

Published in *Dispute Resolution Journal* — November 1998

Reducing Violence In U.S. Schools

The Role of Dispute Resolution

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In recent years, there has been an eruption of violent crimes committed in schools throughout the country. The best way to minimize such crimes, according to the authors, is to adopt the prevention and intervention strategies that are used in the workplace. These strategies should be employed as early as possible to "[teach] the child alternative, socially appropriate replacement responses..." A variety of mediation programs, outlined in this article, are breaking new ground.

In Springfield, Oregon, in May, a 15-year-old armed with a semiautomatic rifle begins firing in a crowded high school cafeteria, leaving two students dead and 22 others wounded.¹ In Arkansas, the police charges that a 13-year-old joined with an 11-year-old friend to kill five persons at the Westfield Middle School in Jonesboro in March. In Kentucky, Michael Carneal pleads guilty to killing three classmates and wounding five others at a prayer meeting in Heath High School in West Paducah late last year. At the time of the murder he was 14.

School life once resembled gentle scenes from "Goodbye, Mr. Chips," but in recent years bloody episodes like these have been acted out in secondary and middle schools throughout the country. Schools have become an arena for violent conflict, even in tranquil rural regions and well-to-do suburbs.

This unprecedented eruption of mayhem demonstrates an urgent need for school districts to emulate private and public sector workplaces by adopting a comprehensive violence reduction strategy, marrying the insights of conflict resolution and crisis management. The strategy should embrace both prevention and intervention. Prevention focuses on relieving the stress, hostility, and tension that can precede violence, and on ensuring detection of danger signals. Intervention entails responding promptly and effectively to threats and danger risks.

The strategy relies heavily on dispute resolution skills. Mediation, facilitation, and conciliation can ensure collaborative problem-solving by the violence-prevention team and mobilize the necessary school and community resources. Dispute resolvers,

moreover, are needed to help design and operate a variety of mechanisms for reducing tension and conflict on a day-to-day basis.

Violence Prone v. Violence Prepared Schools

Shootings, assaults, harassment, and bullying at school can be viewed as a manifestation of a worldwide eruption in workplace violence. Owing in part to the relatively free access to guns, the U.S. is often thought of as a particularly violent country, yet the Geneva-based International Labor Organization has concluded that violent incidents "occurring at workplaces around the globe suggest that this issue is truly one that transcends the boundaries of a particular country, work setting, or occupational group."² The ILO urged that "the full range of causes that generate violence should be analyzed and a variety of intervention strategies adopted. The response to workplace violence is too frequently limited, episodic, and ill-defined."³

Schools, like workplaces, may be divided into the crisis-prone and the crisis-prepared.⁴ The crisis-prone organization denies the possibility of crises, such as outbreaks of violence, and does nothing to prevent or prepare for them, thereby increasing the chance of severe disruption and harm. It reacts to events, rather than reading the warning signs that might allow tragedy to be averted or mitigated. Such an organization is typically mired in adversarial standoff, thwarting genuine internal communication and problem-solving.

The crisis-prepared organization, in contrast, systematically collects and analyzes early signs of distress, and it cultivates stakeholders' sense of mutual interest in responding effectively to incipient strains. Far from denying the possibility of crises, the organization determines in advance how to deal with them. Rather than hunting for a few supposed "bad apples" in the barrel, it checks the barrel itself for defects.

Violence is a human response to stress. Even "normal" people can react violently when stress becomes unbearable. Symptoms and signals of individual and organizational breakdown typically precede every threat or act of violence. A potential for violence is created when an organization does not read the signals or interrupt the downward spiral. A good prevention program seeks to identify and relieve the sources of stress in the workplace and put in place mechanisms to deal with threats.

School violence is an especially complex phenomenon, fueled by a rich mixture of stakeholders. They include employees (teachers, administrators, and non-teaching staff) and the consumers of educational services (students and parents). Each category of stakeholder is subject to its own variety of stress. The pressures of adolescence and the demand for academic performance affect students. Job demands and labor-management tension affect teachers, particularly when they are locked into hyper-adversarial relationships with school authorities and feel scapegoated in public discourse for student underachievement. Parsimonious taxpayers may be denying resources to administrators who must cope with high immigration levels, demands for bilingual education, and a plethora of government mandates.

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And in an era of rapid technological change, parents may feel burdened by the responsibility to ensure that their children are equipped with an education that prepares them for an uncertain future. Exponents of the gang lifestyle, moreover, may be lurking just beyond the schoolyard fence. In addition, the intense struggles central to the "cultural wars" of recent decades — over AIDS, illegal drug use, homosexuality, religious freedom, and free speech rights — have to a large extent taken place in the school setting.

Various forms of tension may influence each other. It would not be surprising if extreme antipathy in labor-management relations had a subtle spillover effect on the attitude of students. Conversely, ethnic and racial disputes among students can disrupt the relationship between the district, parent groups, and the unions. Effective violence prevention therefore depends on the ability of the school to deal comprehensively with the violence potential of employees, students, or parents.

Violence Committed by Students

An act of lethal violence committed by a school child is inherently disturbing. Something clearly needs to be done, as President Clinton has commented, "when high schools in small towns...are torn apart by disturbed children with deadly weapons."⁵ (The President convened a Washington conference on the issue in October, at which federal aid for violence prevention was proposed.) The last school year closed with the massacre in Oregon's Thurston High School. The shooting, perpetrated by Kip Kinkel, resembled multiple murders in schools in Mississippi, Pennsylvania, and like those previously mentioned in Kentucky and Arkansas.

Teachers, parents and students have been left to wonder how persons of tender age could be responsible for such savage slaughter. The media has been chastised for glorifying gore. According to a study by the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania, "television is putting a premium on attracting children aged five to 11, but many of the programs aimed at them contain violence and harsh language."⁶ The Internet is blamed for disseminating recipes for bombs — along with the implicit message that they should be used. The easy availability of guns has also been cited as the inducement to violence. Nearly a million U.S. students took guns to school during the 1997-98 academic year,⁷ apparently undeterred by the expulsion of about 6,000 of their peers for that offense in the previous school year.⁸

"There is a steady state of violence in our schools," according to Gregory Holtz, a public administration specialist at Pace University who monitors federal education grants. Most of it is verbal harassment and bullying caused by dysfunctional home life, bad role

models, and an apparent epidemic of Attention Deficit Disorder, contained pharmacologically with the drug Ritalin. Low-level violence can, however, escalate into something more serious. It is important to deal with violence in the early stages, Holtz maintains, because trying to deal with extreme cases is like devising "a program that remedies hurricanes."

A variety of legislative and technological fixes have been attempted. The Federal Gun-Free Schools Act, initially passed in 1994, mandates expulsion for at least a year and referral to the juvenile justice system whenever a student brings a firearm or explosive to school. Some jurisdictions are opting for "smart-gun" technology, which allows a weapon to be fired only by its owner, making it "childproof."⁹ And measures to control the violent content of television and films has been proposed, such as the V-chip.

Restricting access to weapons and monitoring entertainment may contribute in the long-term to a reduction in violence, but many of these measures involve contentious issues pertaining to the Bill of Rights. School officials cannot responsibly wait until such issues are resolved. They need to take immediate practical steps on their own initiative to forestall a repetition of such acts as Oregon's carnage in the cafeteria. The most immediate practical step would be to formulate a plan for responding to danger signals.

Reading the Signs

Although killings are often described as a surprise, in school as in the workplace there are usually signs that a person may be at risk for committing violence. All too often the signs are ignored, owing to the absence of coherent systems for ensuring early detection and effective countermeasures.

In the aftermath of the Oregon incident, the U.S. Department of Education listed 16 early "behavioral and emotional signs" that suggest a child may become violent.¹⁰ The signs are:

- **Social withdrawal**, often stemming from feelings of unworthiness and rejection.
- **Excessive feelings of isolation and being alone**, possibly due to "internal issues."
- **Excessive feelings of rejection**, which may lead to violent expression of "emotional distress."
- **Being a victim of violence**, either in the school or at home.
- **Feelings of being picked on and persecuted**, which can include ridicule or teasing.
- **Low school interest and poor academic performance**, leading to frustration.
- **Expression of violence in writings and drawings**, particularly when it is excessive and directed at specific persons.
- **Uncontrolled anger** that is expressed "frequently and intensely."
- **Patterns of impulsive and chronic hitting**, intimidation, and bullying behaviors, which can escalate if not addressed.
- **History of discipline problems**, which may be the result of behavior linked to unmet emotional needs.
- **Past history of violent and aggressive behavior**, including animal cruelty and arson.
- **Intolerance for differences and prejudicial attitudes**, based on race, gender, or physical appearance.
- **Drug and alcohol use**, which can reduce self-control.
- **Affiliation with gangs** that "support anti-social values."
- **Inappropriate access to, possession of, and use of firearms**, particularly by children with a history of aggressiveness or impulsiveness.

- **Serious threats of violence** — considered the most reliable indicator of dangerousness.

Besides *early* warning signs, the department listed *imminent* warning signs — indicators of immediate anger. The signs include serious fighting, property destruction, unexplained bouts of rage, threats of suicide, or "detailed threats of lethal violence." The department emphasizes that the early warning signs are not predictors of violence but merely grounds for further examination for the child's emotional condition. They are not listed in order of importance, nor are they all of equal weight. They are meant to be reported to specialists who are trained in evaluating behavioral disorders and, if necessary, attempting an intervention.

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School Districts Unprepared

Measured against the federal guidelines, the districts that suffered fatalities earlier this year were sorely wanting. In both the Oregon and Arkansas incidents, the students had articulated an intention to harm and a plan of dangerous action — which amount to an "imminent warning sign." In Arkansas, the young shooters voiced an intention to take revenge at the middle school for a perceived slight; one allegedly said that "I have a lot of killing to do." Kip Kinkel apparently had spoken to other students in Thurston High about doing "something stupid" and had been voted by his fellows as "Most Likely to Start World War III," a jest that proved to be figuratively prophetic. He idolized the Unabomber, boasted about stuffing "lit firecrackers into the mouths of squirrels and chipmunks,"¹¹ and bragging about having blown up a cow."¹² The day before the shooting, he had been suspended for bringing a stolen gun to school; the shooting may have been his retaliation for the suspension.

Clearly, these boys had been signaling to peers. The troubling expressions may never have reached adult ears because fellow students felt uncomfortable telling their elders or feared reprisal.

An alternative explanation is that teachers heard Kinkel's extreme statements but did not consider them remarkable because of similar threats of mass destruction had been uttered by other children; or Kinkel's pronouncements simply did not register on the district's radar, owing to denial.¹³

There is evidently a yawning gap between what is common knowledge on the school bus and what parents, teachers, counselors, or law enforcement authorities learn or take seriously. A cornerstone of violence prevention is the reporting of even casual threats. Students, like employees, should be encouraged — for their own safety — to report all menacing remarks or behavior, and these should be evaluated carefully by the violence prevention team and its experts.

Both the Oregon and Arkansas incidents involved students who displayed or practiced with weapons and bombs, another imminent warning sign. The discovery of a handgun in Kinkel's school locker the day before the fatal incident led to its confiscation. The school suspended the student and placed him in police custody. The police, in turn, booked and released the youth, finding no cause to detain him.

But confiscation failed to neutralize the danger, since the youth had ready access to other firearms and a stockpile of self-manufactured explosive devices at home. Although the legal grounds for detention may have been insufficient, there was still a potential for harm. The authorities neglected to undertake a prompt and thorough assessment of the risk, an essential element in violence prevention programs.

Bringing a weapon to school signified a need for protective measures. Interviewing classmates and teachers about the behavior that preceded the incident surely would have shown that some form of intervention was needed, particularly since the parents had noticed a sudden decline in academic performance. It was the boy's father — later found murdered, along with the mother, in the family home — who seemed to recognize that necessity; shortly before shots rang out in the school, he made a desperate phone call, seeking to enroll Kip in a program for troubled teens.

As in many safety crises, there was apparently no coordinated effort to evaluate the potential danger or shield possible targets when Kinkel first appeared in school with a gun. The school and the police department each followed its own, ultimately ineffective routine. Just as summarily discharging a disruptive or threatening employee rarely leaves the workplace more secure, suspension of a student without evaluation and remedial action is an inherently hazardous step. In the aftermath of the shooting, *the Portland Oregonian* reported that, "schools are pledging to follow up with students after they are expelled or suspended."¹⁴ The measures include alternative schools for those who are expelled and special training for their parents.

There has also been a rush to place schools in "lock down" mode by installing metal detectors, security cameras, and mirrors. In some instances, school districts offer financial rewards for youths who turn in their friends, and innocuous student essays or fictional accounts of violent incidents became a cause for suspicion.

The need to determine whether a student poses a danger should not become an excuse for a witch hunt. Early warning signs must not be misused as if they were a junior version of the supposed "profile" of the violent adult. Although there have been calls to make reporting of ominous remarks mandatory — following the model of child abuse laws — a mechanistic process for dealing with perceived threats is no substitute for judgement based on knowledge of the individual and the context.

Intervention Strategies

An important lesson to be drawn from the Oregon and Arkansas tragedies is that each district should have a standing crisis prevention and response team to identify potential threats, consult experienced risk assessors, and coordinate the school and community

resources needed to assure safety. A representative team is essential to ensure "buy-in" by all stakeholders, so that menacing remarks, like those that preceded the Oregon and Arkansas shootings, are reported promptly. "Too often," the Department of Education aptly observes, "caring individuals remain silent because they have no way to express their concerns."¹⁵ Even such details as the mode of communication among team members ought to be worked out in advance. Breakdown in communication is one of the first casualties of an emergency.

Intervention should be as early as possible and should include, in the words of the guide, "teaching the child alternative, socially appropriate replacement responses — such as problem-solving and anger control skills." Children who are at risk for violence "often need to learn interpersonal, problem-solving and conflict resolution skills at home and in school.

The Role of Mediation in Schools

In various parts of the country efforts have already begun to give schoolchildren the wherewithal to behave non-violently. In Clackamas County, Oregon, near Portland, the Family Court Services has launched a "peer mediation" program in six middle and high schools. Students are trained to mediate conflicts among their fellow students. As an exercise, trainees at McLoughlin Middle School are asked: "What problems do you see students struggling with...that might show up in mediation sessions?" They are also instructed to explain their role to the disputants:

We don't take sides.
We don't make decisions for you.
We don't decide who's right or wrong.
We are here to help you negotiate.

The ground rules include "no physical fighting or threats." The trainees learn to distinguish between that which must be reported to authorities and that which is confidential.

Teen mediators also participate with adults in sessions designed to help students whose barely contained aggressiveness is linked to dysfunctional family life. In one case, seven middle school boys were brought together around a table in a counselor's office with two teen mediators and a member of staff. "The scars displayed on their faces and arms gave an immediate indication that these youths are not strangers to violence," recalls Amy Swift, the social worker who manages the school's program. The mediators probed for the reasons why the boys battled with each other. Eventually, out came stories about the boys' neighborhood, which they called "Felony Flats." It was a story, according to Swift, about "gangs to protect themselves, the neighbors selling drugs, the parents at the bars." Such sessions, Swift believes, are more effective than having adults try to browbeat students.

The teen mediator program is an example of the "cadre approach," which focuses on a small number of relatively well-trained students. An alternative is the "total student body approach," in which conflict resolution is viewed as a life skill to be diffused throughout

the school population. In the latter approach, students take turns serving as mediator in order to internalize what educators David W. and Roger T. Johnson call the "credo of non-violence." The Johnsons tested that theory in a variety of schools, concluding that "it is the actual experience of being a mediator that best teaches students" how to settle their own disputes:

We found that before training, most students had daily conflicts, used destructive strategies that tended to escalate the conflict...and did not know how to negotiate. After training, students could apply the negotiation and mediation process to actual conflict situations, as well as transfer them to nonclassroom and nonschool settings, such as the playground, the lunchroom, and at home. Further, they maintained their knowledge and skills throughout the school year.¹⁶

At the publicly funded Upstate School Safety Center in New Paltz, N.Y. the presence of conflict resolution skills is considered a "protective" factor, tending to offset such violence-risk factors as the incidence of domestic abuse in students' homes. For the last two years, the center has been encouraging the formation of "school safety teams." The center, which now assists 35 school districts, offers training in the skills necessary to defuse situations that might lead to violence. In many schools, according to Joakim Lartey, a program coordinator at the center, "there is poor communication and the teachers don't know how to de-escalate the kids." His observation is supported by a survey of 348 Oregon schools conducted around the time of the Springfield incident; more than half of the schools agreed with the proposition: "Many teachers do not have appropriate conflict resolution skills." And fully 81% of the schools believed that the statement was true of students as well.¹⁷ If a district is racially and culturally diverse, the lack of communication and conflict skills could help foster ethnically-based gangs.

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The center uses a naturalist's taxonomy to rate the keenness of districts to prepare for the unthinkable. Those who are reluctant to acquire the necessary training — on the grounds that it "can't happen here" — are classified by the center as "ostriches." Those who prepare diligently and arm themselves with the skills needed to avoid dangerous confrontation are regarded more flatteringly as "beavers." The center takes pains to ensure proper teamwork, so that the violence-prevention plan does not suffer — in Lartey's words — "death by committee." It urges the safety teams to set measurable numerical goals, such as halving the number of suspensions by a target date.

Another approach to overly aggressive students draws upon the ancient notion of reintegration of an offender into the community. Ulster-Sullivan Mediation, based in Highland, NY, has developed the Suspension Re-Entry Program. It resembles victim-offender mediation, a technique often used as an adjunct to law enforcement. The program facilitates the return of students who have been suspended for making serious threats or using physical force against a teacher.

A community mediator meets separately with the teacher and the student, and then brings them together for a kind of spiritual healing in which a plan is made to avoid any repetition of the offense. "The suspension is turned into a cooling-off period," according to Clare Danielson, executive director of Ulster-Sullivan:

Punitive discipline does not solve the problem. It simply puts the emotional aspects of the conflict in the closet — to be taken out (or fall out) whenever the emotional door opens again.... There is resentment, anger, fear — all the negative emotions the person being disciplined feels....[The re-entry program] is the opportunity to work out the past difficulties in the relationship and establish a new way of being with each other.

The program was initiated in an upstate New York school district in the spring of 1996, and 12 students were brought back from suspension. All completed the school year.

An imaginative violence-prevention program also was developed at an unlikely site: Boston University Medical Center. Among the center's patients are teens who have sustained spinal injuries from gunshot wounds received in gang wars. Many of the wounded, now bound to wheelchairs, have been profoundly transformed by the experience. As one wrote in the program's newsletter, "When you are lying there, gasping for air, bleeding, going into shock, rushing towards death, all that hard core is gone." Teens in the center are inducted into the Spinal Cord Injury Violence Prevention Club, whose members "offer a positive alternative to retaliation" in their home neighborhoods, according to project coordinator, Joan Vaz Serra Hoffman. They help resolve disputes peacefully that might otherwise further the cycle of violence. Because of their ability to relate to peers, Hoffman urges that young persons be included in the planning of violence-prevention efforts.

Ideally, a violence-prevention and response team should include a representative of the union, because the safety of its members is at stake. Decisions can be made collaboratively with management, and the "buy in" of teachers, whose cooperation is essential, can be assured. All too often, however, the district is beset by union-management strife which prevents cooperation on violence prevention.

Constructing a Comprehensive Strategy

Sometimes labor relations and student behavior problems can be addressed in tandem. In California's Huntington Beach Union High School District, a comprehensive violence prevention strategy aimed at students emerged from the use of dispute resolution techniques to alter a poor labor relations climate.

The district encompasses three Orange County cities — Westminster, Huntington Beach, and Fountain Valley — along with six comprehensive high schools, a continuation school, and an adult education school. In the late 1970s, the district suffered from three teacher union strikes in five years as well as a plague of gang violence. In 1985, Bonnie Prouty Castrey, a federal mediator who lived in the community, was put forward as a

candidate for the school board because of her work in promoting labor-management cooperation. Castrey was told, "Look, we've got to stop fighting. Kids aren't learning, and what's really happening is that we're having a terrible time trying to negotiate contracts." There had not been a contract for 18 months, and children were being forced to decide whether they should cross picket lines in order to attend school. Because of her background, it was thought, Castrey could help create a climate that was conducive to labor-management peace and less troubling for the children.

She was elected, creating a majority that was ready to make labor-management peace. The board, the administration, and the district's three unions selected a conflict resolution process called Relationships By Objective (RBO). RBO is a form of "preventive mediation" pioneered by John Popular at the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service. FMCS describes RBO as "strong medicine."¹⁸ It uses the process to remedy the "strained labor-management relationship," which is characterized by "mistrust, suspicion and animosity." In RBO, the parties analyze their problems jointly, decide on common objectives and take steps to reach those goals. Popular became a consultant to the district, helping to build a cooperative relationship and develop trust between the parties.

That trust allowed the parties to deal with one of the district's most pressing issues: gang violence. The police had informed the board that there were 35 gangs in the district's three cities. "We knew that if there were 35 gangs in those cities, there were gangs on our campuses," Castrey recalls. "We needed to know how to prevent any gang operations — or we were going to have dead teachers, dead staff members, or dead kids. None of us wanted that to happen."

During the RBO process, the teachers articulated their desire to revise the disciplinary guidelines. Galvanized by the murder of a 16-year-old in a gang battle, all the stakeholders realized that a preventive strategy was needed. The newspapers were asking whether the campuses were safe. In 1988, mediators from the Northern California Community Justice Center began teaching the faculty and young people conflict resolution techniques. Since then, several hundred have graduated from the Student Conflict Mediation Program. According to Superintendent Susan Roper,

This program emphasizes prevention and gives students the skills to build better relationships. Student mediators handle common disputes between students, such as rumors, damaged friendships, misunderstandings, arguments, fights, bullying and disputes over personal property.

The district also began strategic planning, involving all constituent groups. The safety component of the strategy called for mediation and conflict resolution programs on every campus, underwritten by grants as well as district funds. In addition, the community and the students expressed a desire for firm policies against violence, so the district set about writing those policies and then making sure that all the stakeholders — including the unions and the community — bought in.¹⁹

Hundreds of residents attended public hearings about a board proposal to bring police sniffing dogs on campuses. The community was assured that the policy would be

noninvasive, that the dogs would search lockers and vehicles only for weapons and for drugs. If either were found, the student would be removed from class and the parents informed. As a result of the policy, students know that school is not a place to smoke, drink or carry weapons. All of this came about as a result of creating labor-management peace; otherwise, the constituent groups in the district would have been unable to trust each other sufficiently to work together.

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Given their core educational mission, schools should be uniquely well-suited to preventing violence. As the Johnsons point out, allowing students "to fail, remain apart from classmates and be socially inept and have low self-esteem, increases the probability that students will use destructive conflict strategies."²⁰ On the other hand, an ability to deploy higher-order reasoning and analytical skills in order to solve problems is closely linked with peaceful outcomes. Thus, the propensity for violence, both in school and in later life, can best be cured in the long run by enlarging students' understanding and self-confidence. Until that goal is achieved, however, it is prudent for school districts to rely for their safety on well-drilled, consensus-based violence prevention and response teams.

ENDNOTES

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