NEGP MONTHLY

A monthly in-depth look at states and communities and their efforts to reach the National Education Goals
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Topic Highlighted in this Issue:

Goal 7: Safe Schools

States in this Issue:

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WISCONSIN

WYOMING

SAFE SCHOOL CLIMATE BECOMES FOCUS OF STATE POLICIES

Despite wrenching incidents of school violence in recent weeks, schools remain the safest environment for students. On average, only about 4 percent of students report that they have been absent within the past month because of fear for their safety at school. States and districts have worked vigorously to create safer environments through smaller groupings of students, partnerships with communities, and strict enforcement of rules of conduct. Among the states making the most progress in this area are North Dakota, Wisconsin, Wyoming, and Nevada.

How safe students feel in their schools directly affects their behavior and their achievement. Students who do not feel safe can rationalize ganging up for protection, carrying weapons, or not coming to school at all. Statistically, schools are safer for children than their own homes or riding in a car, but when violence occurs at schools, students and parents rightly feel vulnerable and threatened, even if the violence happened in a school thousands of miles away.

Terrible incidents in March 2001 reminded educators, parents, and policymakers that providing safe school environments requires constant attention and uncompromised efforts. As part of its data collection, the National Education Goals Panel uses Youth Risk Behavior Surveys to determine students' perceptions of school safety. This is an indicator for Goal 7, which calls for safe and disciplined schools. The survey asks students if they did not go to school at least once during the past 30 days because they did not feel safe.

The most recent data show little change in the percentage that stayed at home because of fear about their safety at school. About 4 percent nationwide did so, but the results in several states are lower than that. States and districts intensified their efforts to create safe school environments following the Columbine High

School tragedy almost two years ago, but various strategies often take time to internalize, and the latest surveys may not have caught changes in students' perceptions.

Youth violence, as measured by arrest records, has declined significantly nationwide since it peaked in 1993. Arrest rates mushroomed largely because of the rapid proliferation of firearms used by adolescents engaging in violent acts. Today, with fewer young people carrying guns or other weapons to school and elsewhere, violent encounters are less likely to draw the attention of police. Schools nationwide are relatively safe, according to the first-ever report on youth violence issued by the office of the Surgeon General. Compared to homes and neighborhoods, schools have fewer homicides and non-fatal injuries. The proportion of schools in which gangs are present began to decline in 1999. "Youths at greatest risk of being killed in school-associated violence are those from a racial or ethnic minority, senior high schools, and urban school districts," notes the Surgeon General's report.

However, the Surgeon General's report, released early in 2001, warned that the best available evidence indicates youths still commit violent acts at an alarming rate, just not as often with guns. Confidential surveys of young people indicate that the proportion of youths that commit violent acts has not changed since 1993. In addition, arrests for aggravated assault have declined only slightly.

Research cited in the report separates youthful offenders into two general groups—those whose violent behaviors emerge before puberty and those who become violent after puberty. For the first group, childhood factors, including lifelong exposure to violent lifestyles, should be addressed by strong, intensive prevention efforts targeted at families as well as children. It is this group which generally commits more and more serious crimes for a longer time. For the latter group, which begins at about age 13, strategies need to focus on peer culture and interventions that bridge the teen years. Most youth violence begins in adolescence, according to the report, and ends with the transition into adulthood.

Research for Policymaking

As well as fashioning policies that differentiate between the onsets of violent behavior in the young, the Surgeon General's review of research points to some other areas for rethinking policies and programs:

- During adolescence, the influence of family is largely supplanted by peer influences. The strongest risk factors are weak ties to conventional peers, ties to anti-social or delinquent peers, belonging to a gang, and involvement in other criminal acts.
- A number of youth violence intervention and prevention programs have demonstrated that they are effective; assertions that "nothing works" are false.
- Most highly effective programs combine components that address both individual risks and environmental conditions, particularly building individual skills and competencies, parent effectiveness training, improving the social climate of the school, and changes in type and level of involvement in peer groups.
- Rigorous evaluation of programs is critical. While hundreds of prevention programs are being used in schools and communities throughout the country, little is know about the effects of most of them.
- In schools, interventions that target change in the social context appear to be more effective, on average, than those that attempt to change individual attitudes, skills, and risk behaviors.

- Involvement with delinquent peers and gang membership are two of the most powerful predictors of violence, yet few effective interventions have been developed to address these problems.
- Program effectiveness depends as much on the quality of implementation as on the type of intervention. Many programs are ineffective not because their strategy is misguided, but because the quality of implementation is poor.

Another report, this one from the National Center for Education Statistics, reaffirms some of the Surgeon General's findings. For example, the percentage of schools reporting at least one serious violent crime was much higher in cities (17%) than in towns (5%) or rural areas (8%). About 20 percent of middle and senior high schools reported at least one serious violent crime, and about 55 percent reported at least one less serious violent or nonviolent crime. About 43% of all public schools did not report either violent or nonviolent crimes to police (1996-97). Younger students, ages 12-14, were more likely than older students (ages 15-18) to be victims of crime at school. However older students were more likely than younger students to be victimized away from school.

Actions Taken

Young people who are aware of dangers in their neighborhoods or schools often make changes in their lifestyles, according to a survey by Louis Harris and Associates, Inc., for several federal agencies. Forty-nine percent of the students surveyed, in grades 7-12, reported that they had made at least one change in their daily routines because of concerns about personal safety. The most frequent action was changing friends. Other changes high on the list included avoiding particular parks or playgrounds, changing the way they went to and from school. Twelve percent reported carrying a weapon because of fear for their safety.

According to the *Juvenile Justice Bulletin* (April 1998), all levels of governance have adopted legislation and/or created collaborations to make school environments safe. Included in its list of efforts:

- Nearly all states have developed some sort of crime-free, weapon-free, or safe-school zone statutes. Most states have defined the zones also to include school transportation and locations of school-sponsored functions.
- A number of states have implemented zero-tolerance policies for such things as weapons and drugs. (A caveat: zero-tolerance policies are now receiving severe scrutiny from student advocates and civil rights groups.)
- Schools are forging partnerships with court officials, probation officers, and other youth-serving professionals to share

information on and monitor students who have criminal records or who are in after-care programs following their terms of incarceration in juvenile justice facilities.

· School districts are formulating crisis prevention/intervention policies and are directing individual schools to develop such policies and individual safe-school plans.

· School district strategies to make schools safe depend on local needs but include installing various security aids, making criminal background checks on school staff before employment, establishing Neighborhood Watch programs in areas near schools, recruiting parents to provide safe houses along school routes and/or monitor walkways to and from school, enlisting parents to be present as volunteers in schools, and developing crisis prevention/intervention policies.

A number of resources are available to give state policymakers information and assistance (see list at end). The Keep Schools Safe Project, for example, is a joint effort of the National Association of Attorneys General and the National School Boards Association that offers model approaches to school safety, collections of research, and periodic alerts through its web site. The Center for the Prevention of School Violence, a North Carolina-based resource established in 1993, offers training for educators and juvenile justice personnel and promotes a pyramid model that encompasses comprehensive strategies. The National Center for Juvenile Justice, started in 1973, offers a data base, juvenile violence statistics, resources and technical assistance, focused on increasing the effectiveness of juvenile and family justice systems. The Maryland-based National Alliance for Safe Schools promotes school safety and orderly educational environments.

The Surgeon General's report says that the most important conclusion from its research review "is that youth violence is not an intractable problem. We now have the knowledge and tools needed to reduce or even prevent much of the most serious youth violence, with the added benefit of reducing less dangerous, but still serious problem behaviors and promoting healthy development."

From data available on 24 states, the Goals Panel has identified several with low percentages of students reporting they skipped school within the past month because they did not feel safe and several that have made improvements in this statistic between 1993 and 1999. These states include Nevada, North Dakota, Wisconsin and Wyoming.
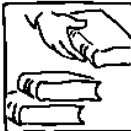
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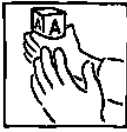
Goal 1: Ready to Learn

Goal 2: School Completion
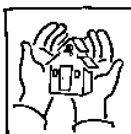
Goal 3: Student Achievement and Citizenship

Goal 4: Teacher Education and Professional Development

Goal 5: Mathematics and Science

Goal 6: Adult Literacy and Lifelong Learning

Goal 7: Safe, Disciplined and Alochol- and Drug-free Schools

Goal 8: Parental Participation

NEVADA

Nevada reduced the percentage of students who were absent because of fear from 8% in 1993 to 4.6% in 1999, the greatest improvement among states for whom data were available. With only 17 county-wide districts in the state, staff in the Nevada State Department of Education Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities program can work closely with school superintendents and staff and make school climate a priority. In addition to district-sponsored professional development in the larger districts, the department offers training on a variety of approaches, according to Michael Fitzgerald, program coordinator.

"When we talk to local officials we emphasize that bullying and intimidation are serious problems but can be changed through education," he says.   Nevada schools use conflict resolution and peer counseling initiatives extensively, and the state offers mini-grants to teachers and others to conduct such programs, with the goal of having the programs eventually funded locally.   State and local officials also promote the use of character education and diversity/tolerance programs.

Although most county districts are rural, the population growth in places such as Las Vegas and Reno have created over-crowded and very large schools. Consequently, says Fitzgerald, "a lot of effort goes into creating smaller environments for students" such as schools-within-schools, teams that keep cohorts of students together, and looping that allows the same teacher or teams of teachers to stay with students for two or more years.

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NORTH DAKOTA

In 1999, North Dakota had the lowest percentage of students who were absent from school because of fear for their safety—2.9%. Since the Columbine tragedy, North Dakota schools have become more conscious of beginning safe- and drug-free efforts in

RESOURCES

Best Practices of Youth Violence Prevention: A Sourcebook for Community Action, produced by the Centers for Disease Control in collaboration with other federal agencies www.cdc.gov/ncipc/dvp/bestpractices.htm

Creating Safe and Drug Free Schools, U.S. Department of Education action guide www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/SDFS/actguid/index.html

Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice, on-line information and contacts on school safety and violence prevention www.air.org/cecp/default.htm   See its *Early Warning, Timely Response*, a publication of the American Institutes of Research with advice from the National Association of School Psychologists

Division of Adolescent and School Health, part of the Centers for Disease Control; provides information on adolescent health risk behaviors, including violence, and school health policies www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dash

Keep Schools Safe, project of the National Association of Attorneys General and the National School Boards Association www.keepschoolssafe.org

National Alliance for Safe Schools www.safeschools.org

National Conference of State Legislatures School Health Finance Project, which includes school violence and mental health issues   www.ncsl.org/programs/health/pp/schlfund/htm

earlier grades, according to Linda Johnson, director of the School Health and Drug-Free program in the Department of Public Instruction.

One strategy, not mentioned by other states, has been the transformation of junior high schools into middle schools where the population warranted it, she said.   This means that students are organized into small teams. Some high schools are using schools-within-schools as a strategy to give more support to students.

The research literature points to the benefits adolescents derive from having an adult truly interested in them and supportive of them, Johnson notes. On this point, North Dakota has a real advantage. Because of an aging population, there are three adults for every child age 17 and under in the state, she says, "and this means there are more adults in a child's life as well as more who volunteer at schools."

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WISCONSIN

Various efforts have reduced Wisconsin's percentage of students who do not feel safe at school from 6% in 1993 to 3.7% in 1999. The state superintendent and the state attorney general in Wisconsin established a task force to study and recommend a plan on school safety, according to Douglas White, director of the Student Services/Prevention and Wellness office in the Department of Public Instruction. It brought together schools and law enforcement officials, set up zero-tolerance policies regarding violence, encouraged school counseling program expansion, and liaisons with police.

Every school, White says, has a comprehensive school safety plan that stresses positive environments and includes how to respond to crises. A state policy, Standards of the Heart, is focused "on helping young people become good citizens as well as smart, lifelong learners," White says. It stresses citizenship,

service learning, character education, mentoring programs, extra-curricular activities, and personal support. It encourages every school administrator to know every child by name, he said.

Standards of the Heart has evolved over the last four years and is articulated through comprehensive school health programs, he says. It also promotes school-community connections in order to support family needs and prevent risk behaviors.

The emphasis on positive school climates, White says, is very intentional and very consistent.

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WYOMING

Wyoming is among the high-performing states on the student sense of safety indicator—with only 3% of students saying they missed school within the past month because of fear for their safety.

Columbine "was a wake-up call across the state," says Gerry Maas, director of the Health and Safety Unit at the State Department of Education. Many school leaders in the state have attended conferences and workshops sponsored by Colorado after the Jefferson County, Colo., school's tragedy such as a "Picking Up the Pieces" conference in Denver.

Using school climate surveys on risk behavior from the Centers for Disease Control, the state expanded the data gathering from 1,500 randomly selected students to 15,000 students representing every high school in the state. Maas' office followed up with consultations with the schools and districts on what students said was happening and not being done in their schools to assure safety. The surveys were scored by his office. "We were not comparing schools," Maas said, "but we wanted them to know what kids said and advise them to take the results seriously."

Wyoming has an advantage in that most students attend schools located in small communities, Maas says, although "some schools and districts do better than others."

The school climate survey also is used in the school accreditation process, according to Maas. Partially because of data, schools and districts are using a number of different programs, depending on what is best for their students. "There are a lot of attempts to get kids to work together," he says.

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UPCOMING GOALS PANEL EVENTS AND PUBLICATIONS

Spring 2001: Release of *High-Stakes Testing and the Consequences for Students*. This paper by Suzanne Weiss with a foreword by Diane Ravitch, provides an up-to-date picture of the consequences states are attaching to tests of student performance. The report summarizes which states now link test performance to high school graduation and grade promotion, and which states plan to do so soon. In addition, it clarifies the remedial help triggered by initially poor performance.

Spring 2001: Release of *Raising Achievement and Reducing Gaps: Reporting Progress Toward Goals for Academic Achievement*. This paper by Paul Barton, provides a new analysis of student achievement scores for states on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Barton analyzed state NAEP data to identify trends in performance of students in the top and bottom quartiles of performance as well changes in the student achievement gap between whites and minorities (black and Hispanic) and top and bottom quartiles.