

*Schools and communities across the nation are stepping up their efforts to prevent and suppress gangs and their related activities.*

# School Safety

NCJRS

**UPDATE**

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## ACQUISITIONS

### Dancing on the edge of disorder: a school responds

Experts in the fields of school safety and juvenile justice agree that an interagency approach is one of the more effective ways to deal with youth crime and violence. Working together as partners, law enforcement agencies, schools and parents can complement each other in the prevention and suppression of undesirable youth behavior.

It is generally accepted that by anticipating and being prepared for the unexpected, schools can avoid or minimize the potential for crisis or disruption. By having well-publicized school discipline policies in place before violent acts occur, administrators have the necessary tools to effectively deal with escalating conflict.

In addition to these approaches, which are components of a comprehensive safe school plan, school administrators need to be able to act quickly and decisively when faced with rising tension and potential disruption. All of these elements were in place at Hawthorne Intermediate School in Hawthorne, California, when internal gang conflict surfaced a year ago last February.

In recent years, Hawthorne Intermediate has taken a vigilant approach to dealing with problems created by the 16 identified gangs that are active within the community. To maintain a neutral environment on campus, gang insignias, clothing, jewelry or other identifiable gang symbols are not permitted at school. Students are not allowed to use gang-type writing on their assignments and their notebooks must be free of any gang markings. When students are found breaking any of these rules, parents are contacted, and repeat offenders face Saturday school,

suspension or independent study.

Last winter, school administrators observed an unusually high number of female students coming to the office complaining about other female students. Each complaint was similar: fear of physical harm, harassment on the way home from school, escalating hostility and threatening mannerisms displayed at school. Each situation was dealt with as it occurred, and the students appeared to be satisfied with the actions taken by the school.

One Thursday, however, a severe fight broke out between two female students in the central corridor during a passing period. One girl grabbed another by the hair and began smashing her head into the wall. In return, the other student bit the chest of the aggressor. Students quickly gathered around the fighters, some attempting to come to the defense of one of the girls.

Within minutes the fight was disbanded, and the girls were ushered to the office and isolated. Their stories were disjointed and slanted, but a common thread of information unraveled. Soon, other girls were implicated. The fighters predicted that more acts of violence would occur after school that day. Because of this potential threat, parents were called, and 14 students were escorted home.

Later, violence spilled over into the community. Groups of girls were observed roaming the neighborhood of one of the two combatants. They knocked on the doors of her apartment building, screamed obscenities and made further threats. That evening, rival groups met and one girl was pushed through a plate glass window.

On Friday, tensions at school remained high. Three more fights occurred before noon. An emergency action plan was set in place to ensure the safety of students and staff for the remainder of the day. The three normally overlapping lunch periods were rescheduled and separated so that no more than 35 percent of the student body would be at lunch at any given time. Teachers with free periods during lunch were paid to provide extra supervision. In addition, all teachers were asked to stand outside their doors during passing periods and to provide added grounds supervision at the end of the day.

As part of the emergency plan, the girls involved in

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## COVER STORY

Thursday's fight were also placed on home study for the two-week period following their suspensions. It was believed that their presence might incite further violence.

Interviews with many students helped to fill in the gaps of the evolving pattern. (See inset for one student's perspective of the incident.) Apparently, a group of eighth-grade girls had decided to form what they called a "dance group." Other girls were invited to become members of this group and once they agreed, their names were added to a growing list.

However, once their names were on the list, certain initiation activities were suggested in order to establish the students as "true" members of the group. Among the initiation rites were shoplifting, truancy, smoking, drinking, fighting and having sex. Upon learning of these requirements, some girls asked to have their names removed from the roster.

Tension resulted among the various factions. Members of the "dance group" felt rejected and disparaged by the group of girls who originally had been asked to join but had refused the invitation. Fearing that the initiation rites would be disclosed, members also felt hostile toward those who had joined but chose to quit. These "dance group" members later admitted that no dancing ever took place. Instead, they

spent their time talking and encouraging one another to threaten or fight girls in the other factions.

An action plan was developed for dealing with this first major internal gang conflict to emerge at the school. The administrative team decided to meet with the parents of the girls involved. Letters were sent home on Friday afternoon to the parents of 42 implicated students.

The meeting was scheduled for the following Tuesday evening. The Hawthorne Police Department Gang Unit was invited to participate. A list of available community resources and descriptions of gang warning signs were

presented to the parents, providing them with information to help their children.

Group participation was encouraged. The chairs were carefully placed in large concentric circles to create a non-confrontational atmosphere. Ground rules for discussion were established and visibly posted. Everyone was given the opportunity to be heard, but only one person was permitted to speak at a time. Participants were given name tags, and refreshments were provided.

After the meeting began, the first issue addressed was

why all of the students and parents present were black. It was explained that only black female students had been invited to join the "dance group." The principal assured the parents that all students and parents would be receiving the same information, but that the nature of the problem required quick action to ensure the safety of the students involved.

Parents left the meeting aware of the gang activity in their community and of the need for after-school activities to keep students occupied in active, constructive endeavors. Students learned that the hatred and violence instigated by the "dance group" was actually the beginning of gang activity within the school. They also had the opportunity to vent their frustrations. Everyone at the meeting left feeling that

the school would take action to provide positive after-school activities.

The administrative team continued working, through an additional group meeting and individual appointments, until the parents of all the involved students had been informed about the situation. A representative from the police department worked with the girls to help mediate their hostilities. At the end of the discussion, almost all of the girls were willing to agree that, while they didn't have to like everyone who attended Hawthorne Intermediate, they did need to respect their right to attend a school with

Now this started. Some<sup>(part)</sup> made up a thing called E.N.D. Some of the girls<sup>(wanted)</sup> went to be in it. Some did not. Some of the things you had to do to be in E.N.D. was you had to have sex with boys that they said, you had to have a boy friend, and you had to tell them I got in this. They<sup>(said)</sup> to me did I want to be in E.N.D. I said NO. O.O. E.N.D. got made because a lot of girls that did not<sup>(wanted)</sup> wanted<sup>(out)</sup> to be from E.N.D. So that E.N.D. member<sup>(means)</sup> that I made it up. So that said that's how I got in. It was 4 girls ditched at one of the girls house and had sex with the boys.

**The END.**

## COVER STORY

a safe environment.

In the aftermath of these events, a bona fide dance club was formed with regular practice times and paid teacher supervision. Students from all three factions frequently are seen together and many have joined the newly formed dance club. Tensions at the school have been markedly reduced. As a positive result, students appear to believe that the school can function as a neutral referee to help resolve intergroup problems.

Prompt attention to the emerging problem at Hawthorne demonstrated a clear recognition of the need for vigilance. The investigation was thorough and immediate. Plans made prior to the actual dispute made mediation a viable solution. The awareness of potential gang problems and the intervention strategies implemented are a credit to the administrative team at Hawthorne. Denial, the option chosen by many at the first sign of trouble, would have resulted in the formation of two gangs. In this case, the girls now have other avenues open to them — avenues that do not include violence as a solution.

Gangs and gang-related activities present escalating problems for many schools in this country. Students are intimidated and fearful; teachers are frustrated and increasingly fearful as well. No single solution exists; yet, a single solution would not work in the myriad locations and situations educators and law enforcement officials face on a daily basis.

A variety of responses may provide a springboard for generating new ways to deal with gangs. School administrators cannot be omniscient, but they can bring together key players to leverage their resources.

Cleveland Public Schools, operating with a partially funded grant from the Ohio Department of Education and the Ohio Department of Alcohol and Drug Addiction Services, initiated a Youth Gang Unit at the beginning of the 1991-1992 school year. Under the Division of Safety and Security within the public school system, the unit employs five specially trained officers and a unit coordinator. They are responsible for 127 sites in the district, in which they investigate all gang-related complaints and incidents. Most cases are cleared within two days.

The program was to be evaluated by the number of contacts made with individuals who have been involved in gangs or gang-related activity. The first year's objective of 500 contacts was met in four months, with 507 contacts in 186 gang-related incidents logged by the end of December 1991.

Youth Gang Unit objectives are to assess and set priorities for enforcement and investigations; to provide education and training to school staff, parents and students; and to create a community network, including law enforce-

ment officers, political officials, social service agencies, and court and probation officers.

For further information, contact Kenneth S. Trump, Youth Gang Unit Coordinator, Division of School Safety and Security, Cleveland Public Schools, 1380 E. 6th Street, Cleveland, OH 44114, 216/574-8552.

The Orange County (California) Department of Education offers a gang awareness seminar for educators, "Creating a Safe School Environment." An optional one unit of credit is offered through a local college. Presenters include representatives of law enforcement, probation, education and the media.

Topics and issues covered include gang profiles, roots of gang violence, risk factors, gang history, prevention and intervention strategies, pros and cons of media reporting, resources for teachers, disclosure, and crisis plans of action. Contact person is Frank Angulo, Drug and Gang Prevention Coordinator, Operation Safe Schools, Orange County Department of Education, 200 Kalmus Drive, P.O. Box 9050, Costa Mesa, CA 92628, 714/662-4966.

Los Angeles (California) County's gang awareness program was developed by the same individual as the program in Orange County. The Los Angeles County concept emphasizes team training, with law enforcement personnel, educators, community leaders and activists working together in partnership. By combining the resources of law enforcement, higher education and the community, "Gang School for Educators" becomes both cost-efficient and cost-effective. This type of schooling is currently being established in Santa Cruz (California) County as well. For further information, contact either Gus Frias or Bill Ybarra, Los Angeles County Office of Education, 9300 Imperial Highway, Downey, CA 90242, 310/922-6301.

Dade County (Florida) focuses efforts on gang prevention through a concerted program of information sharing with all municipalities. The county holds regular monthly meetings of all law enforcement personnel, which serve a twofold purpose. Written incident reports are distributed, and a roll call of all jurisdictions ensures a rapid update regarding problems or significant crime increases. Those in a supervisory position then attend a strategic planning session, using the information reported at the initial meeting. The county also sponsors a variety of workshops several times per year for all employees associated with law enforcement. Information is available from Tony Prieto, Commander, Juvenile Investigations Bureau, Metro Dade Police Dept., 9105 N.W. 25th St., Suite 27, Miami, FL 33172, 305/471-2160.

*The Hawthorne Intermediate School information was submitted by assistant principal Sharon Phillips.*