

## How Safe Are Our Schools, Anyway?

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The issue of school violence remains close to the surface of most thinking about public schooling these days. By now, we are all familiar with the tragedies that have occurred in our public schools over the past few years. Events in Arkansas, Oregon, Pennsylvania, and Colorado have etched images in many of our minds of a life in schools that is frightening. During the past two years, nearly 100 students have been shot in schools. Nearly half were killed; the others will endure physical and emotional wounds that will alter their lives forever. Many educators--and parents--are asking a very serious question: Are our schools *really* safe?

The answer is, by and large—Yes.

According to the U.S. Department of Education's Annual Report on School Safety (1998), our public schools are not the haven of violent crimes some believe. Here are some common myths, and the truth behind them.

**Myth:** *Being in or around a public school is dangerous:*

- **Fact:** Students age 12-18 are nearly 3 times more likely to be victims of serious crimes away from school than in or around school

**Myth:** *Schools are more dangerous than they used to be:*

- **Fact:** Not necessarily. In fact, overall violence in schools has actually *declined* since 1993. For example, the percentage of 12<sup>th</sup> graders injured with a weapon (5%) or without a weapon (12%) has not changed significantly within the last 20 years

**Myth:** *Most crimes against students (and teachers) in schools are violent in nature:*

- **Fact:** Whereas violent crimes in schools certainly occur, the most oft-occurring crime against both students and teachers in school is larceny.

**Myth:** *More kids are carrying weapons to school these days:*

- **Fact:** Despite what the media coverage of recent school tragedies may cause many of us may believe, the number of students who reported carrying weapons to school has steadily *declined* since 1993.

However, the effects of violence in schools--whether real or perceived--still have adverse repercussions on the school environment. Some challenges still remain. For example:

- The higher the grade, the more vulnerable students and teachers are to crime, and crime of a more serious nature.

- Students are more fearful than they used to be. In fact, the percentage of students who feared attack while in school--as well as travelling to and from school--has actually increased over the past few years, despite decreased or steady levels of actual violence.

### **What Can/Should Educators Do?**

Suggestions for combating school violence abound.

Some suggest fussing over minor infractions--reasoning that children really just want (and need) reasonable limits, which are lacking in most schools. Others suggest that there has been an overall denigration of respect in schools, and that insolence has the potential to breed violence in schools. Still others consider it a problem with the offerings of the educational system, itself. After the Jonesboro incident, a Justice panel of law enforcement and education leaders was convened and charged with recommending a course of action to prevent such tragedies in schools. The panel's suggestion was that the school violence problem could be solved if schools would do three things--provide more after-school programs, provide more and better mental health counseling services, and provide effective conflict resolution training for students and teachers.

### **What can OTHERS do?**

The case may be, however, that we are asking schools to solve a problem that lies outside the domain of the schoolhouse. Recently, a pair of principals toured schools around the nation and asked students--how do we solve this violence problem? What they are reporting back suggests one message from students that is loud and clear: students need more time and attention from those who care for and about them. That is, when one asks students how *they* think the problems of school violence might be addressed best, the vast majority seem to say "spend more time with us." Of course, one may ask the question: are parents *really* spending less time with their kids?

And if one did ask this question, the answer is...apparently, yes.

If one compares today with 40 years ago, there certainly appears to be a difference. For example, 19% of married mothers with children under the age of 6 worked outside of the home in 1960. Today, that number is 60%. But, does that mean parents and children are spending less time together? Perhaps. A recent report from the Mayo Clinic suggests the time children and parents spend together today is as much as 12 hours per week *less* than it was in 1960.

It is clear that school violence is an important issue--one that educators must consider and do their part in addressing. However, we must recognize three points: (1) schools are not as violent as many believe; (2) in terms of school climate, the *perception* of violence by students may be more damaging than *actual* acts of violence; and (3) the fight against violence in schools is a battle that cannot be won inside the classroom, alone. Parents and community members who are willing to spend the time with the children in the community and give them the attention they desire will add far greater value to the fight against school violence than any conflict training program for teachers can. Whereas

one death in schools is one death too many, it would appear that the perception of school violence is a larger problem than the violence itself. If this is the case, then how can we--as educators--address this? What role should teachers and schools play in this process, and how (if at all) will this change the perception of violence in schools? Finally, how can we actively engage parents and caretakers in the lives of their children, yet not overstep the bounds of acting responsibly as educators? A challenge, indeed.