

ISSUE



Does School Violence Warrant a Zero-Tolerance Policy?

YES: Albert Shanker, from “Restoring the Connection Between Behavior and Consequences,” *Vital Speeches of the Day* (May 15, 1995)

NO: Pedro A. Noguera, from “The Critical State of Violence Prevention,” *The School Administrator* (February 1996)

ISSUE SUMMARY

YES: Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), advocates a “get tough” policy for dealing with violent and disruptive students in order to send a clear message that all students are responsible for their own behavior.

NO: Professor of education Pedro A. Noguera maintains that the AFT’s zero-tolerance stance and other “armed camp” attitudes fail to deal with the heart of the problem and do not build an atmosphere of trust.

Beyond basic classroom discipline and general civility lies the more serious realm of violence in schools: unpredictable acts of violence against students and teachers and what Jackson Toby refers to as everyday school violence fueled by a disorderly educational and social atmosphere. Toby, in “Everyday School Violence: How Disorder Fuels It,” *American Educator* (Winter 1993/1994), states, “The concept of ‘school disorder’ suggests that schools, like families, also vary in their cohesiveness and effectiveness. What school disorder means in concrete terms is that one or both of two departures from normality exists: A significant proportion of students do not seem to recognize the legitimacy of the rules governing the school’s operation and therefore violate them frequently; and/or a significant proportion of students defy the authority of teachers and other staff members charged with enforcing the rules.” Toby and other experts feel that teachers lost much of their authority, especially in inner-city high schools, during the 1960s and 1970s when school systems stopped standing behind teachers’ disciplinary actions and many teachers became afraid of confronting aggressive student behavior.

A 1978 report to Congress by the National Institute of Education, *Violent Schools—Safe Schools*, documented widespread incidents of theft, assaults, weapon possession, vandalism, rape, and drug use in America's schools. These findings helped lead to the current period of security guards, metal detectors, book bag searches, locker raids, and pursuit of armed teenagers in school halls. "Zero tolerance" has emerged as a rallying cry of the 1990s—zero tolerance for any weapons in school (handguns, semiautomatics, knives, and, in a few cases, fingernail files) and zero tolerance for any drugs in school (crack cocaine, pot, alcohol, and, in some cases, Midol or Tylenol).

These measures have sparked a heated debate over the conflict between students' rights and the need to protect students and professionals from violence. We pride ourselves on being a tolerant society, but it has become obvious that new lines must be drawn. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, senior senator from New York, in "Defining Deviancy Down," *The American Scholar* (Winter 1993), contends that we have become accustomed to alarming levels of criminal and destructive behavior and that the absence of meaningful punishment for those who commit violent acts reinforces the belief that violence is an appropriate way to settle disputes among members of society.

Congressional passage of the Gun-Free Schools Act in 1994 placed an automatic one-year expulsion on weapon-carrying students and demanded referral of offenders to the criminal justice or juvenile delinquency system after due process procedures are carried out. According to Kathleen Vail, in "Ground Zero," *The American School Board Journal* (June 1995), some child advocates, educators, and parents feel that such zero-tolerance policies do not allow enough room for exceptions, especially when young children are involved. There is also a concern that get-tough measures weaken the implementation of conflict-resolution strategies aimed at uncovering deeper explanations of aggressive behavior.

A flurry of articles on school violence has appeared in recent years. Among the best are Jackson Toby's "Getting Serious About School Discipline," *The Public Interest* (Fall 1998); "The Dark Side of Zero Tolerance," by Russ Skiba and Reece Peterson, *Phi Delta Kappan* (January 1999); Abigail Thernstrom's "Courting Disorder in the Schools," *The Public Interest* (Summer 1999); Michael Eastbrook's "Taking Aim at Violence," *Psychology Today* (July/August 1999); "Zero Tolerance for Zero Tolerance," by Richard L. Curwin and Allen N. Mendler, *Phi Delta Kappan* (October 1999); W. Michael Martin's "Does Zero Mean Zero?" *American School Board Journal* (March 2000); and two articles on the controversial practice of profiling potentially violent students in *The School Administrator* (February 2000).

The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) has strongly supported zero-tolerance policies. In the first of the following selections, the late Albert Shanker, former AFT president, makes the case for tough measures to restore safety and confidence in the public schools and thereby stem the exodus of concerned parents. In the second selection, Pedro A. Noguera questions the effectiveness of such measures and offers alternatives that he feels would better address the causes of violence and the social factors that contribute to it.

Albert Shanker



Restoring the Connection Between Behavior and Consequences

I can't think of a more important topic... [T]here have been and will be a number of conferences on this issue. I can assure you, all of the other conferences resemble each other, and this one will be very different. It will have a very different point of view.

We have had, over the last decade or more, a national debate on the issue of school quality. And there is a national consensus that we need to do a lot better. We are probably doing better than we used to, but we're not doing as well as other industrial countries. And in order to do well, we are going to have to do some of the things that those other countries are doing, such as develop high standards, assessments related to those standards, and a system of consequences so that teachers and youngsters and parents know that school counts. School makes a difference, whether it's getting a job or getting into a college or getting into a training program.

We're well on the way. It's going to take time, but we're on the way to bringing about the improvement that we need. But you can have a wonderful curriculum and terrific assessments and you can state that there are consequences out there but none of this is going to do much good in terms of providing youngsters with an education if we don't meet certain basic obvious conditions. And those conditions are simply that you have to have schools that are safe and classrooms where there is sufficient order so that the curriculum means something. Without that, all of this stuff is nonsense. You can deliver a terrific curriculum, but if youngsters are throwing things, cursing and yelling and punching each other, then the curriculum doesn't mean anything in that classroom. The agenda is quite different.

And so we have a very interesting phenomenon. We have members of Congress and governors and state legislators talking about choice and vouchers and charter schools, and you know what the big incentive is for those issues. Parents are not really pushing for these things, except in conditions where their children seem to be unsafe or in conditions where they can't learn. And then they say, well, look, if you can't straighten things out here, then give me a chance to take my youngster somewhere else. And so we're about to put in place

a ridiculous situation. We're going to create a system of choice and vouchers, so that 98 percent of the kids who behave can go someplace and be safe. And we're going to leave the two percent who are violent and disruptive to take over the schools. Now, isn't it ridiculous to move 98 percent of the kids, when all you have to do is move two or three percent of them and the other 98 percent would be absolutely fine?

Now this is a problem which has a number of aspects and I want to talk about them. First, there is, of course, the problem of extreme danger, where we are dealing with violence or guns or drugs within the school. And, as we look to the schools, what we find is that the schools seem to be unable to handle this. We had headlines here in DC . . . saying that the mayor and school officials say they don't know what else to do. In other words, they've done everything that they can, and the guns, and the knives, and the drugs are still there. So, it just happens that they have actually said it, but that is, in fact, how many school administrators and school boards across the country behave. They treat violence as a fact of life, that's what society is like, and they just go through a couple of ritual efforts to try to show that they're doing something. But, basically they give up.

What we have is what amounts to a very high level of tolerance of this type of activity. Now, of course, the violence and the guns and the drugs have to be distinguished from another type of activity. This other type isn't deadly in the sense that you are going to read tomorrow morning that some youngster was stabbed or shot. And that's the whole question of just plain out-and-out disruption: the youngster who is constantly yelling, cursing, jumping, fighting, doing all sorts of things, so that most of the time the other students in the class and the teacher is devoted, not to the academic mission of the schools, but to figuring out how to contain this individual. And in this area, we have an even higher tolerance than we do in the area of violence, where occasionally youngsters are suspended or removed for periods of time. . . .

Last year when Congress was debating the Goals 2000 education program, there were an awful lot of people who said, you know, in addition to having different kinds of content standards—what you should learn—and performance standards—how good is good enough—you ought to have opportunity-to-learn standards. It's not fair to hold kids to these standards unless they've had certain advantages. It's not fair, if one kid has had early childhood education and one hasn't, to hold them to the same standard. It's not fair, if at this school they don't have any textbooks or the textbooks are 15 years old, and in that school they have the most modern books. It's not fair, if in this school they've got computers, and in that school kids have never seen a computer.

Well, I submit to you that if you want to talk about opportunity-to-learn standards, there are a lot of kids who've made it without the most up-to-date textbooks. It's better if you have them. There are a lot of kids who've made it without early childhood education. It's a lot better if you've got it, and we're for that. Throughout history, people have learned without computers, but it's better if you've got them. But nobody has ever learned if they were in a classroom with one or two kids who took up 90 percent of the time through disruption, violence, or threats of violence. You deprive children of an opportunity to learn

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if you do not first provide an orderly situation within the classroom and within the school. That comes ahead of all of these other things.

Now, I said that this conference was going to be different from every conference that I've been to and every conference that I've read about. I have a report here that was sent to me by John Cole [President of the Texas Federation of Teachers], who went to The Scholastic Annual Summit on Youth Violence on October 17 [1994]. I'm not going to read the whole thing, but I'll just read enough that you get the flavor of what these other conferences are like:

"So start with the concept that the real victims of violence are those unfortunate individuals who have been led into lives of crime by the failure of society to provide them with hope for a meaningful life. Following that logic, one must conclude that society has not done enough for these children and that we must find ways to salvage their lives. Schools must work patiently with these individuals offering them different avenues out of this situation. As an institution charged with responsibility for education, schools must have programs to identify those who are embarking on a life of crime and violence and lift them out of the snares into which they have fallen. Society, meanwhile, should be more forgiving of the sins of these poor creatures, who through no real fault of their own are the victims of racism and economic injustice.

"Again and again and again, panelists pointed out that the young people we are talking about, to paraphrase Rodney Dangerfield, 'don't get no respect.' The experts assured us that young people take up weapons, commit acts of violence, and abuse drugs because this enables them to obtain respect from their peers. I found myself thinking that we aid and abet this behavior when we bend over backwards to accommodate those young people who have bought into this philosophy. By lavishing attention on them, we may even encourage a spread of that behavior. Many of these programs are well meaning but counterproductive.

"I don't want to condemn this conference as a waste of time. Obviously, we do need programs to work with these young people, and we should try to salvage as many as we can. However, we must somehow come to grips with the idea that individuals have responsibility for their own actions. If we assume that society is to blame for all of the problems these young people have, may we then assume that society must develop solutions that take care of these young people's problems? We take away from each individual the responsibility for his or her own life. Once the individual assumes that he or she has lost control of his own destiny, that individual has no difficulty in justifying any act because he or she feels no responsibility for the consequences."

Now with that philosophy, the idea is not that we want to be punitive or nasty, but essentially schools must teach not only English and mathematics and reading and writing and history, but also teach that there are ways of behaving in society that are unacceptable. And when we sit back and tolerate certain types of behavior, we are teaching youngsters that certain types of behavior are acceptable, which eventually will end up with their being in jail or in poverty for the rest of their lives. We are not doing our jobs as teachers. And the system

is not doing its job, if we send youngsters the message that this is tolerable behavior within society....

All we ask of our schools is that they behave in the same way that a caring and intelligent parent would behave with respect to their own children. I doubt very much, if you had a youngster who was a fire bug or a youngster who used weapons, whether you would say, well, I owe it to this youngster to trust him with my other children to show him that I'm not separating him out or treating him differently. Or I'm going to raise his self-esteem by allowing him to do these things. All of these nutty things that we talk about in school, we would not do. So the starting point of this conference, which is different from all of the others, is that I hope that you people join with me in a sense of outrage that we have a system that is willing to sacrifice the overwhelming majority of children for a handful. And not do any good for that handful either. And we need to start with that outrage, because without that we're not going to change this system.

That outrage is there among parents. That outrage was partly expressed in the recent election as people's anger at the way government was working. Why can't government do things in some sort of common sense way? And this is one of the issues that's out there. Now, what are some of the things that enter into this? Well, part of it is that some people think of schools as sort of custodial institutions. Where are we going to put the kids? Put them here. Or they think the school's job is mostly socialization. Eventually troubled kids will grow up or grow out of this, and they're better off with other youngsters than they are separated. Of course, people who take that point of view are totally ignoring the fact that the central role of schools, the one that we will be held accountable for, is student academic achievement. We know the test scores are bad. And we know that our students are not learning as much as youngsters in other countries. So we can't just say we know we are way behind, but, boy, are we good custodians. Look at how socialized these youngsters are.

People are paying for education and they want youngsters who are going to be able to be employed and get decent jobs. We want youngsters who are going to be as well off or in better shape than we are, just as most of us are with respect to our parents and grandparents. And the academic function is the one that's neglected. The academic function is the one that's destroyed in this notion that our job is mainly custodial.

So our central position is that we have to be tough on these issues, and we have to be tough because basically we are defending the right of children to an education. And those who insist on allowing violence and disruptive behavior in the school are destroying the right to an education for the overwhelming majority of youngsters within our schools.

Two years ago or three years ago, I was in Texas at a convention of the Texas Federation of Teachers. I didn't know this was going to happen, but either just before I got there or while I was there, there was a press conference on a position the convention adopted, and they used the phrase "zero tolerance." They said that with respect to certain types of dangerous activities in schools, there would be zero tolerance. These things are not acceptable and there are going to be consequences. There might be suspension, there might be expulsion, or there

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might be something else, but nevertheless, consequences will be clear. Well, that got picked up by radio, television, legislators. I was listening to a governor the other night at the National Governors Association, who stood up and came out for zero tolerance. It is a phrase which has caught on and is sweeping the country.

I hope it is one that all of you will bring back to your communities and your states, that there are certain types of activities that we will not tolerate. We will not teach youngsters bad lessons, and we're going to start very early. When a youngster does something that is terribly wrong, and all of the other youngsters are sure that something is going to happen to him because he did something wrong, we had better make sure that we fulfill the expectations of all those other youngsters that something's going to happen. And they're all going to say, "Thank God, I didn't do a terrible thing like that or I would be out there, and something would be happening to me." That is the beginning of a sense of doing something right, as against doing wrong.

And we have to deal with this notion that society is responsible, social conditions are responsible. The AFT does not take second place to anybody in fighting for decent conditions for adults and for youngsters and for minorities and for groups that have been oppressed. We're not in a state of denial; we're not saying that things have been wonderful. But when your kids come home and say "I'm doing these terrible things because of these conditions," if you're a good parent, you'll say, "That's no excuse." You are going to do things right, because you don't want your youngster to end up as a criminal or in some sort of horrible position. . . .

Now what should schools do? Schools should have codes of conduct. These codes can be developed through collective bargaining or they can be mandated in legislation. I don't think it would be a bad idea to have state legislation that every school system needs to have a code of discipline that is very clear, not a fuzzy sort of thing, something that says these things are not to be done and if this happens, these are the consequences. A very clear connection between behavior and consequences. And it might even say that, if there is a legitimate complaint from a group of parents or a group of teachers or a group of students that clearly shows the school district doesn't have such a code or isn't enforcing it, there would be some sort of financial penalty against the district for failing to provide a decent education by allowing this type of violence and disruption to continue.

Taxpayers are sending money into the district so that the kids can have an education, and if that district then destroys the education by allowing one or two youngsters to wipe out all of the effects that money is supposed to produce, what the hell is the point of sending the money? If you allow these youngsters to so disrupt that education, you might as well save the money. So there's a reason for states to do this. And, by the way, I think that you'll find a receptive audience, because the notion of individuals taking responsibility for their actions is one of the things fueling the political anger in this country—that we have a lot of laws which help people to become irresponsible or encourage them not to take responsibility for their own actions.

Now, enforcement is very important. For every crime, so to speak, there ought to be a punishment. I don't like very much judgment to be used, because once you allow judgment to be used, punishments will be more severe for some kids than for others and you will get unfairness. You will get prejudice. The way to make sure that this is done fairly and is not done in a prejudiced way is to say, look, we don't care if you're white or Hispanic or African-American or whether you're a recent immigrant or this or that, for this infraction, this is what happens. We don't have a different sanction depending upon whether we like you a little more or a little less. That's how fairness would be ensured, and I think it's very important that we insist on that. . . .

One of the big problems is school administrators. School administrators are concerned that, if there are a large number of reports of disruptions and violence in their schools, their reputations will suffer. They like to say they have none of those problems in their schools. Now, how do you prove that you have none of these problems in your school? Very simple. Just tell the teachers that if they report it, it's because they are ineffective teachers. If you tell that to one or two teachers, you will certainly have a school that has very little disruption or violence reported. You may have plenty of disruption and violence. So, in many places we have this gag rule. It's not written, but it's very well understood.

As a teacher, I myself faced this. Each time I reported something like this, I was told that if I knew how to motivate the students properly, this wouldn't happen. It's pretty universal. It wasn't just one district or just my principal. It's almost all of them. Therefore, I think that we ought to seek laws that require a full and honest reporting of incidents of violence and extreme disruption. And that would mean that, if an administrator goes around telling you to shut up or threatening you so that you're not free to report, I think that there ought to be penalties. Unless we know the extent of this problem, we're never going to deal with it adequately.

Of course, parents know what the extent of it is. What is the number one problem? It's the problem of violence and order in the schools. They know it. The second big problem and obstacle we face is, what's going to happen if you put the kid out on the streets? It reminds me of a big campaign in New York City to get crime off the streets, and pretty soon they were very successful. They had lots of policemen on the streets, and they drove the criminals away. The criminals went into the subways. Then they had a campaign about crime in the subways, and they drove them back up into the streets. So the business community, parents, and others will say, you can't just throw a kid out and put them on the streets. That's no good. But you could place some conditions on it. To return to school, students would have to bring with them a parent or some other grown-up or relative responsible for them. There is a list of ways in which we might handle it. But we can't say that we're going to wait until we build new schools, or build new class-rooms, or have new facilities. The first thing you do is separate out the youngster who is a danger to the other youngsters.

Now, let me give an example. And I think it's one that's pretty close. We know that, when we arrest adults who have committed crimes and we jail them, jail will most likely not help those who are jailed. I don't think it does, and I don't think most people do. However, most of us are pretty glad when someone

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who has committed a pretty bad crime is jailed. Not because it's going to do that person any good, but because that person won't be around to do the same thing for the next ten or fifteen years. And for the separation of youngsters who are destroying the education of others, the justification is the same. I'm not sure that we can devise programs that will reach those youngsters that will help them. We should try. But our first obligation is to never destroy the education of the twenty or twenty-five or thirty because you have an obligation to one. Especially when there's no evidence that you're doing anything for that one by keeping him there.

Now, another big obstacle is legal problems. These are expensive and time-consuming. If a youngster gets a lawyer and goes to court, the principal or some other figure of authority from the school, usually has to go to court. They might sit a whole day and by the end of the first day, they decide not to hear it. And they come a second day, and maybe it's held over again. It might take three or four days for each youngster. So if you've got a decent-sized school, even if you're dealing with only two or three percent of the youngsters, you could spend your full time in court, instead of being in school. Well, I wouldn't want to do that if I were the principal of the school. And then what does the court do when you're all finished? The court says, well, we don't have any better place to put him, so send him right back. So, that's why a lot of teachers wouldn't report it, because nothing happens anyway. You go through all of this, you spend all of that time and money, and when you're all finished, you're right back where you started. So we need to change what happens with respect to the court, and we have two ideas that we're going to explore that have not been done before.

One of the things we need to do is see whether we can get parents, teachers, and even perhaps high school students to intervene in these cases and say, we want to come before the judge to present evidence about what the consequences are for the other children. When you go to court now, you have the lawyer for the board of education, the lawyer for the youngster, and the youngster. And the youngster, well, he's just a kid and his lawyer says, "This poor child has all of these problems," and the judge is looking down at this poor youngster. You know who is not there? The other 25 youngsters to say, this guy beats me up every day. If I do my homework, I get beat up on the way to school because he doesn't want me to do my homework. So instead of first having this one child standing there saying, "Poor me, let me back in school, they have kicked me out, they have done terrible things to me," you also have some of the victims there saying, "Hey, what about us?" You'll get a much fairer consideration if the judge is able to look at both sides, instead of just hearing the bureaucrat from the board of education. None of these board of education lawyers that I've met talk about the other students. They talk about the right of the board of education under the law to do thus, and so what you have is a humane judge who's thinking of the bureaucrat talking about the rights of the board of education as against the child. I think we need to balance that.

Now, there's a second thing we are going to explore. We are all familiar with the fact that most of our labor contracts have a provision for grievance procedures. And part of that grievance procedure is arbitration. Now, you can take an arbitration award to court and try to appeal it, but it's very, very difficult

to get a court to overthrow an arbitrator's award. Why? Because the court says, look, you had your day, you went to the arbitrator and you presented all your arguments, the other side presented all their arguments. In order for me to look into that arbitration and turn it over, you're going to have to prove to me that something in this arbitration was so terrible that we have to prove that the arbitrator was absolutely partial or that he broke the law. You've got to prove something outrageous. Otherwise, the judge is going to say, "You've had your day in court."

Now, why can't school districts establish a fair, inexpensive, due-process arbitration procedure for youngsters who are violent or disruptive? So that when the youngster goes to court, they can say, "Hey, we've had this procedure. We've had witnesses on both sides, and here was the determination. And, really, you shouldn't get into this stuff unless you can show that these people are terribly prejudiced or totally incompetent or something else." In other words, we don't have to use the court. We could create a separate school judicial system that had expertise and knowledge about what the impact is on students and teachers and the whole system of these kinds of decisions. Arbitration is a much cheaper, much faster system, especially if you have an expedited arbitration system. There is a system in the American Arbitration Association of expedited arbitration that says how many briefs you're allowed to write and how much time each side can take, and all of that. So we have a legal team and we're going to explore the notion of getting this stuff out of the courts and creating a system that is inexpensive and fair to the youngster and fair to the other youngsters in the school.

Now, let me point out that a lot of the tolerance for bad behavior is about to change, because we are about to have stakes attached to student academic outcomes. In other words, in the near future, we are going to have a situation where, if you don't make it up to this point, then you can't be admitted into college. Or if you don't make it here, then you will not get certified for a certain type of employment. But in Chapter I schools, this is going to start very soon. There is a provision in the new Chapter One, now called Title I, and very soon, if Title I schools do not show a substantial progress for students, the school's going to be punished. And one of the punishments is reconstitution of the school. The school will be closed down, teachers will go elsewhere, students will go elsewhere, and the school will open up with a new student body, slowly rebuild. That's one of the punishments. There are other punishments as well. So if you've got a bunch of these disruptive youngsters that prevent you from teaching and the other students from learning, it won't be like yesterday, where nobody seems to care, the kids are all going to get promoted anyway and they can all go to college, because there are no standards. There are no stakes.

Now, for the first time, there will be stakes. The teachers will know. The parents will know, hey, this school's going to close. I'm going to have to find a way of getting my kid to some other school because of the lack of learning that comes from this disruption. Teachers are going to say, hey, I'm not going to have my job in this school a couple of years from now because they're going to shut it down. I don't know what the rules are, what happens to these teachers, whether other schools have to take them or not. But we are entering a period

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where there will be consequences and parents and teachers are going to be a lot more concerned about achievement.

Now, one of the other issues that has stood in the way of doing something here is a very difficult one to talk about in our society, and that's the issue of race. And whenever the topic of suspension or expulsion comes up, there's always the question of race. Cincinnati is a good example. The union there negotiated a good discipline code as part of a desegregation suit. And the question was raised, "Well, is there a disparate impact, with more minority kids being suspended than others?" And who are the teachers who are suspending them? Do you have more white teachers suspending African-American kids?

Our position on that is very clear. In any given school, you may have more white kids with infractions or you may have more African-American kids, or you may have more Hispanic kids. We don't know. I don't think anybody knows. But we handle that by saying, "Whatever your crime is and whoever you are, you're going to get exactly the same punishment." If we do that, I'm sure that the number who will be punished will end up being very, very small. Because, as a young kid, if you see that there is a consequence, you will change your behavior. . . .

Now we have another very big problem, and we're going to try to deal with this in legislation. Under legislation that deals with disabled youngsters, we have two different standards. Namely, if a youngster in this class is not disabled and commits an infraction, you can do whatever is in that discipline code for that youngster. But if the youngster is disabled and is in that same class (for instance, the youngster might have a speech defect), you can't suspend that youngster while all of the proceedings are going on because that's a change in placement. It might take you a year-and-a-half in court, and meanwhile that youngster who is engaged in some threatening or dangerous behavior has to stay there. This makes no sense. We have a lot of support in the Congress on this, and we think we have a good chance of changing this. . . .

Well, that's the whole picture. And to return to the theme at the beginning, we have a cry for choice, a cry for vouchers, a cry for charters. It's not really a cry for these things. People really want their own schools, and they want their kids to go to those schools, and they want those schools to be safe and orderly for their youngsters.

It is insane to set up a system where we move 98 percent of our kids away from the two percent who are dangerous, instead of moving the two percent away from the 98 percent who are OK. We need to have discipline codes, we need to have a new legal system, we need to have one standard for all students. We need to have a system where we don't have to wait for a year or a year-and-a-half after a student has perpetrated some terrible and atrocious crime before that student is removed for the safety of the other students. How are we going to do this? We are going to do this, first of all, by talking to our colleagues within the schools. Our polls show that the overwhelming majority accepts these views.

The support of African-American parents for the removal of violent youngsters and disruptive students is higher than any other group within our society. Now very often when youngsters are removed, it's because some

parents group or some committee starts shouting and making noise, and the school system can't resist that. Now I think that it's time for us to turn to business groups, it's time for us to turn to parents' groups. When youngsters commit such acts, and when they've had a fair due-process within the system, we need to have a system of public support, just as we have in the community when someone commits a terrible crime. People say, send that person to jail, don't send him back to us. We need to have a lot of decent people within our communities, when you have youngsters who are destroying the education of all the others, who will stand up and say, "Look, we don't want to punish this kid, but for the sake of our children, you're going to have to keep that one away, until that one is ready to come back and live in a decent way in society with all of the other youngsters."

I'm sure that if we take this back to our communities, and if we work on it, the appeal will be obvious. It's common sense. And we will save our schools and we will do something which will give us the basis for providing a decent education for all of our children.



Pedro A. Noguera



The Critical State of Violence Prevention

The problem of violence in schools, like the related problem of violence in society, has become one of the most pressing educational issues in the United States. In many school districts, concerns about violence have surpassed academic achievement as the highest priority for reform and intervention.

Public clamorings over the need for something to be done about school violence has brought the issue to a critical juncture. The threat of violence constitutes a fundamental violation of the social contract between school and community. If effective measures to address the problem are not taken soon, support for public education could be irreparably jeopardized.

Across the country, school districts have adopted various “get tough” measures to address school violence. I believe sound reasons exist to question the effectiveness of these measures and present alternative strategies that have proven successful in reducing the incidence of school violence.

Getting Tough

Not surprisingly, the search for solutions to school violence has generated a package of remedies that closely resemble those used in society to combat the threat of violence and crime.

Some popular measures include the installation of metal detectors at school entrances to prevent students from bringing weapons on to school grounds; the enactment of “zero tolerance” policies (advocated by the American Federation of Teachers and other groups), which require the automatic removal of students (through suspension, expulsion, or transfer) who perpetrate acts of violence; and the use of armed security guards to patrol and monitor student behavior while school is in session.

Accompanying the implementation of such measures has been a tendency of school officials to treat violent incidents, and sometimes non-violent incidents as well, as criminal offenses to be handled by law enforcement officials and the courts, rather than by school personnel. Forced to do something about a growing problem, many politicians and school officials have attempted to quell the tide of violence by converting schools into prison-like facilities.

From Pedro A. Noguera, “The Critical State of Violence Prevention,” *The School Administrator* (February 1996). Copyright © 1996 by The American Association of School Administrators. Reprinted by permission.

Yet despite the tough talk and punitive actions, little reason for optimism exists given the track record of these methods and the persistence of violence in schools. For example, despite spending more than \$28 million during the 1980s for the installation of metal detectors at public schools in New York City, crime and violence continue to be a major concern. In fact, while teachers and parents are increasingly frustrated about the problem, the mayor and school board were locked last fall in an angry debate over who should bear the blame for the problem. Recently, at a high school in Richmond, Calif., two students were shot at a school despite the presence of metal detectors. In several states, the failure of public schools to curtail violence has been cited as a primary factor influencing public support for school vouchers and school choice proposals.

Misleading Picture

Two main problems exist with “get tough” measures:

- they don’t address the causes of school violence, and
- they don’t help us understand why schools have become increasingly vulnerable to its occurrence.

As evidence that something is being done about school violence, school officials often point to statistics related to the number of weapons confiscated and the number of students who have been suspended, expelled, or arrested for violent reasons. Such data are used to demonstrate that valiant efforts are being undertaken to reduce the incidence of violence.

The compilation of such data is important because it creates the impression that something is being done even if the problem persists. It also plays an important role in rationalizing the expenditure of resources on school safety—allocations that often result in the elimination of other educational programs and services.

For parents and students who live with the reality of violence and who must contend daily with the threat of physical harm, such data does little to allay fears. When engaging in what were once ordinary activities—such as walking through the halls between classes or playing sports after school—evokes such extreme paranoia as to no longer seem feasible, news that arrests or suspensions have increased provides little reassurance.

Moreover, recognition is growing that many measures used to deter violence have little if any impact on the problem. Suspending students who do not attend school regularly does little to deter poor behavior.

Even at schools where administrators manage to keep the site safe through additional security, victory over violence cannot be declared if kids fight or are attacked on their way to and from school. In such cases, the limited safety provided at the site does little to reduce the fears and anxieties of parents or students.

Quantifying Symbols

Not long ago, I attended a meeting with school officials from an urban district on the West coast. We were reviewing data on the incidence of violence from the past year and discussing what could be done to further reduce violence.

After seeing the disciplinary reports, I jokingly remarked: "Here's some good news, homicides are down 100 percent from last year." To my amazement, an administrator replied: "Yes, the news isn't all bad. Some of our efforts are beginning to pay off."

What surprised me about the comment was his apparent belief that since no murders had occurred at any school in the district at the midpoint of the school year (compared to two during the previous year), there was reason for hope and optimism. I found it hard to believe that district administrators, who generally have little regular contact with school sites, could accept a statistical analysis as evidence that the schools had in fact become safer.

Yet within the context of the fight against violence, symbols such as crime statistics take on great significance, even though they may have little bearing upon the actual occurrence of violence or how safe people feel. Pressed to demonstrate to the public that efforts taken to reduce violence are effective, school districts often pursue one of two strategies: either they present statistics quantifying the results of their efforts, or they go to great lengths to suppress information altogether hoping that the community will perceive no news as good news.

Metal detectors, barbed wire fences, armed guards and police officers, and principals wielding baseball bats as they patrol the halls are all symbols of tough action. However, most students realize that a person who wants to bring a weapon to school can get it into a building without being discovered by a metal detector and that it is highly unlikely that any principal will hit a student with a baseball bat. Still, the symbols persist lest the truth be known that those responsible really don't have a clue about what to do to stem the tide of violence.

Overcoming Fear

To understand why violence has become rampant and how a climate of fear and intimidation has come gradually to be the norm in so many urban schools, we must examine the relationships that are fostered between young people and adults at most schools.

Criminologist Alan Wilson has pointed out that only two ways exist to control behavior and deter crime: (1) by relying on police officers and the courts or (2) by promoting collective morals and sanctions. Any society that comes to rely exclusively on the former to enforce safety is doomed for there will never be enough police officers to go around.

Increasingly, our society, and now our schools, have looked to the police and the courts for answers because we have given up on the possibility that collective morality and sanctions could be effective.

While police officers, security guards, and administrators generally assume primary responsibility for managing and enforcing school discipline, in most cases, teachers make the first referral in the discipline process, and therefore have tremendous influence in determining who receives discipline and why.

In my work with urban schools, the most frequent concern I hear from teachers is that they have trouble disciplining and controlling their students. This problem is particularly true in schools at which the majority of students are black and the majority of teachers are white. Though I don't believe the problem is primarily racial, I do believe racial differences add to the difficulty of dealing with this issue.

Having taught in urban public schools, I am familiar with what classroom teachers are up against. Order and safety are essential requisites to an environment where teaching and learning can occur. However, when I conduct workshops about safety in schools I try to shift the focus of discussion away from discipline to discussion about what teachers know about their students. I do this because I have found that teachers who lack familiarity with their students' lives outside of school are more likely to misunderstand and fear them.

Widening Gulf

The gulf in experience between teacher and student, which is typical in many urban schools, contributes to the problem of violence in schools. Too often, teachers and administrators will fill the knowledge void with stereotypes about their students and the community in which they live. These stereotypes may be based upon what they have read or seen in the news media or what they have picked up indirectly from stories told to them by children.

Lacking another source of information, many teachers begin to fear the children they teach because to some they seem to embody the less-than-civilized images associated with people who reside in the inner city. Fear invariably influences interaction between teachers/administrators and students.

Though it may never be stated, students often can tell when adults fear them, and many will use this to undermine their teachers' authority in the classroom or elsewhere at school.

This is not to say that violence in schools is an imagined problem. However, school violence is a problem exacerbated by fear. A teacher who fears the students that she or he teaches is more likely to resort to discipline when challenged or to ignore the challenge in the hope that she or he will be left alone. Rather than handling a classroom disruption on their own, they are more likely to request assistance from those responsible for handling discipline. They also are less likely to reach out to students in ways that make teaching less impersonal.

Likewise, students who know their teachers fear them are less likely to show respect and more likely to be insolent and insubordinate. When fear is at

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the center of student-teacher interactions, good teaching becomes almost impossible, and concerns about safety and control take precedence over concerns about teaching and learning.

Alternative Approaches

In critiquing the approaches to discipline that are most widely practiced in the country today, I in no way want to belittle the fact that many classroom teachers and students have become victims of violence and deserve the right to work and attend school in safety. In many schools, violence is real, and the fear that it produces is understandable.

Still, I am struck by the fact that even when I visit schools that have a notorious reputation for the prevalence of violence, I can find at least one classroom where teachers are working effectively with students and where fear is not an obstacle to dialogue and even friendship. While other teachers within the school may be preoccupied with managing the behavior of their students (an endeavor at which they are seldom successful), I have seen the same students enter other classrooms willing to learn and comply with the instructions of their teachers.

Many of these “exceptional” teachers have found ways to cross the borders that separate them from their students. For such teachers, differences based on race, class, or age are unable to prevent them from establishing rapport with their students. Consistently, when I have asked students in interviews what is it that makes a particular teacher special and worthy of respect, the students cite three characteristics these teachers share: firmness, compassion, and an interesting, engaging and challenging style of teaching.

Of course, even a teacher who is perceived as exceptional by students can be a victim of violence because of its increasingly random occurrence. However, such teachers and administrators are less likely to allow fear to paralyze them in their work with students.

The fact that teachers and administrators who possess what the French sociologist Emile Durkheim described as “moral authority” tend to be so few in number compels me to ask why. Are fewer exceptional individuals going into teaching, or is there something about the structure and culture of schools that propagates and reproduces the destructive interpersonal dynamics that are so prevalent?

My experience in schools leads me to believe it is the latter. The vast majority of teachers and administrators whom I meet seem genuinely concerned about their students and sincerely desire to be effective at what they do. Even those who have become cynical and bitter as a result of enduring years of ungratifying work in underfunded public schools generally strike me as people who would prefer more humane interactions with their students.

Social Control

What stands in the way of better relations between teachers and students? And how has it happened that fear and distrust characterize those relations rather than compassion and respect?

My answer to these questions focuses on the legacy of social control that continues to dominate the educational agenda and profoundly influences the structure and culture of schools. So many schools are preoccupied with controlling their students or with ensuring safety that they have lost sight of the fact that schools are supposed to be centers of learning where children receive intellectual and psychological nurturing.

The few safe urban schools I have visited share several characteristics: they are small and attempt to treat students as individuals; they bridge the gap between school and community by involving parents and community residents in the school in a society of mutually supportive relationships; they create a physical environment that is aesthetically pleasant; and they focus less energy on enforcing rules than on developing relationships between adults and students to foster trust and personal accountability.

I have visited urban schools that have found ways to effectively address the problem of violence without relying on coercion or excessive forms of control.

At one middle school in West Oakland, rather than hiring a large man to work as security guard, a grandmother from the surrounding community was hired to monitor students. Instead of using physical intimidation to carry out her duties, this woman greets children with hugs, a smile, and words of encouragement. When some form of punishment is needed, she admonishes the children to behave themselves because she expects better behavior from them. Without relying on force she can break up any fight or handle any disruptive student. She also facilitates dialogue between parents and teachers, often serving as a mediator who helps both parties overcome distrust and resentment to find common ground.

I know of a continuation high school where the principal was able to close the campus at lunch time without installing a fence or some other security apparatus. Concerned that too many students were not returning to campus after lunch, he asked the students for suggestions about what should be done to address the problem.

The students suggested that the school develop a student-managed store and dining area so it no longer would be necessary for them to leave for meals. Without erecting a fence, the school is now officially a closed campus, and at lunch time, students, teachers, and administrators can be seen eating together at the student-operated cafe.

Efforts such as these are effective at addressing the potential for violence because they are based on the assumption that students will respond favorably to humane treatment. When the threat of removal is used as a form of discipline, it is most effective when students genuinely desire to attend school. Public health researchers have called attention to the fact that environmental conditions can either promote or deter violent behavior.

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Improving the aesthetic character of schools by including art in the design of schools or making space available within schools for student-run gardens or greenhouses can make schools more pleasant and attractive. Similarly, the divide that separates urban schools from the communities in which schools are located can be overcome by encouraging adults who live within the community to volunteer or, if possible, to be employed as tutors or even teachers, mentors, and coaches.

Undoubtedly, if we can increase the presence of individuals who possess moral authority in the eyes of children, this too will help in reducing the threat of violence at school.

Intrinsic Desires

Ultimately, the promotion of safe schools cannot be separated from the goal of producing schools where children learn. To do so only takes us further down the path of creating prison-like institutions that bring greater control, but do not create an atmosphere of safety and trust.

Those of us who seek to create safe learning environments at our schools must recognize that urban youth today are not passive or compliant and will not be easily controlled. Rather than pursuing that goal we must devise new strategies for providing an education that is perceived as meaningful and relevant and that begins to tap into the intrinsic desire of all individuals to obtain greater personal fulfillment.

Anything short of this will leave us mired in a situation that grows increasingly depressing and dangerous each day.



POSTSCRIPT



Does School Violence Warrant a Zero-Tolerance Policy?

How can the aggressive drive be harnessed so that it provides young people with the energy to live productively in American society rather than being unleashed in the form of violence? This question is posed by Lorraine B. Wallach in "Violence and Agression in Today's Schools" in the Spring 1996 issue of *Educational Horizons*. Wallach contends that "children who accumulate an overload of anger, hate, or jealousy or feel worthless are more likely to be violent, particularly when these feelings are combined with poor inner controls." The building of internal controls and the channeling of normal aggressiveness must begin, of course, in the home and at the presecondary levels of schooling.

To achieve a thorough and balanced approach to the problem of school violence, see *Beyond the Classroom* by Laurence Steinberg (1996); *Violence in Schools: The Enabling Factor* by Carole Remboldt (1995); *Creating Safe Schools* by Marie Hill and Frank Hill (1994); and *Anger Management in Schools: Alternatives to Student Violence* by Jerry Wilde (1995).

Articles of interest include "What to Do About the Children," by William J. Bennett, *Commentary* (March 1995), in which the author discusses the governmental role in dealing with crime, immorality, and uncivilized behavior; "Waging Peace in Our Schools: Beginning With the Children," by Linda Lantieri, *Phi Delta Kappan* (January 1995); the Carnegie Corporation of New York report *Education for Conflict Resolution*, by David A. Hamburg (1994); and "Ganging Up on Gangs," by Reginald Leon Green and Roger L. Miller, *The American School Board Journal* (September 1996). An excellent array of articles may be found in *The School Administrator* (February 1996); the *NASSP Bulletin* (April 1996); and the *Harvard Educational Review* (Summer 1995), which features Janie V. Ward on cultivating a morality of care, Pedro A. Noguera on violence prevention, and interviews with Noam Chomsky and Peggy Charren. Students who will soon enter the teaching profession may also profit from reading *Safe Schools: A Handbook for Practitioners*, which was released in 1994 by the National Association of Secondary School Principals.

Other recent commentary on the problem may be found in Nancy Day's book *Violence in Schools: Learning in Fear* (1996); Jeanne Wright's "Discipline and Order in the Classroom," *Current* (July-August 1997); and multiple articles in the October 1997 issue of *Educational Leadership*, the Summer 1999 issue of *American Educator*, the February 2000 issue of *The School Administrator*, and the March 2000 issue of *NASSP Bulletin*.