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About the cover:

Police and school security officers have become an integral part of many schools. Here Chicago policeman Howard Kilroy is surrounded by children outside Kosciuszko Elementary School. Photo copyright © 1989, the Times Mirror Company.

22



26

CONTENTS

4 School security: 'Who you gonna call?'

By Peter D. Blauvelt

9 Designing safer schools

By Timothy D. Crowe

14 Expect the unexpected

By Scott Poland and Gayle Pitcher

20 Training teachers for troubled times

By Jerry Glenn

22 Town and country violence

By Paul M. Kingery, Elaheh Mirzaee,
B.E. Pruitt and Robert S. Hurley

26 Developing a love for the law

Updates
NCJRS

DEC 12 1990

ACQUISITIONS

Resources

2 NSSC Update

31 National Update 127115

32 Legislative Update 127116

33 Legal Update

34 Resource Update

18 NSSC Publications

19 NSSC Resource Papers and Display Posters

29 School Safety Subscriptions

30 NSSC Documentaries

35 'Principals of Leadership'

Study tracks student attitudes



Although 88 percent of eighth-graders surveyed in a recent federal study said they feel safe at school, many reported that various acts of crime and violence are moderate to serious problems at their schools, including physical conflicts (43 percent), robbery or theft (29 percent), vandalism of school property (31 percent), illegal drugs (25 percent) and weapons (21 percent).

The National Center for Education Statistics recently conducted a national survey of eighth-graders to examine family, community, school and classroom factors that promote or inhibit educational success. The "National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88)" began by surveying 25,000 eighth-graders from 1,000 schools, representing 3 million eighth-grade students in more than 38,000 public and private schools nationwide. The National Center for Education Statistics is a branch of the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), an agency of the U.S. Department of Education.

NELS:88 will be conducted in several waves. The first report describes the experiences of the students as eighth-graders in the spring of 1988; the second will trace them in the tenth grade; and the third will follow them through their senior year in high school. The longitudinal design of this study allows researchers to observe the critical transition of students from middle school to high school as well as to identify student, school and parental experiences that promote student learning.

The first report, titled *NELS:88, A Profile of the American Eighth Grader*,

provides a descriptive summary of the students' responses to questions about school experiences, activities, attitudes, plans, selected background characteristics and language proficiency. These same students were administered a series of cognitive tests in math, reading, science, history and government. Other groups of respondents provided additional types of information: An administrator filled out a questionnaire about the school; two teachers of each student were asked to answer questions about the student, themselves and the school; and one parent of each student was surveyed regarding family characteristics and student activities.

A growing number of students can be identified as being "at risk" of failing to achieve in school or of dropping out, according to the study. Overall, 53 percent of the students surveyed were identified as having certain factors that put them at risk. While 26 percent of the students had one risk factor, 20 percent were found to have two or more risk factors. These various risk factors that were identified and the percentages of students associated with each include:

- Lives in a single-parent family — 22 percent.
- Family income is less than \$15,000 annually — 21 percent.
- Stays at home alone more than three hours a day — 14 percent.
- Parents have no high school diploma — 11 percent.
- A sibling has dropped out of school — 10 percent.
- English proficiency is limited — 2 percent.

Students with two or more of these risk factors are twice as likely as those with no risk factors to be in the bottom 25 percent with respect to composite grades and NELS test results. In addition, they are six times as likely to expect not to graduate from high school and twice as likely to have high absenteeism rates.

Some of the study's other major findings include:

- Sixty-two percent of the eighth-graders said they never or rarely discussed their classes or school programs with their parents; 35 percent reported they had not talked with their teacher about coursework during the school year; and 60 percent said they had not discussed the selection of their courses with a school counselor.
- The typical eighth-grade student spends about 21.4 hours a week watching television — almost four times the number of hours spent doing homework and about 10 times the number of hours spent on outside reading.
- Nearly half of the students say they are bored at least half the time they spend in school.
- At least one-third of the students say that tardiness, absenteeism and cutting class are moderate to serious school problems.
- About 40 percent report that class disruptions by other students often get in the way of their learning.
- Overall, 18 percent of the students reported they had repeated at least one grade.
- Eighty percent of the students demonstrate basic reading proficiency, but 14 percent of the students are unable to perform reading comprehension tasks.
- Only about one-third of the students plans to enroll in a college preparatory program in high school even though two-thirds plan to finish college or above.

Prepared by June R. Lane, associate editor of School Safety.