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Responding to Gangs in the School Setting

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Introduction

Gangs are present in many schools in the United States. The *National Survey of American Attitudes on Substance Abuse XV: Teens and Parents*, released in August 2010 by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse, reported that:

Forty-five percent of high school students say that there are gangs or students who consider themselves to be part of a gang in their schools.

Thirty-five percent of middle-school students say that there are gangs or students who consider themselves to be part of a gang in their schools.

The differences between public and private schools are stark. While 46 percent of students in public schools reported the presence of gangs and gang members at school, only 2 percent of private school students did.

According to the School Crime Supplement to the National Crime Victimization Survey (2007), 23 percent of students reported the presence of gangs on their school campus or in the surrounding area in 2007. This represents an increase in the percentage of students reporting gangs on/around campus in 2003 (21 percent). Schools in urban areas appear to be the most affected by the presence of gangs: 36 percent of urban students reported gangs, versus 21 percent of suburban and 16 percent of rural students in 2005.

In a survey of students conducted in almost 1,300 schools nationwide (Gottfredson and Gottfredson, 2001), 7.6 percent of male respondents and 3.8 percent of female respondents at the secondary level reported that they belonged to a gang. Based on the increased number of students reporting a gang presence at school between 2001 and 2010, this number has likely increased, although no subsequent nationwide studies have been conducted.

Gang members do not leave their conflicts, attitudes, and behaviors outside the school doors. Some of the most dangerous gang activities in any community may take place in and around local schools. Gang members encounter each other at school during class changes, in the lunchroom, in common areas, and during assemblies

and school events. Students may loiter on or around the school campus before and after school, and conflicts may occur between rival gangs. In some instances, gang members come to school to engage in criminal behavior (drug dealing) or to confront rivals.

Because of the potential for violent gang interactions at school, school staff members and administrators need to formulate a plan to deal with gang activity. This article provides an overview of action steps that schools can take to prevent, intervene in, and suppress violent gang activity, as well as crisis response plans that can be developed to address potential acts of school violence including, but not limited to, gang activity.

Why Schools May Deny Gang Problems

In some instances, schools have operated like islands in the larger community, with school administrators and staff believing they are immune to community problems or failing to recognize the signs of gang activity at school. In other instances, heavy-handed responses to gangs have pushed gang-involved youth away from school and educational opportunities, exacerbating community and individual gang problems.

For a number of reasons, denial seems to be especially prevalent among school administrators. Although only a very small percentage of principals (5 percent) reported the presence of gangs in their schools, more than one-third (36 percent) reported the presence of gangs in the immediate community. Interestingly enough, this study reports that "in the 10 percent of schools with the highest student gang participation rates (14.4 percent or more of students reporting gang participation), only 18 percent of the principals" reported the presence of gangs. (Gottfredson and Gottfredson, 2001).

There are many reasons that school personnel may not acknowledge the existence of gangs.

First, in many cases, school staff and administrators do not recognize gang activity when they see it. Training and preparation are crucial to an effective response to gangs in the learning environment.

Second, for many school administrators, public admission that the school has a population of gang members might seem like a failure to properly control the school climate. It is important for school administrators to realize that there is no shame attached to the presence of gang members in school. The only shame lies in failing to adequately prepare for or address the needs of gang-involved students.

Failing to adequately address gang problems can lead to increased risk of victimization in the school setting for both students and staff members.

Third, school-choice laws that have been passed in many areas make it possible for parents to remove their children from a particular school. Schools with a reputation for having a gang problem can lose students. Other negative ramifications for school administrators and the school itself may include loss of funding due to population decreases. However, failing to adequately address gang problems can lead to increased risk of victimization in the school setting for both students and staff members. Schools must walk the fine line between overreacting to the gang problem and attempting to hide or downplay it.

Finally, schools may be reluctant to share information on gang activity in and around the school for fear of violating confidentiality laws. In most cases, this is also a training issue. Schools can legally share information on gang-involved students across agency boundaries with a number of key agencies, including law enforcement and juvenile probation/parole. Schools also have a responsibility to continually share information on policies and procedures relating to gangs with parents and students. In addition, schools and law enforcement can and should share information about gang-related incidents involving students on campus or in the community. This shared information can help these entities prevent further acts of retaliation and violence.

Most schools and school districts that have openly addressed gang problems have found that students and staff members, as well as parents and the community, are safer and feel more secure.

Assessing School Gang Problems

Conducting a comprehensive assessment of gang activity in and around the school is a critical piece of responding effectively to gangs. This assessment should consider a number of factors:

1) Local demographics: What does the local community look like, and has this changed over time? What factors locally including family structure, native

language, immigration status, economic issues, and educational attainment levels within the home are affecting students?

2) Crime and law enforcement data: Schools should build a partnership with local law enforcement agencies for the purposes of sharing data, exchanging information on gang-related incidents, and partnering on school safety issues. Law enforcement data can help to determine the level and extent of gang crime in the local community, which then plays a role in the school's response to gangs. Schools in an urban community with a serious level of gang-related violence need to adopt a range of prevention, intervention, and suppression policies and programs. Schools in areas with a less serious level of gang offending can focus primarily on prevention and intervention activities, and building a collaborative gang prevention network with partner agencies.

Schools also need to consider collecting data on gang-involved incidents that occur in and around the school. Many schools do not factor in gang affiliation or motivation when disciplinary incidents occur within the school setting. Gang-related bullying, assaults, thefts, harassment, and other incidents involving gang members at school can easily erupt into more serious situations without an appropriate response that takes gang affiliations and motivations into consideration. Schools that do collect this information find that they are better able to appropriately respond to future gang incidents. For instance, when the Pittsburgh public school district started to collect information on gang incidents at school, officials found that they were able to develop a preemptive crisis response targeting known gang members with conflict resolution and mediation strategies that led to the prevention of several potentially violent incidents in school.

Schools must identify the level and extent of gang involvement in disciplinary problems and must examine each incident carefully, particularly with the input of school resource officers or security personnel to determine appropriate responses. The following factors should be considered: What were the motivations for the incident? What were the related causal factors? What individuals and/or groups were involved? What follow-up should occur with these groups?

3) Student and staff perceptions: What do school personnel think about gang activity in and around the school? What gang activities and behaviors are teachers, administrators, counselors, secretaries, cafeteria workers, custodians, athletic staff, and security/law enforcement) observing? What problems do students report that are associated with gangs?

4) Resources: What programs, staff, funding, and resources (including local community and governmental agencies) are available to address gang problems in and around the school? What partners should be engaged?

A template for conducting a gang assessment that can easily be adapted to the needs of individuals schools and districts is found in “A Guide to Assessing Your Community’s Youth Gang Problem,” <http://www.nationalgangcenter.gov/Comprehensive-Gang-Model/Assessment-Guide>.

The assessment should identify the level of impact of local gangs in and around the school, factors that are potentially contributing to or exacerbating the problem, and considerations for responding, whether these are cultural, familial, and/or economic. For maximum effectiveness, the assessment should drive the actions of the school in implementing gang-related policies and programs.

School-Based Gang Prevention

School personnel must create a systemic approach to reduce and prevent gang involvement. School administrators should develop a diverse task force composed of administrators, staff members, students, law enforcement, and other agencies/businesses. The task force will assess the impact gangs have on the school, identify gangs in the local neighborhood, and develop strategies to eliminate gang behaviors from the school campus. Part of this systemic approach includes developing action plans that prevent and intervene in gangs.

Schoolwide gang prevention efforts include many of the points discussed previously, including gang awareness, classroom management, dress-code policies, and provision of mentors and role models. Prevention efforts could include:

- Providing students with skills and knowledge to help them avoid gang involvement. For example, schools may opt to utilize the Gang Resistance Education And Training (G.R.E.A.T.) program, in which trained law enforcement officers provide skills-based classroom lessons in elementary and middle schools. G.R.E.A.T. officers and deputies also may provide summer activities and a family-strengthening curriculum.
- Implementing after-school activities that provide youth with opportunities to become involved with positive groups and to develop skills that will allow them to stay out of gangs. These programs offer youth structured and skills-based programming during critical times when many youth may be unsupervised and on the streets. After-school programs are an opportunity to extend the school day and provide additional academic support and development. Research has indicated that early academic success is a protective factor against gangs and delinquent behaviors. After-school programs also offer an opportunity for youth to bond with positive role models and learn new social-emotional skills. The Boys & Girls Clubs of America utilize a “targeted prevention” approach that

identifies youth who may be at high risk of gang involvement because of a number of risk factors, including gang involvement by other family members. These youth are targeted or selected for involvement in prevention efforts through after-school programs in many areas. This approach also could be replicated by school staff and paraprofessionals in areas where such programs are not available.

- Involving parents in gang prevention efforts. Schools may serve as hubs where parents are trained in gang awareness and strategies to keep their children out of gangs. Parents also may be recruited to protect the safety of students in and around the school campus simply by being visibly present before, after, and during school hours. One such program, Parents on Patrol, places trained parents at critical places in the community where they report any problems or safety concerns to the school or law enforcement. Many students must walk home through gang territories, where they may become targets of the local gang, or are driven to the gang out of fear and the need for protection. Safe-passage programs offer support, supervision, and protection for these youth to and from school and give parents or community members ownership in gang prevention and safety.

The OJJDP Strategic Planning Tool, <http://www.nationalgangcenter.gov/SPT>, developed by the National Gang Center, provides a list of research-based activities that are best practices for prevention among school-aged children (6–17). The following are applicable to schools, but some may require a collaborative approach in conjunction with other agencies:

- Provide family strengthening/effectiveness training to improve parenting skills, build life skills in youth, and strengthen family bonds.
- Promote emotional and social competencies in elementary school-aged children, while simultaneously enhancing the educational process in the classroom.
- Increase prosocial peer bonds, and strengthen students’ attachment and commitment to schools.
- Increase teachers’ classroom management, interactive teaching, and cooperative learning skills.
- Develop gender-specific programs.
- Improve parents’ involvement in and support for their children’s academic progress.
- Steer at-risk youth from delinquent peers to prosocial groups and provide positive peer modeling.

- Engage community groups, individuals, and institutions to respond to the multiple needs of youth and their families through case management for the highest-risk youth and their families; provide an array of services, after-school activities, and community activities to strengthen families.
- Mobilize community leaders and Boys & Girls Club staff to recruit at-risk and gang-involved youth into club programs in a nonstigmatizing way through direct outreach efforts to discuss local gang issues, and design a strategy to offer youth alternatives to the gang lifestyle.
- Educate youth to modify their perception that gang membership is beneficial.
- Involve grassroots organizations in the creation of violence-free zones.
- Provide social support for disadvantaged and at-risk youth from helping teachers, responsible adults, parents, and peers.
- Provide after-school programs.

School-Based Gang Intervention

Gang intervention in schools can take two separate approaches. The *whole-school approach* sets strict standards of behavior including enforced dress-code policies that do not allow any gang identifiers or paraphernalia. The whole-school approach ensures that all staff members are trained in the latest gang trends and identifiers and that they monitor gang members very closely. Gang-involved students who violate dress codes and behavior codes are suspended or expelled from the school depending on the severity of infractions. This approach works best if the school adds a prescriptive reentry program for the suspended or expelled students. The reentry program may include parenting classes for parents and guardians of gang-involved students. The program also may include counseling, mental health assistance, and social-emotional skill development efforts that the student must complete before being allowed to transition from alternative education into a traditional school. Schools also may include student-assistance programs that help youth learn the skills needed to succeed in meeting the schools' behavior guidelines.

The *individual gang intervention approach* seeks to direct gang-involved students away from the gang. While still enforcing gang dress codes and behavior codes, this approach actively seeks to provide gang-involved students with skills and support to allow them to remove themselves from the gang life. Schools may opt to do this as a pull-out program, pulling students out of classes on a rotational basis so they do not miss the same class twice in a row. The approach also may be used as a lunchtime program, a Saturday school program, an opportunity class, or on-campus suspension. Whatever the mechanism, the approach is

to provide students with connections, knowledge, skills, and motivation to begin to remove themselves from the gang and negative gang-related behaviors. The San Diego County Office of Education has implemented a strong school-based gang intervention effort. It includes a 16-week curriculum designed for gang members to first identify and process the consequences of gang involvement before moving on to skill development. The approach allows gang-involved students to connect or bond with a positive role model and provides them with community-service opportunities.

The OJJDP Strategic Planning Tool, <http://www.nationalgangcenter.gov/SPT>, also provides a list of research-based activities that are best practices for intervention with school-aged children (ages 6–17).

- Build a comprehensive framework for the integration of child and adolescent services programming that links the juvenile justice system with human service and other related agencies, including schools, child welfare services, mental health agencies, and social services.
- Create an infrastructure consisting of client information exchange, cross-agency client referrals, a networking protocol, interagency councils, and service integration.
- Target potential and current serious, violent, chronic gang-involved juvenile offenders for resource priority.
- Provide case management by a particular agency for case conferencing and to coordinate services for offenders and the families of gang youth.
- Provide mentoring of at-risk and gang youths, counseling, referral services, gang conflict mediation, and anti-gang programs at schools in the community.
- Provide close supervision and monitoring of gang-involved youth by agencies of the juvenile/criminal justice system and also by community-based agencies, schools, and grassroots groups.
- Provide intensive probation supervision linked with more structured behavioral and/or skill-building and multimodal interventions.
- Provide direct placement and referral of youth for employment, training, education, and supervision.
- Provide alternatives to gang involvement, including remedial and enriched educational programs for gang youth with academic problems and vocational and apprentice training.

Classroom Strategies for Teachers

Classroom teachers are a critical component in gang prevention and intervention. Teachers have the best

opportunity to connect or bond with students. Students who feel connected to the school and its staff are less likely to be involved in negative behaviors. Teachers should try to increase rapport with all students, particularly those who are gang-involved. Some tips for teachers include the following:

- Create a positive classroom climate. The classroom must be a peaceful and neutral space. This means that teachers must maintain vigilance over the slightest signs of “disrespect,” stare-downs, and challenges. This includes the use of gang hand signs, symbols, colors, or language.
- Do not allow gang-type graffiti to be displayed on notebooks, papers, homework assignments, or school property. If graffiti is discovered on desks or other school property, the graffiti should be reported to the school administrator, documented, photographed, shared with local law enforcement, and removed immediately.
- Establish simple and clear rules for behavior in the classroom. List those rules along with possible consequences. Teachers must consistently enforce the rules in a calm, low-key manner. Gang members need structure in the classroom setting and must be disciplined for negative or disruptive behaviors. When disciplining gang-involved students, teachers should always quietly ask them to remain after class to discuss rule violations. Adults should ensure that a gang-involved student does not have his associates with him during discussions. This model of discipline has been found to work best when dealing with gang-involved students.
- Develop rapport with gang-involved students. Rapport is a critical factor in both prevention and intervention. If a gang-involved student can connect with the adult in the classroom, he may come to see the teacher as a role model. It also makes discipline much easier. Connect with gang-involved youth as much as possible outside the classroom, including in the hallways and during lunch. Do not be afraid to talk to them about their aspirations and hopes or about informal matters such as favorite sports teams. These informal discussions show students that teachers do care for them in and out of the classroom, and this facilitates rapport and bonding.

Team-Based Information— Sharing, Case Management, and Crisis Response

School staff members are often left alone to decipher and interpret student behaviors and then take disciplinary actions. Schools can increase their effectiveness by

bridging the gap between schools and outside agencies. One possible approach is to convene a multidisciplinary team to case-manage targeted students. This team-based approach allows school personnel to enlist partners to mobilize resources and give additional insight on the student, family, and community dynamics that are affecting a student, his peers, and the learning environment inside the school.

Ideally, a school-based multidisciplinary team should include professionals from various fields, such as mental health workers, local law enforcement, local county departments (such as children and youth services), juvenile probation, youth organizations (for street-level information), and faith-based organizations.

Each team member plays a unique role. Law enforcement representatives may observe and report on criminal conduct by a student and his family. Local youth-serving organizations may have insights into community factors affecting the family. The school social worker may have information about the student's history and family situation. School representatives can speak to the student's performance and behavior. Many times, students are concurrently enrolled in numerous programs or have received multiple services. In a multidisciplinary team, individualized solutions for students can be developed from an open discussion that draws on past history, what worked, and what did not work.

Schools may be concerned about sharing information about individual students across agency boundaries because of student confidentiality laws and policies. However, the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) states that school personnel can share information about specific students with other disciplines as long as this information is related to health and safety emergencies. The key issues related to serving students with a multidisciplinary approach are documenting the health/safety dangers posed by gangs in the school setting, as well as having parental consent to share information across agency boundaries.

This multidisciplinary team should develop criteria for targeting students, such as gang membership, demographic factors, school and behavioral history, and identified risk factors. The team members should identify students needing specialized gang interventions and develop service plans to intervene with these students (involving other key agencies). This work should be documented, and the students should receive ongoing case management to ensure that the services remain appropriate and are adapted as needed. Team members should provide regular updates to the team on the progress of the student and family and explore responses to the youth's gang involvement. Appropriate responses may include employment, school-based interventions, outreach to the student and his peers/family members, family interventions, and interventions that target key mental health and substance-abuse issues.

These multidisciplinary teams are also well-equipped to provide a crisis response. First, the team can preplan for possible school scenarios involving gangs. From that discussion, a plan for information-sharing between key agencies and team members should be implemented. Some examples of questions that need to be addressed by the team include: When should police officers be called to the school campus? What types of information on incidents that occur in the community will be shared with school administrators, and how? When should team members be called to the school to support intervention activities?

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) Comprehensive Gang Model provides a template for implementing a multidisciplinary team to intervene with gang-involved youth. A guide to implementing this model can be found online at <http://www.nationalgangcenter.gov/Content/Documents/Implementation-Manual/Implementation-Manual.pdf>. A concise description of the team approach is found in “Multidisciplinary Gang Intervention Teams,” <http://www.nationalgangcenter.gov/Content/Documents/NYGCBulletin3.pdf>.

Policies and Procedures to Prevent Gang Incidents

Set clear rules for all students, and require all staff to constantly enforce them

Every school should set firm, clear policies regarding gang behavior. Schools should not allow gangs to identify themselves on the school campus or during school activities through gang-related clothing styles or gang paraphernalia. Ensure that students and parents know the rules up front and the consequences if rules are broken. Schools should consider a dress code that prohibits gang-related clothing, such as extremely oversized clothing, references to specific gangs or gang affiliations, gang colors, customized sports paraphernalia, or other specific items that may signify gang affiliation in the local community. To reinforce these standards, remind parents on a quarterly basis about the dress code. Schools can also work with local law enforcement agencies to stay current on local trends and to identify items that should not be allowed.

Gangs also should not be allowed to stake a visual foothold in the school by using gang-related graffiti to mark territory. Gang-related graffiti may lead to conflicts between students. At a minimum, such graffiti makes a visible statement to students that gangs are present in the school, which can be very intimidating. Graffiti should be photographed, documented, and removed immediately. It may be found in obvious places, such as bathrooms, classrooms, and hallways, but it also may be found on desks, inside lockers, on school books, and in more hidden areas. It may be used to claim territory within the school, as it is on the streets; to intimidate rivals within the school setting; or simply to advertise the presence of the gang.

School policies should not overreact to gangs, but they also should not underreact or ignore existing problems. The goal of these policies should be to make it clear to students that gang behavior in any form will not be tolerated at school to ensure the safety of all students during the school day.

Appendix 1 (on page 11) provides a discussion of common gang identifiers found at school.

Train staff members to recognize and deal appropriately with gang issues

School staff members should receive regular training on current gang trends and identifiers in the local community, including the signs and symbols of local gang activity, along with rivalries between local gangs and current criminal activities.

Further, school staff at all levels need training on positive discipline strategies that can be used to address negative behaviors effectively. These strategies will be discussed in more detail later in this article.

Ongoing documentation of gangs present in the school and their activities

School personnel may believe they are legally forbidden to collect information of this nature and/or share it with law enforcement personnel. School resource officers or school police departments can assist the school with this function. Helpful information includes documentation of gang graffiti written in and around the school grounds and its meaning, information on typical identifiers used in the school setting by local gangs, information on gang-related tattoos, and members and/or rivals of groups functioning in and around the school. In the event of a gang conflict, prior knowledge of the existence and membership of these groups can allow a much more targeted and effective response, such as mediating conflicts before they get out of control and separating students with ongoing conflicts from one another.

Reach out to assist parents and make them partners in their children’s education

Schools should share information with parents immediately about any negative behavior that might indicate a student’s gang involvement. The school should hold regular meetings with parents and inform them about gang, drug, and violence issues in the community. Teachers should be given information on community support and educational programs so that it is readily available for parents who may be struggling with their children.

Help increase student success and feelings of attachment to the school

Student success and bonding to the school occur in two ways. First, schools should address learning deficits at the earliest possible point to keep students on-target with academic performance. Early school failure is a noted risk factor for gang involvement, and opens the doors to many other anti-social behaviors, as well. This may

require providing readily accessible remedial assistance for students who have fallen behind their peers.

Secondly, students need positive relationships with adults in the school setting. Students who feel they belong and are valued at school are far less likely to be involved in negative behaviors such as gangs and drug use. These connections should occur not only in the classroom and during extracurricular activities, but also during interactions with other types of school personnel. All school employees can and should be encouraged to make connections with students: bus drivers, counselors, teacher assistants, cafeteria workers, school resource officers, and even clerical staff can play meaningful roles in the lives of young people. A safe and welcoming school can be created when all school personnel strive to make every student feel needed and wanted.

Schools can also consider increased recruitment and expanded programs to provide more students with opportunities to participate in activities. The school should work actively to get student input on potential barriers to their participation in school activities and desired activities, and activities should not focus solely on sports.

The school also can allow groups that provide positive alternatives to gangs to advertise on school grounds. These groups might include the Boys & Girls Clubs, Big Brothers Big Sisters, local community centers, county or city recreation programs, and so forth. The school should invest in targeted programs that give students a helping hand in achieving academic success. Early school failure is a factor that contributes to joining gangs. Programs that help students attain grade-level academic skills and thus, feelings of personal competency, can decrease the attraction of gangs.

Ask staff members to remain accessible to students during school hours

Relationships with school staff—especially teachers, coaches, and counselors—are an important resource for students who may lack other positive role models and adult support.

Provide effective strategies to solve problems and resolve disputes

Schools may consider offering students classes on anger management, conflict resolution, and peer mediation to help them learn to independently solve problems. School staff also should receive this sort of training so that they can model positive conflict-resolution skills for students. Schools should address issues such as roughhousing in their codes of conduct because this behavior can easily escalate into more serious conflicts. One means of preventing gang problems is to focus on solving little problems before they grow into big ones.

School staff members should be strong and visible

Staff members are on the front line of a school's defense against gang involvement. On many school campuses, only a few teachers are willing to take a stand against gang activity and work towards providing an adequate response. Students must see every member of the school staff working together and being consistent in dealing with gangs. Staff members should not belittle each other in front of students, should publicly support each other's decisions, and should meet privately to discuss problems or conflicts. They also should enforce school policies together. School staff members need to be present and visible where students are located, including in hallways during class changes, in the lunchroom, in bathrooms, and at school activities.

Zero-Tolerance Gang Policies

Since the mid-1990s, an increasing number of states and local school districts have implemented rules and laws with zero-tolerance consequences for certain violations of school rules. These policies have had mixed success at accomplishing their mission, which is to increase school safety. It is clear that some actions by students cannot be tolerated within the school setting, and students cannot be allowed to victimize other students. However, in some cases, zero-tolerance policies may go too far, penalizing students for relatively minor infractions and thus barring them from the opportunity to gain an education.

For instance, although gang clothing and identifiers should not be tolerated in the school setting, there is a wide variety of responses to these items besides suspension and/or expulsion. Some schools maintain a small clothes closet to allow students to change clothes if they wear prohibited items to school. Other schools may schedule meetings with parents to point out the offending items and ask parents/students to sign a behavioral contract agreeing that the items will not be worn at school. Others may simply contact parents and send students home to change clothes.

According to a research brief prepared by the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) on Educational Management (McAndrews/Tobin, 2001), elements of an effective zero-tolerance policy include the following:

- Specifying clear consequences for misbehavior, with consistency of application.
- Allowing flexibility and considering expulsion alternatives.
- Clearly defining what constitutes a weapon, a drug, or an act of misbehavior.
- Complying with state due-process laws and allowing for student hearings.
- Developing the policy collaboratively with all stake-holding agencies (e.g., state departments

of education, juvenile justice, and health and human services).

- Learning from the experiences educators have had with zero-tolerance policies in other states, schools, and districts.
- Integrating comprehensive health-education programs that include drug and alcohol curricula.
- Tailoring the policy to local needs.
- Reviewing the policy each year.

Safety Warnings for School Staff

Although the school itself may seem like a controlled setting, school staff members need to understand that certain actions on their part should be avoided. Violence has a clearly understood role in street gang culture, and adults can become targets of violence by failing to understand the potential ramifications of interactions with gang members.

For their own safety, school staff members should not:

- **Make fun of or “disrespect” any particular gang or group.** Never refer to a gang member as a “wannabe,” since this can be seen as provocation to commit an act of violence.
- **Demean or insult gang members.** Make it a policy to treat everyone with courtesy and respect.
- **Call out or humiliate a gang member in front of his peers.** If inappropriate behavior must be addressed, do it privately, one-on-one.
- **Set up opportunities for rival gangs to commit acts of violence.** For example, if members of rival gangs are caught fighting, they should be isolated rather than placed in the same room to await possible sanctions. The school grounds, cafeteria, administrative offices, hallways, classrooms, school events, and even bathrooms are all places where rival gang members may intersect. Plan ahead to prevent violence. These areas should be supervised by staff members to ensure that students are not victimized.
- **Favor one group over another group.** Enforce all policies equally for all groups. For instance, if the school color is red, and gangs in the area use red as an identifier, the wearing of red clothing must be addressed in a way that honors school traditions without allowing some gang members to flagrantly disregard school rules.
- **Let issues slide.** Rules must be enforced fairly and consistently with all students, or adults will appear weak and ineffectual. Gang members often get the impression that adults lack the capacity to protect them or address incidents of bullying or victimization. When this occurs,

they may take matters into their own hands or engage in acts of retaliation.

- **Imitate gang slang, clothing, hand signs, or symbols.** Imitation may be perceived as disrespectful by gang members. It also demeans the adult and removes him or her from a position of neutrality. Rather than establishing common ground through imitation, set an example with professional attire, and establish relationships through consistency and caring.
- **Focus solely on negative behaviors.** Provide gang members with opportunities to gain recognition for positive behaviors.

Warning Signs of Impending Gang Violence

Whenever gang members interact, whether at school or in other settings, there is always the possibility of violent conflict. Hence, adults need to be aware of youth behavior and affiliations. Gang members often follow unspoken rules that govern appropriate responses to disrespect, whether intentional or unintentional. Disrespectful actions might include confrontational glances, verbal exchanges, or nonverbal gestures. If a gang member feels disrespected, violence is a common response.

School staff members must be alerted to the following behaviors that may predict impending violence:

- **Mad-dogging or “hard looks”**—Gang members may exchange threatening glances with other youth or roll their eyes disrespectfully, hoping to provoke a confrontation.
- **Gang hand signs**—Gang members may sign their gang affiliation, hoping to provoke a response from rivals. Hand signs usually consist of alphabet letters, numbers, or symbols made with the hands. Hand signs should not be tolerated.
- **Verbal challenges**—Gang members may call out the name of their gang or make disrespectful and insulting remarks about rival gangs. Adults should discourage this behavior.
- **Groups squaring off**—Gang members may be preparing to fight.
- **Showing gang colors**—Gang members may carry concealed items in gang colors (such as bandanas) and flash these items to show disrespect for rival gangs.
- **Show-bys**—Gang members may drive by a building, showing off weapons, or they may display their weapons to other youths in advance of a shooting.
- **Reports of concern**—Youth may express concern that potential conflicts between gangs are impending. Any reports of concern by youth should always be investigated.

If these behaviors occur, school staff should be trained to respond calmly and appropriately, firmly stopping negative behaviors and notifying law enforcement when necessary.

Action Steps to Prevent a Gang Crisis at School

Around the United States, violent gang incidents have occurred on or around school campuses or at school events. In communities with entrenched gang problems, gang members may view the school campus as a viable place to locate and attack a rival gang member during instances of gang conflicts in the community. For this reason, schools need to have an action plan to follow to help prevent a violent incident involving gangs (or others) in the school.

Confidential reporting for students

Provide a confidential method whereby students can report rumors of potential violence and/or weapons. This might include a toll-free hotline to the district office, a confidential suggestion box on the school campus that is checked every hour, and/or training for students on how and when to make a report of concern. Every report should be followed up in a way that protects the identity of the reporter. Emphasize that telling is not snitching when encouraging students to report possible dangers at school.

Reports of weapons

Staff members should immediately report to administrators any rumors of students carrying weapons on the school campus or of a potential violent incident; every rumor must be followed up. Contact law enforcement immediately if a weapon is reported on campus. School staff members should not attempt to disarm a student or other person without law enforcement assistance, if at all possible. Most school staff members lack the training and skills to successfully disarm an armed individual, and may cause harm to themselves or others. Do not assume that a positive relationship with a student guarantees a staff member's protection.

Controlling entrances and exits

If the school design allows, school personnel should be stationed at entrances to greet persons entering the school building. The person at the entry should ensure that visitors have a valid reason for entering the school. Also, the person at the entry point should be equipped with a means to communicate with the school office (radio, cell phone, etc.). There is no reason for strangers to be walking through a school unsupervised and unchallenged.

Training and code signal

Schools routinely drill for fires and other emergencies. Drilling for a crisis involving an armed intruder or an act of gang-related violence within the school setting

requires a different sort of practice. Many schools have implemented a code word for the staff that can be broadcast over the intercom to signal a crisis without alarming the students. For this sort of crisis, staff members should clear the hallways and move students into classrooms, locking the doors, as soon as possible. Like fire drills, these crisis drills should be practiced at regular intervals.

Responding to Worst-Case Scenarios

Armed intruder or other serious crisis

Contact local law enforcement immediately. The person making contact should stay on the phone with the police dispatcher until officers arrive. This person should be prepared to provide the dispatcher with a physical description of the intruder, his or her probable location, and the direction in which he/she was last seen moving. Other information the officers may need can be provided through the connection with the dispatcher.

Violent incident involving rival gangs spills into the school

Prior documentation of and knowledge about gangs and gang members present in the school can allow the school to preemptively respond at the beginning of the school day to gang-related tensions in the aftermath of a violent gang-related incident. Gang members from the groups involved should be segregated and provided with counseling and/or mediation, and ground rules can be established to ensure the safety of all students. The situation should be closely monitored by law enforcement and/or school personnel to address any issues that arise.

Aftermath of a Crisis in the School or Community

Schools need to form partnerships with appropriate community agencies/mental health providers and law enforcement agencies. These partnerships enable schools to be aware of violent incidents in the community that might spill over into a school or cause residual trauma and fear for students. When a serious incident has occurred in the community, partners can be convened to formulate an action plan to address student needs and to circumvent retaliation. Issues to address might include grief, post-traumatic stress disorder, and conflict resolution/mediation between groups involved in the incident. ■

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Appendix 1

Gang Identifiers in School

Gang behaviors may vary significantly from one region of the country to another, or even within the same county or area of a single community. It is impossible for a single article to detail every combination of symbols and identifiers found in a specific area, so it is best for schools to work with their local law enforcement agencies to share information if at all possible. This section provides a brief overview of common gang identifiers.

Clothing, hand signs, colors—do they still matter?

At one time, it was relatively easy to identify gang members by their clothing, hand signs, graffiti, and tattoos, as well as by their attitude of flaunting their gang membership. Today, in many parts of the United States, gang members may be less likely to flaunt their membership in a gang with colors, gang attire, and hand signs. With increased sentencing penalties and increased police attention, many gang members now hide the symbols of their gang affiliation. However, these signs and symbols still exist, and school personnel in gang-affected areas should learn as much as possible about the identifiers for active gangs in their areas.

External identifiers such as clothing and symbols should never be the sole focus in gang identification. Instead, the behavior of groups and individuals, especially criminal involvement, in context with appearance, is the primary standard to determine gang affiliation.

Street gangs use various forms of communication. These may include a particular style of dress, hand signs, specific symbols and/or colors, and graffiti incorporating the symbols and colors associated with a particular gang set. Gang members use these identifiers to communicate their gang affiliation, to create respect (fear) among community members, and to challenge rival gang members. School staff should be regularly trained, and work closely with law enforcement personnel, to document, track, and intervene when they observe gang communication.

Gang Attire

The evolution of traditional street gang attire can be traced through the decades, especially in the Hispanic culture, back to the days of the pachucos (Mexican-American youth) on the West Coast in the 1940s and early 1950s. The pachuco look—khaki pants, white T-shirt, and plaid shirt—came about through economic necessity. This look remains common with many gangs around the United States. However, over the last 60 years, gangs in different regions of the United States have put their own spin on these traditional gang identifiers, incorporating sports clothing, jewelry, and specific brands of clothing as the badge of their gang affiliation.

Gang members may wear athletic shoes in specific brands and styles; athletic jogging or warm-up suits;

professional baseball, football, and basketball athletic jerseys; blue jeans; and hip-hop attire. If they wear sports clothing, they often modify or alter these items to reflect their gang affiliation. Although this clothing has no meaning to the average citizen, gang members select clothing items that have some significance to their particular gang. This symbolism is shown in the color of the item, names or initials on the clothing, an insignia or logo, and numbers on the clothing.

Gang members wear gang colors and symbols on many items: shirts, bandanas, jewelry, sports clothing (check for alterations), hats (including altering or writing graffiti on the insides of hats), hairbands, shoelaces, belts, belt buckles, and specific shoe brands whose names or logos have a specific meaning to the gang.

Shirts and other items with Old English-style or airbrushed lettering may spell out gang names, symbols, acronyms, individual monikers/nicknames, and numbers. Another common customized design is a reference to gang members who have “fallen in the line of battle.” The members of the gang may wear such shirts to funerals and in the community or school, paying homage to these fallen peers with slogans such as *por vida* (“for life”) or RIP (“rest in peace”).

Much of the gang-style clothing seen today is current fashion rather than an admission of gang membership. However, careful attention should be paid to modified or customized clothing, which may contain specific references to an individual’s gang affiliation.

School staff members must provide warnings to young people and their parents about the dangers of wearing gang-style clothing. The main reason that students should not wear gang clothing is for their own safety. In gang-prone areas, if gang members see a young person wearing colors, numbers, brands, or symbols closely associated with rival gangs, they may shoot first and ask questions later.

Hand Signs

Gang members use hand signs to:

- Show affiliation to their set.
- Show disrespect to rivals.
- Challenge rivals.
- Provoke confrontations.

To a gang member, a hand sign is a nonverbal form of communication that can lead to violence.

Many gangs have their own hand signs. To throw a hand sign at a rival gang member is considered an insult or a challenge, called “set tripping.” Set tripping is often the catalyst for gang-related violence.

There is no good reason for gang members to use hand signs at school. School staff should learn to recognize this behavior, and it should be strictly prohibited on the school campus and at school events.

Gang Graffiti

Gang graffiti gives insights into gang rivalries, affiliation, and territory in a given community and can often be found at school. Gang graffiti may include the following elements:

- The name and/or initials of the gang and, if relevant, its overall affiliation (Crips/Bloods/Sureños/Folks, etc.).
- Threats or challenges to rivals. These may include abbreviations such as BK for Blood Killer, CK for Crip Killer, or rival gang names including Killer or Killa. The number 187, common in gang graffiti around the United States, represents the California Penal Code for homicide. Rival gangs also may be threatened or “disrespected” by crossing their names out with an X or a line, or by writing insults or slurs next to their names.
- Hints about the history of the gang, such as telephone area codes, territorial markers, and street names from the gang’s originating area.

- A placa (roll call or list of the gang members’ nicknames). Gang members often refer to one another by their nicknames and may not know the first and/or last names of fellow gang members. These nicknames often describe something about the gang members, such as physical appearance or personality. Names with the number 2 or higher behind them indicate there is more than one person in the gang with that nickname. When reading the graffiti, one can often easily determine that the scribe is either the first or the last moniker listed. As a matter of respect, a scribe may list monikers of his close associates first and his own last. However, if the same graffiti is done in a rival gang’s turf, the scribe is likely to list his moniker first to let the rival gang know that it was he who initiated the insult and marked his territory.
- Statements bragging about the gang’s reputation. These include words such as loc/loco (“crazy”) and rifamos (“the best”).

For schools, the best policy is to plan for and remove graffiti as soon as possible to maintain a clean and orderly school environment. The longer graffiti is left visible in the school setting, the less safe students will feel, and the more likely a confrontation between rival gangs becomes.

Appendix 2

Do's and Don'ts for School Personnel

DO	DON'T
Do treat gang-involved students with the same respect and value shown to other students.	Do not humiliate or embarrass gang-involved students (especially in front of peers).
Do have high expectations for academic achievement.	Do not publicly praise a gang member for academic achievement before checking with the student.
Do expect gang-involved students to submit assignments.	Do not allow students to write gang symbols or to turn in assignments with gang-style writing.
Do provide more cooperative and hands-on learning experiences.	Do not allow gang members from the same set to work together.
Do actively involve gang members in the learning process.	Do not allow gang-involved students to “disappear” in the classroom.
Do talk to students individually about gang involvement.	Do not allow your classroom to be used as a gang forum.
Do enlist gang-involved students to work with other students on school projects and other extracurricular activities.	Do not allow students to form cliques and exclude other groups.
Do set definite rules and consequences. Suspend, file charges, etc., if warranted. Gang members respect and expect discipline and structure.	Do not change your mind about enforcing rules. Gang members view inconsistency as a weakness and will exploit it.
Do enforce all rules with respect.	Do not challenge or try to intimidate gang-involved youth, especially in front of their peers.
Do provide consistent consequences for <u>ALL</u> students.	Do not make exceptions for favorite students.
Do stay current on words or activities that are gang-related: dress, rap music, hair nets, etc.	Do not allow students to use words or activities that are gang-related.
Do know students by street names or nicknames.	Do not allow students to refer to each other by gang monikers.
Do give gang members responsibility that enhances their positive self-esteem: tutors, helpers, etc.	Do not trust gang members completely. Be a guide and a mentor, not a peer.
Do show concern and empathy for gang-involved youth.	Do not become an enabler by providing excuses for students' negative behaviors.
Do keep communication with gang-involved youth informal, open, and honest.	Do not become a home boy/girl to gang members.

Appendix 3

Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)

The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) (20 U.S.C. §1232g; 34 CFR Part 99) is a federal law that protects the privacy of student education records. The law applies to all schools that receive funds under an applicable program of the U.S. Department of Education.

FERPA gives parents certain rights with respect to their children's education records. These rights transfer to a student when he or she reaches the age of 18 or attends a school beyond the high school level. Students to whom the rights have transferred are "eligible students."

- Parents or eligible students have the right to inspect and review a student's education records maintained by the school. Schools are not required to provide copies of records unless, for reasons such as great distance, it is impossible for parents or eligible students to review the records. Schools may charge a fee for copies.
- Parents or eligible students have the right to request that a school correct records that they believe to be inaccurate or misleading. If the school decides not to amend the record, the parent or eligible student then has the right to a formal hearing. If, after the hearing, the school again decides not to amend the record, the parent or eligible student has the right to place a statement with the record setting forth his or her view about the contested information.
- Generally, schools must have written permission from a parent or eligible student to release any information from a student's education record. However, FERPA allows schools to disclose those records, without consent, to the following parties or under the following conditions (34 CFR § 99.31):
 - o School officials with legitimate educational interest;
 - o Other schools to which a student is transferring;
 - o Specified officials for audit or evaluation purposes;
 - o Appropriate parties in connection with financial aid to a student;
 - o Organizations conducting certain studies for or on behalf of the school;
 - o Accrediting organizations;

- o To comply with a judicial order or lawfully issued subpoena;
- o Appropriate officials in cases of health and safety emergencies; and
- o Local and state authorities, within a juvenile justice system, pursuant to specific state law.

Schools may disclose, without consent, "directory" information, such as a student's name, address, telephone number, date and place of birth, honors and awards, and dates of attendance. However, schools must tell parents and eligible students about directory information and allow parents and eligible students a reasonable amount of time to request that a school not disclose directory information about them. Schools must notify parents and eligible students annually of their rights under FERPA. The actual means of notification (special letter, inclusion in a Parent Teacher Association [PTA] bulletin, student handbook, or newspaper article) is left to the discretion of each school.

For additional information or technical assistance, you may call (202) 260-3887 (voice). Individuals who use a telecommunications device for the deaf (TDD) may call the Federal Information Relay Service at (800)-877-8339.

Or you may contact us at the following address:

Family Policy Compliance Office
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20202-5920

Further information on the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) can be found online at <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/brochures/elsec.pdf> and <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/index.html>.

The **National Gang Center** (NGC) is a collaborative effort between the Office of Justice Programs' (OJP) Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP).

This partnership works to provide professionals in the field of gangs with tools that can be used in a comprehensive range of strategies to respond to street gangs, from prevention and intervention to criminal justice strategies such as suppression, prosecution, and re-entry.

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