

The online resource for
principals with students
aged 10 to 14

Matters

January 2009

Climate-based Strategies for Violence Prevention

Some simple, but powerful, strategies can make a drastic difference in the overall climate of your school.

Anthony J. Limoges

Grainy security camera footage portrays a scene of utter chaos in the cafeteria. The evening news is asking, "How could this have happened?" A grieving mother, tears streaming down her face, asks why. Pictures of shocked and devastated teens fill the front pages of newspapers. Chat rooms across the Internet fill with opposing conversations, some mourning the victims while others are cheering the aggressors. And finally, teams of experts rush to the site, telling us what went wrong and asking us how we didn't see the signs.

This article is not about the complexities of dissecting why such incidents happen; rather, it is about looking at practical, proactive steps that every principal can take to prevent such an incident from happening in his or her school. It's also about making each school community healthier as a whole. The steps outlined here may seem elementary, but don't underestimate their power. If you approach them with passion, you will notice almost immediate results in the areas of disciplinary and counseling referrals, school spirit, activity/club memberships, and parental support.

Keep It Simple

Violence prevention is grounded in the actions of individuals who collectively make a difference. It is not about where we can outsource our school problems. All too often, when it comes to issues such as gangs, bullying, substance abuse, and suicide prevention, we look to someone or something—a special counselor, a one-shot speaker, or a new curriculum. They may provide a quick fix, but if we aim to create a lasting difference, we have to come to grips with the fact that the best person for the job may be the person looking back at us in the mirror.

Data Don't Lie

Data can redeem and data can devastate, but one thing data can't do is lie. The biggest mistake you can make is to jump in and begin to make changes based upon your own presumptions and biases. Instead, start with surveys of all major stakeholders: teachers, students, parents, classified staff members, community members, and anyone else who has an interest in the success of your school. Be scrupulous in your evaluation and don't take the results at face value. Your job is to look for patterns.

There also are many other forms of useful data right under your nose: Suspension data, counseling referrals, academic testing results, and attendance rates are no more than a mouse click away.

All too often, we wait until state-mandated groups enter our school with outside evaluators. But why wait for total strangers to come in for an evaluation? Why not ask colleagues whom you trust to take a look at specific areas. And, don't hoard this information. The results of your data cultivation will give you some solid direction in how to begin curing what ails your school.

People, Not Programs

Creating student-teacher relationships is *the* single most powerful preventive tool, and it is the cornerstone for the programs that I supervise. Although I deal with an extremely high-risk population, often involving members of rival gangs, there are relatively few incidents of violence during school hours. The common link is the connection and respect that students have for the adults at the site. Without these connections, instruction and curriculum would be a moot point. The bottom line: Students need to feel like they are known, liked, and respected

before they can accept instruction (Dahlgren, Hyatt, & Dobbins, 2005).

And it doesn't always have to be you who makes that connection. I recall a student from my first few years of teaching. I'll call him Josh. He had a vindictive, mean streak and he would constantly pick on weaker students. When Josh was called out because of his behavior, he would close up and go silent. Despite multiple efforts, I failed to connect with him. But when another teacher, Ms. White, would walk into the room, his face would light up and I could see him soften.

So Ms. White became my resource for all things relating to Josh. I would use her as a resource for suggestions, and in particularly rough times she would intervene and talk with him. While it may seem like Ms. White was doing my job for me, the ultimate goal is the success of the student. Encourage your staff to connect with students, to spend time in their communities, probe their interests, and attempt to understand their perspectives.

It Takes More than Management and Discipline

The school manual and discipline policy can be vastly overrated. For example, I cannot tell you the number of administrators and teachers I speak with who talk about the dress code; specifically, about the elimination of certain colors as a way to control gangs. Gang colors are by no means a joke, and they shouldn't be taken lightly. But removing the colors does nothing more than remove a visible manifestation of the gangs in your schools. The kids still know who is on what team. The only people who don't know anymore are the adults. Like most discipline policies, it provides only the illusion that we can control student behavior (Gossen, 2001).

During my first few years as an assistant principal, every day seemed like the movie *Groundhog Day*. There were always the same behavior issues and the same responses: detention, suspension, and once in a while I would throw in a trash pick-up. What I really wanted to do was counsel these students about behavior alternatives and how they could avoid making the same mistakes in the future. What I wanted to do was prevention.

When I became a principal, I vowed to break the familiar cycle. And this is where I connected with the concept of restitution. The key characteristics of restitution are:

- It will be seen by the victim as adequate compensation;
- It will require effort;
- It does not in any way encourage repetition;
- It will be relevant to the general area of the mistake;
- It will be tied to a higher value; and
- It will strengthen the child (Gossen, 2001).

I took these concepts and connected them with a team rule given to me by a retired football coach: "Do the Right Thing." We created staff shirts with this slogan, hung posters, talked about it in rallies, wrote poems and songs, and attempted to embed it in all facets of the school environment.

When students were referred to the office, I would ask them if they felt they had done the right thing. As a result, debate was diminished, less time was spent on consequences, and more time was spent on prevention. As a whole, referrals, suspensions, detentions, and overall discipline problems were reduced.

Not Just the 3 R's

The standards-based curriculum is not enough to truly round out a prevention-based school. Aronson (2000) says, "We wouldn't expect students to learn algebra on their own, or to become good violinists or competent tennis players without instruction." Yet, somehow we think that children can learn how to get along with each other merely by being thrown together at school. Harmonious schools do not happen by magic. Creating a positive school climate takes hard work from everyone in the school community.

Relentless Nurturing

My final component in a proactive recipe for violence prevention is far more personal. It is the state of mind that I call relentless nurturing. It involves constantly being in the face of the students and letting them know that you are behind them, that you will support them, and that their success is important no matter what mistakes they make.

If you and your teachers follow these simple but powerful preventive strategies, you will notice a drastic difference in the overall climate of your school.

References

- Aronson, E. (2000). *Nobody left to hate: Teaching compassion after Columbine*. New York: Henry Holt and Co.
- Dahlgren, R., Hyatt, J., & Dobbins, C. (2005). *Time to teach: Encouragement, empowerment, and excellence in every classroom*. Hayden Lake, ID: The Center for Teacher Effectiveness.
- Gossen, D. (2001). *Restitution: Restructuring school discipline*. Chapel Hill, NC New View Publications.

Anthony J. Limoges is principal of the South Region for the San Diego County Office of Education, Department of Juvenile Court and Community Schools. His e-mail address is alimoges@sdcoe.net.