

Chapter 1

SCHOOL VIOLENCE: COMMUNITY INTERVENTION MODEL

INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 1999, the student shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, shocked the country into realizing that schools were no longer “safe havens” for students. Society has portrayed schools as safe environments where students learn, socialize, and mature. However, this perception is no longer accurate because since 1992, 24 schools have experienced incidents in which students killed students and others in school, the most recent being two in the San Diego, California, area. The series of shootings that prompted the central Michigan area to challenge the “safe” status of schools included the following:

1. October 1997: A 16-year-old student in Pearl, Mississippi, killed his mother, then went to his high school where he killed three students and wounded seven others.
2. December 1997: A 14-year-old student in West Paducah, Kentucky, killed three students at his high school during an early morning prayer meeting.
3. March 1998: Two students, ages 12 and 13, from Jonesboro, Arkansas, killed four students and a teacher after setting off a fire alarm.
4. May 1998: A 14-year-old student in Springfield, Oregon, killed his parents and shot 24 students at school. Two students died.
5. April 1999: Two high school students from Littleton, Colorado, killed 12 students and a teacher, then killed themselves. The magnitude of this tragedy received extensive media coverage and prompted many to reappraise what needs to be done to prevent such incidents.

In addition, a review of federal legislation revealed that several national goals are related to student anger and violence. Goal six of *Educate America* focused on creating safe, disciplined and drug-free schools. One of *CDC and Healthy People 2000 Goals* is to reduce weapons-related deaths, reduce the carrying of weapons, reduce the frequency of physical conflicts and increase the number of youth receiving conflict resolution training in schools.

The basic premise of the project undertaken in the central Michigan area was that a community intervention model was needed to deal with the possibility of a school-shooting incident. The aim was to anticipate and prepare for such an incident. We feel that the prediction of human behavior is an inexact science and while efforts need to be directed toward the early identification and prevention of such incidents, it is also logical to prepare for their occurrence. We believe that it “could happen here” in central Michigan.

The strategy selected to develop the community intervention model involved sending a group of individuals, representing various disciplines within the community, to communities where shooting incidents occurred. We were aware that extensive written materials were available on the topic of school violence, but we felt invaluable information also could be gained by personally talking with individuals who went through such tragedies. We felt that questions such as the following could be answered only through personal contact:

1. When were decisions made by various agencies (i.e. school, public safety, police/fire, mental health) during the incident? In retrospect, what would have been done differently?
2. What changes in policies and procedures have been made or recommended as a result of the incident?
3. What suggestions do individuals involved with school violence incidents have to prevent such incidents in the future?
4. What can be done as part of the healing and coping process when such tragedies occur?

The premise of the model was that we needed personal conversations with individuals to truly understand the dynamics of the incidents and the impact on the community. Reading about incidents or taking existing documents and simply endorsing them for use in the central Michigan area were not considered viable ways to deal with the issues. When the project was discussed in the local press, several mental health professionals thought it was a waste of time and energy. They thought we should either adopt or modify existing documents, such as *Early Warning, Timely Response: A Guide to Safe Schools* or bring in people who have served on the

National Emergency Assistance Team (NEAT) to train people in our community. While we felt that reading documents and bringing in experts was part of a possible solution, we also felt it was critical for us to have personal dialogue in the environment of the incidents to fully understand what happened and how to apply the lessons learned to our community.

PROCEDURE

In the spring of 1999, the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe of Michigan funded an 18-month grant for approximately \$55,000. The grant represented the collaborative efforts of five police agencies (Mount Pleasant Police Department, Michigan State Police, Central Michigan University's Public Safety Department, Isabella County Sheriff's Department and the Saginaw Chippewa Tribal Police Department.) A project consultant was hired to implement the grant's objectives.

Centrally located in Isabella County, the city of Mount Pleasant has a population of approximately 28,000 people with an additional 17,000 Central Michigan University students. The Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribal Reservation also borders the city limits of Mount Pleasant. The reservation is the home of one of the largest Native American casinos in the country -- the Soaring Eagle Casino. The casino draws approximately 30,000 additional people into the city of Mount Pleasant on a daily basis. Isabella County and the city of Mount Pleasant are steadily increasing in population and growth. The schools within Isabella County are affected by this growth and support the need for the crisis response plan.

The following school systems are within Isabella County: Mount Pleasant Public Schools, Shepherd Public Schools, Beal City Public Schools, Chippewa Hills Public Schools, Sacred Heart Academy and the Baptist Academy. There also are two K-8 charter schools: Morey Charter Schools and the Renaissance School. In addition, there are two alternative education schools (Odyssey and Oasis) and one community education site.

The first procedure was to form a screening committee that would select various individuals from the community to serve on the task force. Three police representatives, one tribal officer, and two elected officials -- one from county government and one from city government -- made up the screening committee. The

screening committee met over a six-month period, during which time it identified and interviewed individuals for possible inclusion on the task force. The committee conducted extensive discussions about the qualities desired. Ultimately 17 individuals were selected. The task force composition included representatives from the following disciplines: mental health, law enforcement, education, public relations/media, and clergy. Individuals within the selected groups were employed as school principals, elementary and high school teachers, assistant superintendents, friend of the court and probation officers, college professors, mental health therapists, police officers, public relations officials, and clergy. The group was clearly interdisciplinary and represented a broad-based community focus.

The task force met for three months prior to site visits, reviewing written articles and documents on school violence, including Web sites, newspapers articles, and other publications. The essential framework was to view the issues of school violence from four perspectives: Education/School Personnel, Mental Health/Human Services, Law Enforcement/Tactical, and Public Relations/Media. After months of discussion, a series of questions and observations were identified as relevant for the development of a comprehensive community intervention model. The concepts are listed in an outline format.

CONCEPTUAL ISSUES: SCHOOL/EDUCATION PERSONNEL

1. Can we identify students who are “at-risk?” Is there a comprehensive interagency plan to address them?
2. What interventions are available, suggested, or recommended for:
 - a. Students, including conflict resolution training, dealing with teasing, bullying, aggression.
 - b. Teachers, including mentoring, referrals, programs.
 - c. Administrators, including policies, procedures, expulsion issues.
 - d. Security of facilities, including metal detectors, presence of officers, backpacks, alarms.
3. How can we encourage parental involvement in schools? How do we encourage parents to be part of the solution, to recognize problems, to form expectations of school, and to make referrals when concerned?

4. What ways will help schools cope and deal with the tragedy after an incident occurs?
5. What usable, workable crisis plans are there for dealing with school incidents?
6. What are the essential components of school-based crisis plans?

CONCEPTUAL ISSUES: MENTAL HEALTH/HUMAN SERVICES

PERSONNEL

1. What data exist on the early recognition and identification of “at-risk” students?
2. What is known about the psychology of kids who kill?
3. Do we treat aggressive, conduct-disordered, or opposition-defiant students differently? What interventions are recommended? What do we know about their motivations as evidenced by letters and tapes left behind?
4. What interventions are available through schools, mental health agencies, courts and churches to students who feel alienated and not connected to friends, family, school and community? What interventions are available for students and parents?
5. What solid crisis intervention plans deal with interagency and community factors?
6. How do we convert psychological knowledge into understandable principles, e.g. how to understand the warning signs of e-mail, verbal threats, etc.?
7. What constitutes a “risk appraisal,” and who should do it when a parent or school is concerned?
8. How do we establish and nurture a working relationship between schools, mental health personnel, and courts?

CONCEPTUAL ISSUES: LAW ENFORCEMENT/TACTICAL

1. What is a reasonable working relationship and expectation of roles between schools and police?
2. What are the various roles police personnel play in schools?
 - a. Training: DARE, GREAT, TEAM
 - b. Security advisor, deterrent

c. Role model, mentor

3. Are the missions of each viewed as compatible or different in dealing with “at-risk” students?
4. How should school threats be handled? Who is in charge, and what is the procedure?
5. What is the function and utility of “hot lines?”
6. Are interagency agreements in place?
7. What is the role of SWAT/Crisis Teams?
8. What is the philosophy of SWAT/Crisis Teams regarding an aggressive response?
9. How should activities be coordinated at the scene of an incident – entry, communications, staging, injuries, informing the community?
10. What are issues associated with review panels and school administrators commenting about an incident? What about “second guessing” by parents, community, and the media?

CONCEPTUAL ISSUES: MEDIA

1. What is the relationship among the media, violence, aggression, and student behaviors? Are there glorification and copycat issues?
2. What are the ethical and professional standards regarding the reporting of violent acts? Are there philosophical options?
3. How do various reporting goals have an impact on the community, such as stating the facts, the nature of the events, inquiry, expose, faultfinding, human interest (reporting the impact of incidents on individuals, families).
4. What is the role of media in the healing and coping process?
5. What are the impacts of rumors and premature information on the actions of community members?
6. What is the impact of printed versus video presentation of incidents?
7. What are the impacts of sound bites and videotapes versus detailed stories?
8. Do the media report equally on the positive and negative behaviors of students? Does unequal reporting result in a skewed view of student development?

BASIS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

Several interrelated approaches were used to understand the issues associated with school violence. In addition to site visits, members of the task force reviewed published documents and videos, and attended conferences and workshops. The consultant attended a regional conference on “Kids Who Kill” and a national conference on violence sponsored by the American Psychological Association. Other members attended a program sponsored by the National Alliance For Safe Schools.

The major source of our information, however, came from visits to communities where school violence occurred. The communities visited and their time frames were as follows:

- April 24-26, 2000: Pearl, Mississippi
- May 3, 2000: Port Huron, Michigan
- May 16-18, 2000: Jonesboro, Arkansas
- September 5-7, 2000: McCracken County Schools, West Paducah, Kentucky
- September 26-28, 2000: Littleton, Colorado

Approximately five members of the task force attended each site visit. Each member had delineated responsibilities and met with different members of the community. During each site visit, members of the law enforcement, school, mental health, media, and clergy were interviewed. Parents also were interviewed on several occasions. Newspaper coverage and videotapes of television reports also were reviewed. In addition, policies, procedures, and written documents available prior to and after the incident were solicited.

Approximately 15 days and 2,000 hours were spent on the five site visits. After each site visit, task force members generated an interim report of their observations. The entire site visit team then discussed these reports. After the completion of the site visits, the entire task force met to integrate the results of the literature review with the results of the site visits. This interaction served as the basis for recommendations. Appendix A contains descriptions of each site visit and the central issues involved.