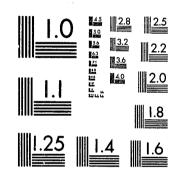National Criminal Justice Reference Service

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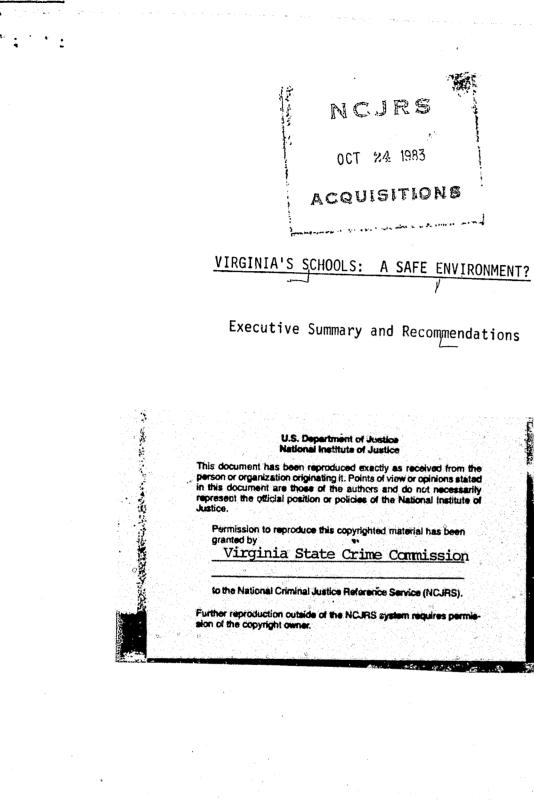| | 1.0 | 2.8 | 2.5 |
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National Institute of Justice
United States Department of Justice
Washington, D.C. 20531

2/23/84

VIRGINIA'S SCHOOLS: A SAFE ENVIRONMENT?

Executive Summary and Recommendations

July 28, 1982

91684

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INTRODUCTION

Are Virginia's Schools Safe? To answer this question, the Youth Subcommittee of the Virginia State Crime Commission set out to determine:

+ The nature and extent of serious incidents in Virginia's middle and high schools.

+ How school administrators in Virginia are addressing the issue of crime in their schools.

+ The kind of assistance administrators would like to have for addressing crime.

+ The nature of the relationships among school, police, and court officials.

STUDY DESIGN

To acquire the information to address the aforementioned objectives, two techniques were used. Pupil suspension and expulsion data forms were mailed to principals and interviews were conducted. Rather than interview all administrators of schools, police or sheriffs departments, and juvenile court service units, a representative sample was acquired. The State Department of Education selected 15 school divisions (with a high school and middle school from each division) based on school size, geography, and school economy, as judged by per pupil expenditure and teacher salary. For each division selected, a representative of the police or sheriffs department and the court service unit director were also interviewed. The twenty-six schools selected represented five percent of the state's population of seventh through twelfth graders.

FINDINGS

Student on student assaults are by far the reason most students are suspended or expelled from school. Of all serious incidents, they account for one-half. Next is drug and alcohol usage, accounting for 20 percent of suspensions. The remaining serious school incidents, are divided among verbal threats, abuse and profanity; vandalism and theft; possession of weapons; and other offenses, each of which constitutes less than ten percent of the suspensions and expulsions. According to this study, physical assaults by students on teachers is practically non-existent in Virginia.

When principals were asked whether they felt serious incidents by students in school had increased or decreased over the past 5 years, 17 of 24 said they believed serious incidents had decreased.

When asked the question: "Do you think students and teachers are afraid of being the victim of a serious incident?", the vast majority of principals said that neither students nor teachers feared being the victim of a crime in school. The question was asked, "In what location in school or on school grounds does crime most often occur?" Very logically, but apparently not so obvious, is that location is only a secondary factor affecting crime. The primary factor is supervision. Crime or serious incidents occur most often in places where supervision is relatively minimal. Accordingly, it was found that property crimes are most likely to occur in gymnasiums or halls where student lockers are located and in parking lots. Drug and alcohol offenses occur most often in restrooms, smoking areas, and on school grounds. Fights and assaults usually occur in the cafeteria, halls and stairways.

CAUSES OF SERIOUS INCIDENTS

School, court and police personnel were given an open-ended question, "What is the primary cause of serious incidents?" They were provided a selection of causes to stimulate their thinking and were encouraged to add others. The selection of causes provided was:

+ School size

+ Community environment

+ Discipline in schools

+ Home environment

+ Teacher training

+ Other

The home was cited by far the most often as the source of school problems. School and police personnel cited the home about 75 percent of the time and the court cited it about 50 percent of the time. Some of the home related issues voiced were: lack of parental supervision and discipline, broken homes, and absentee parents.

Six of 20 principals, two of 15 court service unit directors and three of 15 law enforcement personnel pointed to the community as the ultimate cause of serious incidents. Some reasons cited were: absence of opportunities for leisure pursuits, absence of prevention measures and boredom.

Five of 25 principals and one court service director and police official were of the opinion that school size is positively correlated with serious incidents involving students. Big schools discourage personal attention, especially from the adult figures in the school. Concern was expressed that large schools are impersonal, and it was implied that children need constructive attention from adults.

RELATIONSHIPS

The study indicated that only in a few localities are the schools, the courts, and police making a conscious effort to establish and nurture good relations. The schools seem to be going about their business somewhat independently of the courts and police and vice versa. If a school needs the court or police, or if the latter needs the school, and there is a favorable response, all is well. In the absence of a crisis, this may be adequate. On the other hand, speaking generally, if a crisis arises or a controversial issue needs resolving, one must question whether the relationship would serve adequately under the additional stress. The question is raised because there is very little conscious nurturing of relationships.

In short, it appears that the bonds between the schools and the courts and police are adequate in fair weather but may be vulnerable when needed most, in times of storm, controversy, crisis, or disagreement.

SCHOOL NEEDS

At the conclusion of this interview, school administrators were asked the question, or one similar:

> We feel it is important for the community to be involved with the schools; we are sure you feel that way, too. Do you feel the community, including state agencies, could do more to assist schools in dealing with serious incidents? If so, what?

By far, the overwhelming response to this question was generally a need for informed, supportive, and involved parents and community. Sixteen of 25 respondents, or 64 percent, expressed such a need.

The dominance of this response was so great as to be thoroughly convincing, and it raises a question: Do school administrators have a structured public relations program whereby they systematically inform the public and solicit support and involvement from parents and the community?

Some of the more specific concerns expressed by school administrators that could be placed under a public relations heading were:

+ There is a need to let the public know that the school cannot solve all problems;

+ There is a need to change the image of the school;

+ Community organizations need to know they can provide services being cut by shrinking budgets;

+ Speakers from the community should be brought in to address issues identified by the community;

+ Parents need to know what their children are doing and know their problems;

+ Parents should back the school; and

+ Parents seem not to care; they are apathetic.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on information obtained primarily from interviews with principals, the following recommendations are offered.

1. School principals establish structures for communicating with juvenile courts and police on a regular basis. Communication should occur at two levels: at the administrative level around policy and procedures and at the service level around specific cases. Persons at the administrative level would include the school superintendent and director of pupil personnel services; the judge and court service unit director; and the police chief or sheriff and head of juvenile services. Persons at the service level would include the school principal, counselors, and teachers; probation counselor and supervisors; and law enforcement officers.

Some of the issues implied in statements that stimulated this recommendation are:

+ Principals do not have a clear understanding of the role of the juvenile judge and why he makes some of the decisions he does.

+ A student or youth is arrested, detained, heard, a decision made, and the youth returned to school before the school is aware of the youth's offense.

+ The school needs to know what the police want from it and why.

2. Probation counselors, in their case disposition recommendations to

their judges, and judges, themselves, consider the use of school services and programs -- in-school suspension, detention, Saturday work, etc. -- as dispositional alternatives as well as other imaginative alternatives in lieu of or as part of probation.

3. The job descriptions and evaluations of principals' performance include public relations functions. Principals develop and carry out annually a public relations plan for their area.

    This is recommended because of the dominant desire expressed by principals for community interest and involvement in their schools, because of their ranking community involvement as one of the best strategies for dealing with serious incidents in schools, and because many are making no conscious and structured effort at public relations.

4. That the Department of Education develop a uniform, statewide system for keeping records on suspensions, expulsions, vandalism, theft, breaking and entering, and other serious incidents. This system should use uniform terminology and define and distinguish among such terms as assault, fight, threat, vandalism, theft, etc. Also, the system should include a common procedure for determining the cost of vandalism and theft.

    This recommendation will not place more work on school administrators because they are keeping the same records now. This recommendation speaks to statewide uniformity in record keeping which will make the records kept more useful. Adoption of the

recommendation, or one similar, is necessary if there is ever to be reliable data for studies on violence and vandalism in schools.

5. Security resources, both personnel and hardware, should be distributed to schools, not simply on the basis of whether the school is elementary, middle, or high, but also on the location of the school and on its history of serious incidents.

6. Agencies which work with youth: schools, courts, police and sheriff's departments, and social services, develop standard social history forms for reporting procedures. These forms could be structured so that data unique to a particular agency could be added without reproducing the entire social history. This has been done in some jurisdictions and reduces the unnecessary duplication of effort. Such an endeavor could also help open communication lines among youth serving agencies.

7. Encourage students to participate in the making of decisions that affect them by including students on faculty and administrative committees and other decision-making bodies. This participation will increase the vested interests of students in school and will discourage student alienation. Involvement of students in decision-making provides experimental learning of the democratic process, which is the hallmark of our society.

8. The appropriate authorities need to decide whether it is important to know the nature and extent of violence and vandalism in Virginia's schools. If so, after recordkeeping, terminology and cost analysis have been standardized (see recommendation number four), a more thorough study needs to be conducted. This thorough study could serve as baseline data for making longitudinal comparisons in the future.

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