

# crime prevention review

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RESOURCE DIRECTORY

*Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design:  
Compendium of Resources and Programs in California*

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# CRIME PREVENTION REVIEW

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The CRIME PREVENTION REVIEW is a professional forum for the Criminal Justice System in California designed to provide discussion of varied concepts and issues of crime prevention and useful resources for the practitioner in the field.

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## School Racial and Ethnic Conflict Prevention

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### SOME BARRIERS TO PREVENTION

Much violence spills into the schools from their surrounding communities. The problems of society—prejudice, poverty, crime, ideological differences and the like—often disrupt the schools' efforts to educate our children. In what follows I plan to focus on violence and conflict of a racial or ethnic nature about which the schools can do something preventative and constructive. Extortion, vandalism, assaults and rape are criminal acts which (while sometimes related to racial and ethnic conflict) are best discussed separately. I plan to limit my discussion to what school districts can do to prevent and/or resolve racial and ethnic conflict on their campuses.

Once such conflicts occur, most can be resolved if the leadership in the school community—educators, parents, students, classified personnel, board members, concerned citizens and others—will assess the problem in a spirit of conciliation. The biggest barrier to preventing or solving most such problems is an unwillingness by some key group or groups—teachers, parents, students, administrators—involved in the school, to assume a share of the responsibility.

Too often much valuable time is wasted pointing the finger of blame at others or in wishful thinking. For example, some teachers in our public schools defeat their own purposes by stating over and over to themselves and to one another that "This used to be a good school and could be again, if it weren't for the kind of students we're getting now." Such change in enrollment may be the result of court-ordered desegregation or changing population, but the fact remains that many teachers fail to face the new reality—the students who are sitting in front of them. While this illustrates only one

\* The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the Community Relations Service.

aspect of the problem, it highlights a major cause of such conflict—fooling ourselves in the face of very pressing realities.

In one high school in a local California district a few years ago, the student population changed from predominantly Anglo to Mexican-American. The staff received no preparation for the change. Planning was nowhere to be seen. Local city officials and the board of education were aware of the coming change, but the school district just let it happen. Teachers and the administrative staff received no in-service training to prepare for the new students. Instead of experiencing understanding, they experienced frustration and a sense of not knowing how to teach their new students, which quickly expressed itself as anger, resentment and criticism of both students and their families. "If parents did their job at home," they often said, "our job in the school would be easier." All of this was perceived by the students and their families as prejudice, as indeed some of it was.

What occurred, predictably, was that local Mexican-Americans rallied to the support of the students as a series of incidents finally triggered rioting with personal injuries and property damage. Mexican-American students and adult leaders called for mass meetings. School board meetings became shouting matches. The Mexican-American community submitted a list of "demands." The Anglo community became fearful and expressed concern for the security of their children. Anglo and Mexican-American parents suddenly were polarized. The issues were not clearly reflected in the "demands" since they grew out of a reaction to the district's failures more than an assessment of the problems.

With variations, this is a familiar story in many school districts nationally. Even when anticipated change in student population receives widespread coverage in local media, as in court-ordered desegregation, school boards have difficulty preparing school personnel for their new situation. In some cases, teachers and administrators themselves resist in-service efforts. In others, funding or union contracts are barriers. Even when there is in-service training, it often does not address academic problems facing educators, but instead focuses on a rhetoric of brotherhood and good human relations without translating it into specifics that give teachers and administrators the techniques and insights needed to meet their responsibilities. Instead of merely being told to respect all children, educators need specific and relevant new techniques, information and resources that will help them stimulate learning and to understand the needs of the students assigned to them.

#### APPROACHES TO PREVENTION

Many educators do not make use of curriculum resources, classroom and other techniques which support the goals of integration, alternatives to violence in problem-solving and interracial conflict prevention. School districts often call upon experts who know little about schools, students, education, staff development or curriculum, and these "experts" fail to translate their "know-how" into educationally sound methodology. Experts in conflict prevention are needed who also know schools and their needs.

Schools can do a number of things to help prevent racial and ethnic conflict. They can become better acquainted with its causes. They can dem-

onstrate a greater commitment to using the techniques for promoting intergroup understanding and the kind of attitudes that help young people begin to respect themselves and one another more. One way of doing this is the development of a curriculum and school program that helps students cope with problem-solving, controversy, alternatives to violence and ideological differences. Students need to develop confidence in human relations and in dealing openly with racism.

School administrators and school boards need to become more skilled in long-range planning and its implications for curriculum change and staff development. They need to be more involved in working with the news media, business community, and other civic and religious groups to build a positive climate throughout their communities.

Schools need to become more aggressive at building working relationships with outside public and private agencies—including law enforcement—serving youth and their families. They need to remind other institutions throughout the community of their share in this important responsibility for conflict prevention and the promotion of a good school climate.

Boards, teachers and administrators, with help from parents and students, need to be clearer about student discipline so that everyone in the school community is in greater agreement about what student behavior is considered acceptable. This is one place where parent participation can be vital, but schools need to become more skilled overall at giving parents a sense of involvement and ownership in schools and the education of their children.

As schools become more experienced with a needs assessment, problem-solving approach that involves minority leadership, parent, students, certified and classified staff (security, health, food services, etc.) in both assessment and implementation of recommended solutions, they will obtain a clearer picture of what needs to be done locally. It might be a better affirmative action program or an improved racial and ethnic studies curriculum. It might be that their students need to be more involved in the creation and maintenance of a positive school climate. It might be making the extra curricular activities and student government free of discrimination and more accessible to all students. It might be the creation of a rumor control and communication program to counter or prevent rumors. More responsible and informed contingency planning and staff training about what it means is often needed. Both old and newly hired staff periodically need to be updated on existing contingency plans and policies.

Finally, a commitment to continual self-education and growth, accompanied by a desire to make the maximum use possible of in-house experts, is essential. Most districts have teachers and administrators who—because of their background, experience or special training—understand certain types of students and problems better than some of their associates. Giving them an opportunity to share that expertise in a structured and meaningful way can give any school district an added sense of pride and success in coping with change.

Many schools are doing many of the things that I have recommended. Indeed, school people across this country taught me much of what I have learned about the subject. Because of my position with the Community Relations Service, I am called most often to schools that need help; but there

are school districts that do not wait for a major disruption before they focus their attention on building a positive school climate.

### LAW ENFORCEMENT AND SCHOOLS

Law enforcement is having a growing relationship with schools. Although there have been some who have criticized police in the schools, there is a growing awareness that with effective planning and clear policies on their roles, police can be a positive influence in a school community. In many schools, the officer assigned to teach safety, traffic regulations or law enforcement is carefully selected for his ability to relate to young people. Often he becomes a counselor, a role model, a voice of authority. Of course, this is an important responsibility, and most school people with whom I have talked speak highly of their assigned officers.

Where there is need for more work in school/police relations is in contingency planning. Unfortunately some school and police authorities prefer to continue without a contingency plan for school emergencies, working day after day fearful that if you talk about preparing for violence you might cause it. According to that approach, fire drills are what cause fires.

But contingency planning is no laughing matter. At one California high school, a tanker truck of highly explosive material became trapped between two school buses full of students being sent home because of disruption. The tanker just happened to be passing the school as police blocked off the area, unintentionally creating a dangerous situation. With contingency planning, the students might not have been sent home in the first place. And perhaps, the police never would have been needed.

During school desegregation, contingency planning is essential. How do demonstrators get so close to buses unloading at an elementary school that children are threatened physically? How do buses find themselves routed directly into a mass of angry demonstrators? How do buses get left without security overnight at the height of anti-busing sentiment in a desegregating community? How do students get locked in their classroom during a school riot, unable to escape in case of fire? Why can't parents find out where their children are? How does the parking lot become a traffic jam? Why can't the principal phone out of the building or the superintendent phone in? Why doesn't anyone remember what happened or who did what? Why doesn't anyone know who's in charge when the principal is away? What did that alarm mean? How did the entire student body learn about a bomb threat before the principal, and then stampede for the exits? How does an adult educator with twenty years experience end up wrestling in the hall with six students? How did a rumor that a female student lost an eye get started, when she really just had broken her glasses? Why won't the police leave the campus even when the superintendent of the district is ordering them to leave? How did the press get misinformation from the faculty, and rumors become headlines that night? The answer to all of the above is: without contingency planning.

Law enforcement could be educating the educators on the importance of contingency planning. Of course, it requires careful planning to approach the problem. Good relations between top officials in the police department

and the school district need to be established, but in the long run what is gained is worth the effort. Contingency planning for school emergencies requires a real partnership between law enforcement and public education. I believe it is an important partnership and one worth promoting.

Finally, one might ask: Okay, but who's going to take the initiative for all this? Obviously, the superintendent of schools and the board of education have a primary responsibility for providing the leadership, but anyone can take the initiative. If it's done in the right spirit, I believe a positive response can be expected. Most chiefs of police are able to approach their local school superintendents and boards in a manner that will communicate their intentions. Anyone seeking assistance in school contingency planning, could contact the Community Relations Service, U.S. Department of Justice, Suite 1050, 1275 Market Street, San Francisco, California 94103; or phone (415) 556-2485. A brochure *School Disruptions: Tips for Educators and Police* is available by writing: Community Relations Service, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington, D.C. 20530.