An Overview of Anti-Violence School Reform in the State of New York.

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Abstract

The image of American schools as violent institutions was fed by a series of horrific shooting incidents that occurred at the end of the 1990. Despite the fact that such events have been shown to be atypical, anti-violence school reform movements were implemented in many schools in the United States. Through a meta-analysis of existing documents and studies, this paper presents a closer look at Project S.A.V.E., one such reform initiated in New York. Although its intent is admirable, research indicates this legislation has not been effective.

Keywords:

INTRODUCTION

This paper provides an overview of Safe Schools Against Violence in Education (Project SAVE), school anti-violence legislation enacted in the state of New York. However, in order to understand how such legislation came to be enacted and to examine its efficacy, it is necessary to first understand the nature of the American public school system and the nature of school reform in America. In the sections that follow, background information on these elements, as well as the historical context in which Project SAVE was passed will be provided. The next section will examine some of the major tenets of this anti-violence legislation. The paper will close with a discussion of the issues surrounding the overall effectiveness of Project SAVE to date.

AMERICAN SCHOOL REFORM

School reform in the United States has long been an ongoing topic of concern for educational researchers. Despite numerous attempts at reforming schools so that they provide equal access for all, and despite numerous studies investigating the nature of schools and the process of reforming them (Fullan, 1991; Jessiman, 2001; Sarason, 1996; Sizer, 1997; Tyack & Cuban, 1995), understanding how to go about the engenderment of meaningful, lasting school change has remained elusive. The relatively recent passage of the federal No Child Left Behind Act (2002), bears witness to the ongoing inequities in the American educational system. The gap in achievement between white, middle-class students, and the students of color and low-income students who make up the majority demographic in inner-city urban schools continues to exist.

American urban schools present a special challenge to reform agents. They are likely to have fewer resources, more under-performing students, and a larger percentage of inexperienced teachers (Au, 1998) than their suburban counterparts. The National Center for Children Exposed to Violence reports that serious school violence occurs most often in urban schools, and notes further that the percentage of violence found in schools tends to reflect the rates found in the general population within the community.

One well-known fact regarding change and reform in American public schools is the primary role the classroom teacher plays in implementing change. Most researchers agree that in order for meaningful change to occur, the teacher's role must be considered (Allington, 2002; Darling-Hammond, 1999; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Enderlin-Lampe, 2002; Heller, 2004). Teachers

orchestrate classroom change; they are the individuals who have direct contact with students, the clients of the educational system.

THE AMERICAN PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM

The central role of the American teacher in all aspects of classroom change exists in part because there is no centralized office which governs what is taught or how it is taught in American schools. School governance within each of the 50 states is headed by its own state department of education, which is the administrative center for all schools in that state. Overarching educational policies and academic standards for all schools in the state are promulgated by the state department of education. The next administrative level is the local school district, composed of a collection of elementary, middle and secondary schools within a given geographic area. Each district is headed by a superintendent and a local board of education.

In the state of New York, districts are classified into six types. These are based on the geographical, political, and employment characteristics of the counties in which they reside. These six types are New York City Public Schools, large city districts, other city districts, suburban districts, and rural districts. In New York state's largest region, the city of New York, there are 33 different school districts, each overseeing some 40 to 50 schools. In contrast, in some rural areas, an entire school district might be comprised of one elementary, one middle, and one secondary school building. All told, in the state of New York, there are roughly 700 school districts, with no two alike. Each is composed of differing numbers and kinds of school buildings, with disparate socio-cultural, economic, and demographic characteristics.

The autonomy entrusted to individual state departments of education, and ultimately to individual school districts and school buildings is an indication of how highly valued independence is within American culture. In the case of school violence, as with all other pressing educational issues, individual states have developed their own policies that reflect the peculiarities of their individual situations. Such independence can permit innovation and flexibility, as each school or school district likely knows its own situation better than a governing entity at the state or national level. However, it can also prevent a uniform approach to problem solving within the system, and this appears to have been the case with Project SAVE.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF PROJECT SAVE

The seeds of the Project SAVE legislation began to be sown as a result of the 1999 shootings at Colombine. This shocking event precipitated a national conversation in the media about the horrors of school violence. A series of highly publicized, spectacular shooting incidents in several different middle-class, suburban American public schools across the country, fed a growing belief that American Schools were dangerously out of control. Despite the idiosyncratic nature of these highly publicized events, a wave of shock and fear spread across the United States. Because the cause of these incidents was unknown, it seemed to the general public that this kind of unpredictable catastrophe could strike anywhere and at any time, and American public school officials began questioning how best to respond to this threat of seemingly imminent violence.

Percentage of Principals Reporting Which Discipline Issues Were Moderate or Serious Issues in Their Schools, 1990-91 and 1996-97		
Discipline Issue	1990-91 %	1996-97 %
Student tardiness	34	40
Student absenteeism/class cutting	25	25
Physical conflicts among students	23	21
Student tobacco use	13	14
Verbal abuse of teachers	11	12
Student drug use	6	9
Vandalism of school property	12	8
Student alcohol use	10	7
Robbery or theft of items over #10	7	5
Gangs	*	5
Trespassing	7	4
Racial tensions	5	3
Student possession of weapons	3	2
Physical abuse of teachers	1	2
Sale of drugs on school grounds	1	2
Source: Violence and Discipline Problems in U.S. Public Schools: 1996-1997 (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, NCES 98-030, 1998).		
* Item was not included in 1991 survey		
(Table taken from Skiba and Peterson, 1999, p. 3)		

Table 1. Percentage of Principals Reporting Which Discipline Issues Were Moderate or Serious Issues in Their Schools, 1990-91 and 1996-97.

However, school administrators did not appear to share the general public's perception that fatal shootings and bombings were about to erupt in school buildings across the country. For example, Skiba and Peterson (1999) analyzed data from the National Center for Education Statistics (1998) regarding a nationally representative survey of school principals and disciplinarians. Researchers asked informants to state the problems they considered to be most serious in their schools. Respondents cited problems such as tardiness (40%) or absenteeism (25%) most frequently. They cited incidents more commonly considered critical to school safety only infrequently as moderate

problems: drug use was cited as a moderate problem by 9% of respondents, gangs by 5%, and possession of weapons by 2% of the individuals who responded to this survey. Further, Skiba and Peterson report that these percentages had not increased compared to a similar survey taken five years earlier in 1990-91, indicating that the apparent deterioration of disciplinary conditions in American schools perceived by the public at large was not based in reality. Their results are listed in Table I.

PROJECT SAVE

Despite the lack of factual evidence that anti-violence legislation was a necessity, on July 24, 2000, the state of New York instituted Project SAVE. This legislation was an effort to institute school safety reform in every school, from kindergarten to grade 12, throughout the state.

According to the New York State Center for School Safety, The Save Project provides for numerous changes in New York State Schools. The major components include 1) district-wide and building-level emergency response plans, 2) codes of conduct, 3) Teacher authority/principal authority, 4) School violence prevention training, and 5) Uniform Violent Incident reporting. The sections that follow will provide basic information for each of these elements.

DISTRICT-WIDE AND BUILDING-LEVEL EMERGENCY RESPONSE PLANS

Project Save requires each of the 700+ school districts in the state of New York to develop its own comprehensive safety plan. The plan must include policies and procedures for responding to threats, responding to acts of violence, appropriate prevention and intervention strategies for dealing with violence, procedures for contacting law enforcement officers as well as parents and/or guardians, annual school safety training for staff and students, and a protocol for responding to bomb threats, hostage taking, intruders and kidnappers.

Additionally, each school building within a district must create a building-level emergency response plan that lays out among other things, policies and procedures for safe evacuations, drills and exercises to test components of the emergency-response plan they develop, as well as policies and procedures for securing and restricting access to crime scenes. This means that literally thousands of individual schools in the state are required to construct their own individual building safety plans. Policy requires that that students and staff undergo an annual school safety training program to review their plans, but the actual amount of time devoted to training and the substance of the training is not specified by law.

CODES OF CONDUCT

Project SAVE requires each school to adopt a code of conduct for the maintenance of order on school grounds. These codes apply to teachers, students, and other school personnel, as well as to visitors to the school. Schools must develop specific regulations regarding such elements as appropriate dress and language, security issues, removal of students from the classroom, disciplinary procedures for violators, policies and procedures for detention, suspension, removal of disruptive students, and minimum suspension periods for students who are repeatedly substantially disruptive as well as those that commit violent acts. In defining disruptive and violent students both, Project SAVE begins by offering tautological explanations. Disruptive students, for example, are defined as those who are "substantially disruptive of the educational process or interferes with the teacher's authority over the classroom" (New York State Center for School Safety, p. 2). The definition for violent students begins with the description of those who "commit an act of violence on a teacher or other school district employee, or fellow student" (New York State Center for School Safety, p. 2). Such definitions do little to tease apart the meaning of these terms and leaves their interpretation to individual school personnel.

TEACHER AUTHORITY/PRINCIPAL AUTHORITY

Project SAVE gives teachers the authority to remove disruptive or violent students from the classroom, provided that such teachers act in compliance with the district code of conduct. It also empowers principals of individual schools to suspend violent or disruptive students. Districts must develop specific procedures regarding the process of removing disruptive students, including who has authority to do so, who must be informed of such acts, and how the offending student's education programming will continue outside of the school. However, no information is provided regarding how teachers can identify students exhibiting behaviors that might be early precursors to violent behavior. Further, no guidance is offered regarding how to deal with students before they become so disruptive or violent that they would have to be suspended from school.

SCHOOL VIOLENCE TRAINING

Project SAVE legislation requires that all classroom teachers in the state of New York complete a two hour training course in violence prevention before they receive permanent teaching certification. However, there is not a state-wide shared curriculum in place for this training. Instead four broad and rather vague goals are listed for teachers undergoing the training. Teachers should 1) be able to characterize the nature and scope of issues related to school violence; 2) develop an understanding of the components of Project SAVE; 3) understand the relationship between data and planning; and 4)

understand what constitutes the key elements of promising violence prevention programs. SAVE training is not fully standardized. Since no textbook or materials are required for the training component of the program, it is up to individual trainers to determine which specific information to present to teachers, and within that, what to emphasize.

Interestingly, while Project SAVE leaves the specific interpretation of its regulations up to individual districts, the legislation is quite specific about the amount of time required for the training, which is listed as two hours. Although numerous policies and procedures must be put into place at the district and school building level, the actual training time allotted for teachers to understand how to implement these procedures is limited to two hours (New York Center for School Safety). This minimal amount of time means that teachers may have time to learn about the specific provisions of Project SAVE. However, two hours is not sufficient time to learn about more complex topics such as known precursors to violent behavior. Changing teacher perceptions and practice is a lengthy and complex procedure requiring sufficient time for teachers to investigate and adjust their pre-existing beliefs about student performance. (Timperley and Robinson, 2001).

UNIFORM VIOLENT INCIDENT REPORTING (UVIR)

Because so many schools and school districts schools must report violent incidents, Project Save requires that all use a common, standardized reporting format called Uniform Violent Incident Reporting (UVIR). However, a self-study on Project SAVE (University of the State of New York, 2004) found that unforeseen definitional problems resulted from the use of this format that was ironically, designed specifically to eliminate such problems by providing a shared vocabulary of school violence. The researchers explained the cause of this problem lay with terminology based on the legal system:

The use of a wide range of definitions of violent and disruptive incidents taken from the Penal Law places school officials in the unfamiliar position of making judgments similar to those made by a criminal court. For example, in the Personal Injury and Intimidation Category, school officials must judge whether a student has intentionally caused physical injury to another person (assault); or recklessly engaged in conduct which creates a substantial risk of physical injury (reckless endangerment); or has intentionally placed or attempted to place another person in fear of imminent physical injury (menacing); or has threatened, stalked or sought to coerce or compelled a person to do something or engaged in verbal or physical conduct that threatens another with harm (intimidation or bullying) (University of the State of New York, 2004, p. 3).

This definitional problem calls into question the accuracy of the statistical data that Project Save collects in an attempt to analyze its own effectiveness. The self-study revealed that because of these complicating factors, individual school districts made different decisions regarding which incidents to report. Additionally, school districts in different parts of the state used different policies in determining which incidents to report. For example, some schools have adopted a zero tolerance policy, "punish[ing] all offenses severely, no matter how minor" (Skiba & Peterson, 1999), while others have much laxer policies, defining disruptive or violent students by different standards. Thus, in a zero tolerance school, carrying nail clippers could be considered a serious violation while the same action would be of little or no consequence in a different school district. This definitional difference as to what constitutes serious violations further distorts the reporting process. The self study found that schools with zero tolerance policies identified all incidents as reportable and resulting in suspension. "Some schools reported only incidents involving the police and/or personal injuries…[while] some schools reported only incidents resulting in suspensions" (State University of New York, 2004, p. 4).

Thus, because there was not a shared understanding of what might constitute violent or disruptive behavior, because the legal terminology used in the UVIR (Uniform Violent Incident Reporting form) was complex and confusing, and because schools used different policies in determining what was actually reportable, the statistics ultimately collected and analyzed do not provide clear, unambiguous data about the actual number of violent events occurring in New York State schools, nor do they provide information on whether such events have increased or decreased as a result of Project SAVE. What data collection and analysis has provided is information on broad overall trends reported by various school buildings and school districts within the state. Such statistics do little to provide insight on how and why specific disruptive or violent behaviors occur and what might be done to reduce their incidence.

CONCLUSION

The prevention of school violence is a topic worthy of scientific research and debate in the educational community and the goal of the Project Save Legislation – "creating and maintaining safe learning environments" (New York State Education Department, 2004, p.3) is a laudable one. However, it remains questionable if this top-down approach of mandating anti-violence reform can be proven effective for several reasons.

One clear factor is the individual differences between and among independent school districts within the state in identifying and reporting disruptive and violent incidents. Perhaps more importantly,

the implementation of reforms such as Project SAVE does not address the larger question of how to deal with incidents of disruptive or violent behavior in schools, or at least, how to deal directly with the root causes of such behavior. Further, this legislation does not help school officials predict disruptive or violent student behavior. Instead, much of Project SAVE is concerned with the specifics of how to remove trouble makers from the classroom, or if necessary, from the school. Implicit in the law is the assumption that if the offender is removed, then the violence will stop. Especially in the case of zero tolerance, studies have revealed a tendency to suspend and expel students for behaviors such as disrespect and disobedience, and even tardiness and truancy. Such behaviors are not known precursors of school violence. In fact, in one study on American school expulsion practices (Morrison & D'Incau, 1997), researchers found that the majority of offenses in their study were committed by students not likely to be considered dangerous to the school environment. Rather, they found poor academic skills to be a strong predictor of school exclusion, a factor that is not dealt with in legislation such as Project SAVE.

Even at the elementary school level, these factors are seen by researchers to be precursors for disruptive or violent behavior. "Students at risk for developing conduct disorders, exhibit disruptive behavior, below-average achievement and poor social skills" (Skiba & Peterson, 1999). If intervention is not offered at these earlier ages, students can become increasingly alienated from teachers and peers as they grow older. By adolescence, they may quite naturally seek the company of other anti-social peers. (Skiba, Peterson & Williams, 1992).

Ironically, then, school practices and regulations such as suspension and dismissal, which are designed to eliminate violence in our schools and promote safe learning environments may actually be doing violence to the very population we wish to protect – the students. The National Center for Children Exposed to Violence notes that anti-violence interventions such as conflict resolution, good citizenship instruction, and peer mediation training are essential educational tools that need to be made available for children. For meaningful change in school violence to occur, teachers and other responsible school-based staff need far more than a two hour course in the specific tenets of anti-violence legislation. They need practical information regarding ways to identify the early warning signs of violent and disruptive behavior as well as effective means to intervene. Information about how to respond in a crisis situation, while useful, does not get at the real issues surrounding school violence.

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