictly enforced and administrative censure of speech and action were not questioned. Discipline standards in school were deeply affected by the 1969 Supreme Court decision which said that "it can hardly be argued that either students or teachers shed their Constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate" which resulted in the Civil Liberties Union passing out students' rights on printed cards. (Lentz 1980, 41-42). Today's curriculum emphasizes contemporary social values and personal development. Dress codes include sanctions against wearing gang related clothing and headbands. Some teachers have stopped giving any take-home homework as a matter of policy.

COURT CHANGES

The greatest changes in schools have been the result of court intervention. The major Supreme Court case that has affected school administration is 419 U.S. 565, 95 S.Ct 729, 42 L.Ed.2d 725, 1975, Goss V. Lopez. In this case several Ohio public school students were suspended for misconduct for up to ten days without a hearing. "The Court held that the due process clause of the 14th Amendment requires that public school students be informed of the charges against them and be given a simple opportunity to present their version of the incident before being suspended, or as shortly thereafter as practicable." (Gottfredson 1985, 185-6). In minor infractions a counseling session in which a student is allowed to offer an explanation, defense, or denial of the infraction is sufficient to satisfy the requirement of the court.

A month after Goss was decided, Wood v. Strickland, 420 U.S. 308, ruled that school officials are "subject to suit and held financially liable for damages were they deliberately to deprive a student of his clearly established Constitutional rights" (Rubel 1980, 74). This ruling put fear in the hearts of school administrators who questioned whether the risk of financial injury outweighed efforts to control discipline. Suddenly schools were faced with placing sanctions on children with adult rights.

An effort was made in 1980, by California Attorney General Duke Dukmejein to sue the Los Angeles City School

District for declaratory relief for not providing a safe environment for students. The suit failed, but the California Constitution was changed in 1982, to guarantee a safe, secure, and peaceful campus for students in Article I, Section 28(c). The measure did not specify how this was to be accomplished and litigation for failure to provide such an environment has not arisen.

Several education advocate groups have joined together and filed a friend-of-the-court brief in the case of Edwards v. U.S. (93-10058). The defendant was convicted of possessing a gun within 1000 feet of school grounds under federal law P.L. 101-647, the 1990 Gun-Free School Zones Act. The defendant contends that the federal government cannot enforce this law because there is not a close connection between guns and interstate commerce. So far there have been only five federal convictions and only one appeal. However, the Gun-Free School Zones Act was ruled unconstitutional by the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals in New Orleans on September 15, 1993. (Tom Roberts, "Using Federal Statutes to Combat Local Violent Crime", Texas Police Journal, November 1993, Vol. 41, No. 10, 4). Most other offenses involving guns on campus are being prosecuted using state law. Dennis Henigan, attorney with the Center to Prevent Handgun Violence, states that violence in schools is a national problem requiring a national response, and that the government is not committed to enforcing the federal law.

Currently a law is pending in Congress to prohibit anyone under 18 from possessing a handgun under most circumstances. Colorado has passed similar legislation which allows jail time for minors, but the Colorado law is being challenged as being unconstitutional since possessing a handgun is not illegal per se for adults. Florida is developing a similar law, but is hampered by the fact that it is legal to carry a gun in that state if not concealed. Many Florida inner-city gangs are said to be wearing a gun displayed in a holster. ("Armed Children", Fort Worth Star-Telegram, 23 October 1993, Sec. A, 32).

NON-TRADITIONAL FAMILIES

The family unit has traditionally been the training ground for social values including restraint of violence and how to channel anger in constructive ways. Many are of the opinion that rebellion is rampant among the student population; some parents attempt to wash their hands of the problems created by violence-prone teens and consider parental involvement in school affairs unnecessary. "The frustration of a developing identity is a major task for adolescents and one which is often not without strained relationships with those whose support they need most," according to Robert D. Hilliard in "Re-engaging the Family and the Community in the Education on Young Adolescents". (Hilliard 1992, 7-11). School is the logical second choice for behavior training.

Lack of parental involvement is ranked as the strongest contributor to increased school violence by school leaders, surpassing social class, racial and ethnic tension, gangs, alcohol and drugs, and student transiency. (Booth 1993, 16-22). Lack of involvement can be due to several causes including divorce, parental prison terms, temporary job relocations, or parents who are absent due to long work hours. The non-traditional family is more common in 1993 than in 1970. In a recent editorial Paul Greenberg states:

"In many ways our schools have become the receiver-in-bankruptcy for the American family. And the school may be so busy trying to care for children, and meet their basic physical or psychological needs, that there is precious little time left to educate them". (Paul Greenberg, "Clintons Owe No Excuses in School Choice", Fort Worth Star-Telegram, 28 Jan 1993, NE Sec. A, 29).

Divorce and children born out of marriage have become commonplace. The number of teenage mothers has risen, so schools have accommodated by creating special programs such as Keep Exceptional Youth in School (KEYS) where mother and baby can both attend school. Working parents have increased the likelihood of children coming home to an unsupervised house.

Poverty and lack of parental supervision are both factors which can have a bearing on a student's propensity for violence. Although the economic status of the students' family and neighborhood are often cited as justification for violence both in school and out, there are innumerable examples of persons who have suffered the same trials during childhood and risen to great political and financial heights.

If poverty itself was critical, we would see rampant violence in all third world countries instead of select locations. The poverty level for American hispanic families exceeds that of American black families, yet the crime victimization for blacks is higher than hispanics. The combination of poverty plus alienation generates behavior (Friedlander 1993, 11-14).

Poverty sets up the scene by causing parental absences for work, causing family disturbances related to financial shortages, and disillusionment of one's plight compared to what the "victim" sees as the financial stability of society as a whole. Violence and handgun possession on campus are the shortcuts to impromptu social status among peers rather than wealth and a panacea to feelings of alienation.

Lack of parental supervision can enlarge the scope of school violence. Single-mother households and absentee fathers create a need for a male authority figure. When a youth leader, church leader, or teacher does not fill that role, both male and female students seek leadership in gangs.

SECURITY ON CAMPUS

The larger campuses of today are more susceptible to invasion of non-students, suspended students, and ex-students simply because of size. Since a campus often comprises several buildings, it is more difficult to exclude illicit entry during the class day. Fort Worth Police Liaison Officer D.D. Collins noted ironically that "When they're in school,

sometimes they don't want to behave, but when you suspend them, you can't keep them out of school. I ask them, 'Explain that to me,'...They have nothing else to do." (Indira A.R. Lakshamanan, "Policing the Schools", Fort Worth Star-Telegram, 5 April 1993, Section D, 1-5).

Underreporting of campus offenses is a major issue. School administrators are reluctant to make public the extent of the problem and often consider offenses to be an in-house problem. Principals must decide if the act of setting a wastebasket on fire is a juvenile prank or a criminal arson offense. Principals must decide if a fistfight on school grounds is a discipline problem or a criminal assault. The natural inclination by principals as managers of the school is to handle problems at the lowest level and least public exposure possible. It is estimated in many quarters that less than one in fifty reportable offenses are even brought to the attention of the school staff and even fewer to the attention of police.

School officials must also be aware that the problem of school violence is not restricted to someone else's campus. In a survey of school leaders and teachers in The Executive Educator, the leaders were aware of violence on a national level, but did not generally perceive their own schools as having a serious problem. "Fifty-three percent of school leaders rate national news media coverage of school violence as 'overblown'" (Booth 1993, 16-22). The response of

teachers was vastly different. A conclusion could be made that teachers are on the "front line" and more aware of the daily dangers. Gary D. and Denise C. Gottfredson compiled a list of traits that characterize disorderly schools.

- a. teachers with primitive attitudes;
 - b. rules that are not perceived as fair and clear and are not firmly enforced;
 - c. ambiguous responses to student behavior;
 - d. disagreement among teachers and administrators about the rules and appropriate response to misbehavior;
 - e. students with low levels of belief in conventional social rules; and
 - f. lack of resources needed for teaching.
- (Gottfredson 1985, 182).

Letter E is where on-site full-time police officers could make a difference. Since modern large schools take on the environment of a small community, the authoritarian role of law enforcement would add realism to student life. A key to regaining authority from the students is to realize that students are not yet adults intellectually and emotionally. School should be the preparation for adulthood.

An episode that left Fort Worth Police officers speechless occurred April 11, 1993 at William James Middle School. The shooting occurred about 150 feet from the East Division Police Substation across the street. School officials reported to the 911 dispatcher that a teacher had fallen rather than the actual fact that the teacher had been shot at by a student in a crowded classroom. "Principal George Thompson instructed his secretary to call 911, but to report only that the teacher had fallen down some stairs."

Thompson then made a call several minutes later to the district security office to report that a gun had been "discharged" in the classroom. The head of the security office, Billy Whitworth, denied that his office was informed about a shooting, but only that there was a student on campus with a gun. This time lapse allowed the student to walk off the campus still carrying the .380-caliber semi-automatic handgun. The student, in fact, was not arrested for several hours in another part of the City. The principal's explanation was that the teacher's injuries from a fall when she jumped out of the classroom were his top priority and

"the boy was gone. We knew who he was. I didn't think we would have trouble catching him...It's kind of district protocol...to report things like this to the district, and let the district do the dispatching (to 911)...In emergencies, we always notify them and let them make the decision on what to do." (Douglas Jackson Jr., "Incomplete: 911 Call Left Out School Shooting", Fort Worth Star-Telegram, 16 Feb 1993, 1).

Many school administrators are formalizing their in-house offense reporting systems and training their staff on how to properly process offense reports. Peter D. Blauvelt is one of the leading proponents of school policing. His book, Effective Strategies for School Security, is a prescription for starting a school policing program with forms and recommendations for implementation ranging from prevention strategy to developing information sources within the school. One section is devoted to search and seizure of persons, lockers, and vehicles. Blauvelt states that the school's

primary objective is its legal duty to provide safety and welfare of all students and staff, not to obtain evidence. (Blauvelt 1981, 63). While the former concept is in sympathy with municipal law enforcement, the idea that evidence is not a high priority objective causes anguish among the detectives who try to file cases.

There are a myriad of different forms used by different schools, but each basically follows the same format.

"To be effective, crime prevention programs must be based on the knowledge of (1) how many crimes are actually occurring, (2) what types of crime are occurring, (3) when or at what times they are occurring, (4) where they are occurring or occurring most frequently, and (5) who the perpetrators are." (Quarles 1989, 14).

The Charleston County School District has employed a computerized Behavior Tracking System (BTS) which tracks every positive and negative referral to the office and generates letters to parents concerning their child's behavior. The BTS targets consistency in rule enforcement. After using BTS the suspension and disciplinary referral rates declined dramatically. This would indicate that neither school administration nor students were quite sure of the "going rate" of sanctions previously. Prior to BTS the punishment for a given infraction varied from one administrator to another. With BTS in place an informal schedule of infractions and their related punishments was established. (Gottfredson 1993, 183).

INFLUENCE OF MASS MEDIA

The mass media has redefined what socially acceptable behavior is. Violence is commonplace in both commercial television and cable programs while movies are becoming increasingly brutal. Thomas E. Radecki, a psychiatrist who chairs the National Coalition on Television Violence, states that children are more likely to mimic violent behaviors and be more accepting of violence they observe on television. (Rohr 1990, 159). Particularly harmful is the message that the "good guy" wins through violence. (Rohr 1990, 162). Students can easily obtain access to theaters showing these films because ticket sellers rarely question the attendee's age and suitability of the film. As a result, increasingly violent behaviors are being introduced on campus.

OPINIONS ON SOURCE OF CAMPUS VIOLENCE

Professionals in dealing with youth violence agree that there are many causes of increased violence in the schools. What causes students to carry handguns, attack other students, and get into other trouble varies from situation to situation. Sgt. Calvin Wallace of the Fort Worth Police Department cites breakdown of the family, single parent homes, gangs and TV and movie violence as some of the main causes of youth and teen violence. Shirley Duncan, program director at Brooks House Teen Crisis Center in Bedford, Texas, adds that "you can't

have a blanket reason, but you can have some common denominators ...includ(ing) family problems, low self-esteem, peer pressure, and a lack of structured activities". (Ingrid Watson, "Crossing the Line: Students Face Violence on Streets and in Schools", Fort Worth Star-Telegram, 23 Feb 1993, Sec. G, 8).

There is little disagreement that the propensity for violence in the public schools has its roots deep in childhood and is nurtured during the student's upbringing by a combination of environmental factors. The most effective efforts at stemming the rising tide of violence concentrate on eliminating these external, long-term risk factors. Programs that develop student self-esteem and promote scholarship include extra tutoring, parenting classes for parents who fail to maintain discipline, family counseling, and character-building youth organizations such as Scouting, YMCA after school workshops, and D.A.R.E. The environment of violence, itself, is disruptive to the balance of students who are not directly involved.

"There is a close relationship between academic performance and level of violence in student's lives. These can only be understood over extended periods of time...Schools may not have the power to cure violence trauma in students. But stable routines, clear boundaries of acceptable behavior, and justified trust in adult presence and authority can help students afraid of violence to keep their anxiety and panic under control and can help students look upon school as safe and positive." (Friedlander 1993, 11-14).

IN-HOUSE SCHOOL POLICE DEPARTMENTS

One suggestion to school administrators is to create their own police department. School administrators see this as a way of reclaiming power and authority to enforce discipline by piggybacking on the power and authority of police officers. Forty-six school districts statewide in Texas have actually done this including the cities of San Antonio and Houston. Opponents to in-house police departments urge caution in creating an oppressive environment for education and question whether campus police should be armed to avoid on-campus shootouts. Already in San Antonio school police have had to draw down on students. (Gillman 1993, 12).

The bill to give school police full jurisdiction anywhere within the school district boundaries was passed in spite of opposition by the Texas Police Chiefs Association. The American Civil Liberties Union calls it wasted duplication. Additional problems arise when principals want lockers searched because the line between police and educator has blurred. (Gillman 1993, 12). As a school administrator, a principal is free to make administrative searches of lockers and students based on probable cause without a warrant in the course of ensuring the safety and welfare of the student body. A peace officer requires a warrant based on probable cause to make the search. When a principal orders his school police officer to make a search of a student locker for weapons, the

principal has effectively become an agent for the State and must have a warrant. While in-house policing is a useful tool, it often changes the legal status and responsibilities of school administrators.

SCHOOL LIAISON OFFICERS

Many police departments have created school liaison officers as a means of restoring peace to the public schools. The Fort Worth Police Department began its school liaison program twenty years ago. Fort Worth schools are assigned fully certified and experienced police officers to patrol the schools full-time and function as truant officers, law enforcers, security guards, and counselors. Today there are twelve teams of police officers and school administrators employed by the Fort Worth Independent School District to patrol its 106 campuses and watch over 70,000 students.

Fort Worth Police Officer Larry Fletcher, in his fifteenth year as a school liaison officer, summarized the students' attitude by saying, "These kids believe nothing is going to happen to them. I don't think they realize that when you're shot, you're dead. They see people shot in one movie and then they see them get up for the next movie." (Indira A.R. Lakshmanan, "Policing the Schools", Fort Worth Star-Telegram, 5 April 1993, Sec. D, 1-5).

EFFECT OF JUVENILE ARREST

Arrest has lost its stigma. When juvenile offenders are re-integrated immediately back into the school, the message is sent to other students that there is no tangible sanction. Being arrested lost much of its deterrent effect when juvenile offenders started receiving probated sentences. Many of these juvenile offenders "considered incorrigible in 1973 became emotionally disturbed in 1974" (Reaves and Austin 1990, 207). Thus began a revolving door of juvenile offenders from the juvenile court, through a month or so of mental detention, and back into the public school system with relatively little behavior change. Today's challenge is to recognize that offenses committed by youth require effective action, whether by detention or counseling, to assure that behavior is positively changed before reintroducing them into the public school system.

Administrators are becoming more reluctant to punish, suspend, and expel students because of legal liability. If the student is 18 or older, the student has the right to prevent the school from conferring with his parents about suspension, truancy, absenteeism, and any disciplinary measures. Administrators may withhold any information deemed confidential from the parents (Lentz 1980, 42). A suspension can simply mean a vacation from school to go to an unsupervised home and watch television or just "hang out". This appears to the student as a reward for misbehavior and a

motivation to better-disciplined students to consider misbehavior.

Although environmental factors play a role in school violence, there is a trend toward overemphasizing the effects of environment on student behavior. There has been an effort to claim that students commit offenses because they have not been taught differently, because their behavior reflects the surrounding community, or because of some deprivation of childhood. Daniel L. Duke has coined the term "politics of apology" to describe attempts to shift the blame or vindicate factors of juvenile crime from one reason to another. This allows the student to assume less responsibility for his actions in school. Duke refers to this as "depersonalization of blame" and states that it is "politically expedient in the short run, but not always in best interests of student, school or community." (Duke 1980, 45). An example is a comment by Carey Cockerell, director of juvenile services at the Lynn W. Ross Juvenile Center in Fort Worth, " Kids are responsible for their decisions, but at the same time they're a mirror of society, and what they see society doing is that violence is acceptable." (Patricia Rodriguez and Mary Gay Johnson, "Coming of Rage", Fort Worth Star-Telegram, 4 April 1993, Sec. G, 6).

The fact remains that juvenile justice is civil law. Whereas up until the end of the last century children and adults were essentially punished under the same laws, what we

have today is a hybrid justice system that is neither a social welfare agency nor criminal courts (Reaves and Austin 1990, 197) .

HANDGUNS APPEARING ON CAMPUS

Availability

Students can easily obtain handguns. The students are able to furtively borrow the weapons from home, or have an older student obtain low cost firepower from a pawn shop. Many of the guns on campus are undoubtedly the product of a successful residential burglary. Overall the number of guns per capita in the United States has more than tripled in the last twenty years, many of which are accessible to students.

Most students would not turn in a fellow student who brought a handgun to school because of peer pressure and fear of retaliation according to 20 students involved in the advisory board of the Star-Telegram writing the teenage news section ("Viewpoint:Reducing Violence", Fort Worth Star-Telegram, Section G, 9) .

Reverend Jesse Jackson placed part of the responsibility on students themselves for removing guns from their schools. He asserts that reporting a gun carrying student to authorities is a matter of self-defense rather than "snitching", and that to remain silent about a student carrying a gun is to become his accomplice. Although he allows that reporting a gun can be done anonymously, "you may

have to go a step further and just outright challenge the person who does it." When reporter Lynn Minton retorted that the challenger could get killed, Reverend Jackson replied, "Not necessarily. But it does take courage and strength to fight for justice and change." (Lynn Minton, "Jesse Jackson: 'You can get rid of guns in your school-if you want to'", Parade, 19 December 1993, 8).

Pierre Thomas reported that the Justice Department's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention concluded that the problem is not in keeping guns out of the hands of young people, but rather in convincing them that a handgun is not essential to survival in their neighborhood. In a Justice Department study, student respondents stated that the overwhelming reason for carrying a handgun was for self-defense. (Pierre Thomas, "Guns Part of Urban Childhood, Study Says", Fort Worth Star-Telegram, 13 December 1993, Section A, 14).

A survey of 2508 students in 96 middle and high schools, including rural, intercity, and suburban, by LH Research for Harvard University School of Public Health reported the following:

- 60% of students in grades 6-12 said they can get a gun quickly if they wanted.
- 39% know someone killed or wounded by gunfire.
- 15% carried a handgun in the last 30 days.
- 4% had carried a handgun to school during the past academic year. ("Looking for Ways to Stem the Youth Violence Tide", The Executive Educator, Vol. 15, No. 9, September 1993).

This is an admittedly small sampling of students and the veracity of the students could be questioned, but fact remains that a problem exists concerning violence and handguns among students.

Metal Detectors

Measures to detect handguns coming into school buildings now routinely include metal detectors in a quarter of American urban school districts. In Dallas, the machines were initially used on an occasional or rotating basis. After recent gun related murders on school property in Dallas, the metal detectors have come into everyday usage.

Fort Worth school officials started considering metal detectors in early February 1993 after a 14 year-old male, upset at his suspension, opened fire on a substitute teacher outside a portable classroom building. (Terry Lee Jones, "Fort Worth Gunplay Leads Area Schools to Examine Security", Fort Worth Star-Telegram, 16 Feb 1993, 1). A week later Fort Worth school board President Gary Manny offered to make metal detectors available to those schools in the system that are willing to implement them, but added, "I think for many of us, it's almost an admission that we have lost the battle and we have no other way to control the situation." ("School Security Tightens", Fort Worth Star-Telegram, 23 Feb 1993, Section G, 9). Many other local schools are using or acquiring two-way portable radios for staff communications between main buildings and portable buildings for security.

An increase in carrying handguns on school campus is borne out by statistics. During the first semester of the 1992-1993 school year, 54 of the 102 weapons seized in the Dallas school system were handguns. In the 1992-1993 school year, Fort Worth Independent School District held 69 discipline hearings involving guns. BB guns and pellet guns were not considered handguns for these figures ("Weapons in Schools", Fort Worth Star-Telegram, 23 Feb 1993, Sec. G, 8). The following measures and seizures were taken by Tarrant County school districts between September 1992 and March 1993 to decrease incidents of violence ("What Tarrant School Districts are Doing About Weapons", Fort Worth Star-Telegram, 5 April 1993, Sec. D, 5):

<u>District</u>	<u>Guns seized (Weapons)</u>	<u>Measures taken</u>
Arlington	9/(33)	Walk-through metal detectors, Metal-sniffing dogs, considering requiring mesh book bags.
Azle	1	Metal-sniffing dogs, parking lot security officers.
Birdville	5	Increased in-service training for teachers on violence, one full-time police officer, security guards.
Castleberry	2	Random searches and contraband sniffing dogs.
Crowley	2	Random searches and contraband sniffing dogs.
Eagle Mountain/ Saginaw	0/(7)	Closed campus with single gate entry and exit, periodic contraband sniffing dogs.
Everman	1	Gun sniffing dogs
Fort Worth	69/(289)	Uniformed police on campus, gun sniffing dogs, handheld and walkthrough metal detectors, surveillance cameras.

Grapevine/ Colleyville	1	Gun sniffing dogs, dress code forbidding gang clothing, two full-time police officers, parking lot security guards.
Hurst/Euless/ Bedford	(4)	Security Guards on parking lot, metal sniffing dogs, full-time officers on campus.
Keller	(10)	Trained dogs and cameras on busses, parking lot security guard.
Kennedale	0	---
Lake Worth	0/(1)	Metal sniffing dogs.
Mansfield	(16)	---
Northwest	0	Metal sniffing dogs, security guard.
White Settlement	1	Metal sniffing dogs.

EROSION OF AUTHORITY

The basic problem as this writer interprets the research is that students in the public school find a vacuum of authority and power in place of the firm guidelines and discipline which were in place before 1970. The advent of the students' rights movement and its effort to grant full citizenship to students has resulted in schools abdicating their responsibility to keep order. As authority erodes, student continue to push the envelope of what is acceptable behavior on campus which leads us to the subject of weapons on school grounds.

Just as a geo-political vacuum of authority leads to fracture groups vying for power, we see both individuals and gangs attempting to fill the authority vacuum at school. Without the social and management skills to do this, they must rely on physical force and weapons. After several shootings in and around our Dallas-Fort Worth schools, we have resorted

to metal detectors to keep weapons out of the schools. This short range solution is as effective as the equipment used and the schedule of usage. It does not address the vacuum of authority issue, nor can it be effective once the student is inside the building due to the ingenuity of our misguided youth.

Experimentation in alternative classrooms in the last two decades have lead to open classes, loosely structured curriculum, more freedom to roam the halls, and student-centered classrooms. The departure from the traditional teacher-centered approach to education has transferred responsibility to the individual student for his own education. It has decimated the "rituals" of teacher-centered classrooms in which order was based on the firm set of rules invoked by the instructor and was the basis of his/her power. In that case every student was expected to know what was expected, and more importantly, students were expected to deliver on their responsibilities. Having the teacher draw boundaries of acceptable behavior gave students a sense of continuity. (Noblit 1993, 23-28).

Many in Fort Worth feel that we are on the right track with the school liaison program. The full-time school liaison officers work as part of the authority structure of the school and coordinate with teaching and administrative staff. As a commissioned peace officer, they not only have perceived power to enforce order, but also real authority to enforce the law.

Their dual goal is not only to respond to exigencies, but also to get to know members of the student body who are looking for an authority figure. They establish information sources which can identify students carrying handguns to school, where handguns are likely to be hidden on campus, and get advance notice of impending violence by picking up on rumors of individual feuds and gang disruptions that can result in handguns showing up on campus.

Some students carry handguns on campus for personal protection. These are the weapons we will probably not see until it is too late. The student that packs the weapon will probably not introduce it until he is frightened and cornered which is, of course, a poor time to make a rational decision on its usage. An example is the Dallas area high school student who was carrying a handgun in his backpack for protection in October 1993. The backpack was dropped on the floor for a student picture; the gun accidentally discharged killing the very student who brought it for protection. If authority and security is restored to the campus, and if students perceive that their environment is once again safe, this aspect of the handgun on campus problem should dissipate.

The firearms that the school administration are likely to see are the ones brought for "show and tell" and those brought with the intent of committing an offense. The "show and tell" bearer will be a student or ex-student using the ownership of the gun to enhance his own importance. He will want it to be

known by the other students that he is packing or there is no point to the "show and tell".

The objective is not to eliminate violence on campus, but to decrease it to an acceptable level.

"The school acting alone probably will have difficulty ameliorating the problem of violence, but the school is the crucial agent. Other agencies and institutions have neither the opportunity nor the focus and concentration of youth that the school has." (Goldstein 1984, 202).

Violence is a face-saving way in which students react in response to the humiliations of having their failures made obvious to themselves and others. (Goldstein 1984, 202).

In summary, there are four courses of action before us. We can maintain the status quo to determine if what we are seeing are isolated incidents of violence with sensationalistic news coverage rather than an increase of violence in every school. Another course is to take the technical path of using covert surveillance cameras on campus, metal detectors at every door, and security guards with metal sniffing dogs, virtually turning schools into prisons. A third alternative is to create a new police force with no other responsibility but to safeguard the school "community" with its added expense and liability due to the blur between discipline and law enforcement. The fourth path is a partnership between the school and the existing law enforcement community in the form of school liaison officers. This path is already in force in much of the nation with after police established a stronghold with the D.A.R.E. program and expanded to full-time school

liaison officers.

Measurement of programs to decrease school violence is important also. First on the measurement scale is the number of reported offenses after implementation, as opposed to before. Reliably due to underreporting and unconscious bias in reporting can affect this measure. Since there is a strong correlation between a student's scholastic success and a lower likelihood of committing violent acts, a comparison of pre- and post- dropout rates and academics would indicate effectiveness of the program. It would be of use to compare increase or decrease in surrounding neighborhood crime to see if the violence is just being displaced geographically. After it has been determined that the campus really is safer, the most important measurement will be the decrease in student and teacher perceptions of danger and fear.

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