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School Safety,
Justice,
and the
Educational
Environment:

*Materials for
School-based Planning*

Neighborhood Defender Service of Harlem
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New York, New York 10027

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Introduction

This booklet is a collection of statements on the subject of school violence and school safety by public officials, teachers, students, parents, cops, administrators, and researchers. Each states an opinion on questions that all New Yorkers desperately need answered:

- Where does the violence in our schools come from?
- How should we deal with it when we see it?
- How can we make schools safer and prevent the violence before it happens?

To answer these questions usefully, you need to be working with others concerned about your school. You can be working on these issues in many different ways: as part of a class, in a parents association, in a student council, on a staff committee, in a community meeting. The answers are not in this booklet, but the statements here can help launch your discussion and set your group on a constructive course.

Why we produced this booklet

Too often, efforts to improve school safety—although expensive—are isolated and shallow responses to individual incidents. Even the more thoughtful programs are too often designed in isolation by politicians or officials without consulting parents, teachers, and students in a serious way. As a result, when opportunities are created for parents, teachers, and students to join the process, the discussion rarely moves beyond expressions of pent-up frustration and restatements of obvious truths.

The knowledge that we need to make schools safer is already available in and around our schools. The knowledge is in the parents, the teachers, the students, the security officers, the custodians, the secretaries, the local cops, and the principals. We need a way to draw upon that knowledge, to plan together, and to learn from our experiences.

This booklet comes out of one such effort. In the fall of 1992, residents of Harlem came together with educators, school administrators, police officers, parents, and senior city officials for a one-day conference on School Safety, Justice, and the Educational Environment. The conference was sponsored by the Neighborhood Defender

Service of Harlem, a community-based law office that provides free legal representation to Harlem residents accused of crimes, including children arrested in and around their schools.

The conference was an effort to develop practical solutions to school violence in a dialogue between those who make policy and those who live with its consequences. The focus of the day was on workshops in which the participants described the real-life problems they faced and discussed a wide variety of practical responses. Never before had these individual police officers, teachers, and community residents had an opportunity to engage in such problem-solving together at a local level.

Many ideas emerged during the conference, but one recommendation rose above all the others: school-based planning. At the start of each school year, the participants in this conference suggested, principals should bring their parents, teachers, students, security staff, and local police together to plan how that school will deal with incidents ranging from petty arguments to armed violence. Such a process cannot end school violence, but it can create a safe, fair, and positive school environment by enabling everyone involved to respond appropriately to violent disruptions when they occur.

There is no single method for effective school-based planning. It can begin with discussions in individual classrooms, school-wide councils, school-based management committees, or other

“a unique opportunity...”

The tragic reality shared by urban centers throughout this country is that our young are increasingly exposed to violence. The level of crime and drug activity which persists in many communities continues to foster an environment that conditions our youth toward aggressive behavior.

This is a reality that demands our immediate attention. We have a responsibility to make the lives of our youth a little less difficult and a lot less dangerous. And that responsibility extends to insure that their learning environment is just that: a calm, safe, and respectful learning environment.

It is for these reasons that a forum which draws on the knowledge and input of so many of you who are active in the day to day life of our school community is so vitally important. It is particularly valuable that this group has been convened by a community-based group of lawyers, the Neighborhood Defender Service, who have been involved in cases that have originated from school-related activity in this neighborhood.

This clearly is a unique opportunity for community residents, teachers, school personnel, and representatives of the New York City Police Department to strategize how best to reduce the opportunity for incidents and to coordinate an appropriate response to such incidents in this neighborhood and beyond.

—Fritz W. Alexander II,
Deputy Mayor for Public Safety,
Keynote address to the 1992 Harlem conference

forums. Wherever it starts, leadership from the principal as well as consensus building are both vital.

We hope that this booklet will help too. The statements quoted here are to get you thinking and talking. Compare your own experiences with those quoted here. Compare your own views with the suggestions made in these statements. Disagree with statements in this booklet, and explain to your colleagues why you disagree. Use the hypothetical case to identify specific actions that you and others are willing to take in the face of individual incidents. Get beyond the clichés. Get beyond last month's incident. Find a basis for a long-term strategy.

Most of the materials included in this booklet are drawn directly from the proceedings of the 1992 Harlem conference. The participants in that conference spoke, for the most part, in open discussion and not from prepared text, and the statements should be read in that context. We have quoted the conference panelists by name, and others by their roles. The hypothetical case used in the conference (reproduced in part two of this booklet) was prepared by attorneys at the Neighborhood Defender Service of Harlem based on a series of actual cases.

The conference materials are supplemented with three extracts from the Safe Schools Study, the last major piece of national research into what makes safe schools safe. The study was commissioned by the United States Congress almost twenty years ago out of an earlier era's concern with school violence. The passages from the Safe Schools Study remind us that the causes of violence in New York City schools are not unique to us or to our time, and the solutions we intuitively seek are not fundamentally different from those identified by others in the recent past.

Let us know if you use this booklet

If you use this booklet in your own discussions, we would like to know what you think of it and we would be grateful for any suggestions about how we could make it more useful. We will also be pleased to supply you with additional copies at no charge, while our supplies last. Contact us through Vaughn Jackson, Director of Outreach, at 212-876-5500.

School Violence: *Where Does It Come From?*

Instructions: Use the statements on these pages to help you clarify your own beliefs about where the violence in schools comes from.

- Which of these statements is closest to your own ideas?
- Which do you think is mistaken?
- What factors have these statements left out?

a

“they come to school angry and hurt...”

School Security Coordinator:

A lot of students come to school angry. They come to school angry. And hurt.

Former Special Ed Teacher:

Many of them come in off the school bus. I used to meet them in the lunchroom, watched their behavior in the lunchroom, and sat down and talked to them in the lunchroom before they ever got upstairs. So whatever problems they had—just making it to school was a big deal, in tears from the night before or the fight that happened on the bus—I’d discuss it, settle it there, before it got upstairs and became a potential problem with another student or with a teacher.

b “*conflict that quickly escalates...*”

The cruel cynicism of these incidents is that they commonly develop from what often is perceived as a petty conflict among youth—a conflict that quickly escalates into an out-of-control incident.

*Fritz W. Alexander II,
Deputy Mayor for Public Safety*

c “*the fight is going to recur...*”

When you break up a fight, that is not the end of the situation. If you simply separate students and don't deal with the issue, the fight is going to recur and it is going to get bigger next time.

*Peter Cummings,
Office of School Safety*

d “*the alienated, turned-off student...*”

The syndrome suggested here is that of the alienated, turned-off student who is beyond caring about grades because he or she has given up. The courses seem irrelevant, and the student feels that nothing he or she does at school is going to make any difference. The school seems to constitute a set of impersonal circumstances to be endured, or avoided, until he or she can get out. Resigned to these circumstances because he or she cannot affect them or improve his or her own chances in them, the student turns to personal violence either in frustration or in an effort to have at least some impact on somebody.

Violent Schools—Safe Schools: The Safe School Study Report to the Congress, Volume I, January 1978, US Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, National Institute of Education, page 135.

A Typical Case: An Argument Escalates

Instructions: Read the hypothetical case and the comments about the case on pages 8 & 9. Then discuss:

- What should the teacher and the AP have done?
- What should the police have done?
- What should the students have done?
- What do you think of the response of the administrators?

It is a sunny, cold, January day at about 3:00 p.m., and the last class of the day is ending at a junior high school. The first floor hallway is crowded with students getting coats, talking, and heading for the exits. Dozens of students and three or four staff are walking through the hallway and the school lobby when a shouting match begins between two eighth grade girls. Within a few seconds, they have thrown down their bags and coats, and started fighting. The other students in the area circle around and watch for about 10 seconds until an eighth grade boy moves forward and tries to hold back one of the girls.

At that point, another two boys jump in, and fighting soon begins between several boys while the two girls continue to fight. From about 20 feet away, a teacher sees the fight and thinks she sees that one of the boys has a razor knife. The teacher runs to the office and tells an assistant principal what is happening. The AP calls 911 and tells the operator that there is a knife fight in the lobby of the school.

Quite often we have problems like this. We have usually suggested that the teacher stay present and send someone else for help.

—UFT staffer

**The AP
should have
investigated and
possibly called for
help from other staff
before calling police.**

—a guidance counselor

In the meantime, other teachers have tried to break up the fight by getting everyone to move out of the building. No one seems to have been hurt during the brief fight and no other teachers have seen any weapons.

Once outside, the fight between the girls resumes with words and some shoving, but no one else joins in this time. Within a minute, a police car arrives and two young officers get out of their car. They push their way through the crowd of students, and break up the fight by holding the two girls. At that point, one of the boys in the crowd yells, "Fuck the police." Officer A, worried that this kind of thing might incite the crowd to turn against the police, chases the boy who yelled. He catches up to the boy about twenty yards away, just as a second police car arrives with two more officers.

Officer A handcuffs the boy who yelled, and the crowd moves from the girls to where the boy is being arrested. While Officer A holds the boy, the other three officers try to keep the other students back with their night sticks. Someone in the crowd hits Officer B in the face, and the officer starts hitting the students in front of him with his stick. The other officers grab another boy out of the crowd and arrest him for striking Officer B.

I've been involved in a situation like this once before. This thing had escalated. It was between a girl and a boy, and this one boy, actually it was nonsense, to tell you the truth, because they were friends. But the other boys, they were trouble makers in the school and they escalated the situation.

—a police officer

By the end of the incident, about five minutes after the police have arrived, the police have arrested the two girls and two boys, and several other students have been hit and bruised. Several school administrators, who have watched the scene from the windows, write a letter of complaint to the Police Commissioner.

a *“tell them to stop fighting...”*

Teacher: When you see something like this, there should be verbal intervention. “Stop fighting.” Not bodily intervention, but make your presence known and tell them to stop fighting.

Student: In high school, the students won’t be intimidated by the teachers. Teachers will endanger themselves.

Teacher: It matters who the teacher is. There are some teachers who the students don’t care for, and they will just keep fighting; but there are others who they know and they will not fight in front of.

b *“most kids don’t want to fight...”*

In my opinion most kids don’t want to fight. They don’t want to seem like they are soft. Most children want you to step in between them and stop them fighting. Most young people feel that someone in authority should stop this.

—a parent

c *“this would never have happened...”*

Maybe if she [the teacher] had separated the students and called for the police at that point, this would never have happened.

—a police officer

d “*she was afraid...*”

There are teachers in the schools who are simply afraid. Why didn't that teacher go up and see whether or not there was a razor? She was afraid, or he was afraid. This is not in isolation; they see what goes on on TV. They know that kids who have weapons and can get weapons are younger and younger. So when she perceives for some reason that there was a razor there, her first instinct, or his first instinct is fear. This is beyond me, let me get someone else.

—a former elementary school teacher

e “*a plan to expedite the exit...*”

A good administrator should have some kind of a plan to expedite the exit. When you have kids leaving the school, this is the time you are going to have problems. There are ways to keep them moving outside as well. You don't want them congregating on the corner.

—a high school safety coordinator

f “*there's not going to be a riot...*”

Someone in the crowd made a comment, which always happens. You can't take things personal. The officer decides to chase him and put him under arrest. What's he putting him under arrest for? Because he thinks he's going to start a riot? There's not going to be a riot. These kids are just there to watch a fight. They're not there to riot. Because this officer decides to take things personal, you have four kids: the girls were arrested, two boys were arrested, cops assaulted.

—a police officer

What Can We Do Now?

Instructions: Use the statements on these pages to help you identify the issues you want to address as you plan how your school will respond to violent incidents.

- Are the right people involved in your planning process?
- What lessons can you draw from the recent or distant past?
- Who needs to be trained, and how?
- How can you use curricula as part of your plan?
- How will you work with the local police?
- What is the message that you want to send?

a “a unity counsel...”

After a series of fights and beatings at and around my school, our principal, Mrs. Natalie McFarlane, conferred with a group of students and faculty. In a successful conference, Mrs. McFarlane and faculty gained some insights as to why students are resorting to violence to solve their problems. We then formed a unity council. This council will provide a way for those with problems to express and solve them in positive ways. In our upcoming school spirit week, we plan to have speakers address our student body about school violence, borough wars, and the future. We will also have our students speak their minds and try to help one another. If those students, parents, and all concerned are willing to promote non-violence, those trouble makers who pollute our schools with violence and danger can become a part of our mainstream of peace.

—Ronald Taylor,
student at A. Philip Randolph Campus High School

b “a sound safety plan ...”

Safe schools just don't happen. They are the result of work and planning by all of us. Our experience is that if the school establishes a sound safety plan in the beginning of the year, there will be a lessened probability of incidents occurring in the school.

—Sheila Friedman, UFT

c “you have to insist on being involved...”

Parent: A lot of parents don't get involved because the principals don't want them. I'm not kidding, that does happen in our schools. But you have to be insistent on being involved with what goes on in your school.

Community Board Member: You're right. But we have at this point so many working parents, we have so many single parents, that this is still going back to foundational problems.

Teacher: Whether you are a working parent or not, you have to make some kind of presence at that school to let them know that if anything happens, I will be here. Attend PTA meetings: they're held in the evenings. I'm sure some parents are not working too late. Occasionally go to the PTA. If your child is involved in certain activities, some way somehow you will find a way to be involved with it too. It is very difficult if you're a single parent, but wherever there's a will there's a way when it comes to your child or your children.

d *“we had special gang busters...”*

The bottom line is that we’ve been down this road before. This is nothing new. As I look around the audience I see some very young faces. You don’t remember 1950, the gangs, and the gang wars. It was a terrible problem in the city, but we solved that because there was commitment and will to do so. There was a commitment of people and resources to solve that problem. We had community centers then, after school centers, evening center programs, adult programs at night. It takes resources. We had street academies. We had special gang busters: these were social workers who went out and interacted with these kids, with them day and night. We solved the problem and we can do it again.

—Dr. Bernard Brown,
Superintendent. Community School District #5

e *“years ago, we had stern teachers...”*

Many years ago, we didn’t have security guards, we didn’t have police, we didn’t have that. What we had was stern teachers who say “Hey, you will sit down and you will shut up,” and nothing else will be happening. But now everything is so free flowing—“Do your own thinking” and “Do your own thing”—and so many things are rights of students. . . . If the teacher is there looking just like one of the students or behaving like one of the students, how can the students respect that teacher? If that teacher goes in there and looks like a role model, behaves like a role model, a lot of behavior negative patterns will be cut; there will be respect for the teacher.

—a former teacher & principal

f

“metal detectors in the schools...”

In a crisis we are dealing with a symptom, we are not dealing with the problem. When we deal with students fighting, we are dealing with a symptom. I am responsible for putting metal detectors in the schools. That’s not a solution to anything. I would like to take them all out tomorrow.

—Peter Cummings

g

“negative effects...”

In a number of the schools we studied, including those described as moving successfully towards providing a safe school environment, the need to make the school secure seemed to have some negative effects on the quality of the educational program.

Violent Schools—Safe Schools: The Safe School Study Report to the Congress, Volume I, January 1978, US Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, National Institute of Education, page 170.

h

“are our schools too restrictive?...”

Are our schools too restrictive now? I don’t think so, but I think that we are headed in that direction.

—Dr. Bernard Brown

i

“we have lost guidance counselors...”

There always seems to be money as a reaction; but all the metal detectors, all the things in the world will not obviate the fact that the high schools are underfunded. We have lost guidance counselors, we have lost a lot of the extracurricular activities—the music, the art—that brought our young people together and provided the kinds of educational things that our students need.

—Patricia Black, Superintendent of Manhattan High Schools

j *“maybe our rules aren’t right...”*

Yes, kids should be referred more to guidance counselors, but guidance counselors in high schools have caseloads that are ridiculous. You’re talking about 200 kids. The person who cares the most still can’t deal with the number of kids that they’re assigned.

So the question becomes, as adults, maybe on the line it says we can leave at three o’clock, but maybe our rules aren’t right, maybe that makes no sense for us. Is our union saying, yeah, all right, the clock says three o’clock, but your responsibility is being there....

As much as we talk about parents, and I think parents are an important part of it, I think the school system and the unions have a responsibility and we just aren’t living up to it.

—an educational administrator

k *“there are too many rules...”*

The challenge is with the teachers, the challenge is with them. And I will be very blunt, there are too many rules, too many rules that are stopping us from being human when it comes to young people.

—a teacher

l *“you’ve got to develop personal contact...”*

You’ve got to widen communication within the schools, you’ve got to develop personal contact. Let me give you an example. On one occasion, there were some high school students drunk in the yard, disrupting classes. The fact that I knew the names of six of the seven young men, meant that six of the seven calmly walked away. The seventh, I didn’t know. The seventh the police had to deal with, they got stuck with that problem. If I had known the name of the last individual, there probably wouldn’t have been a problem at that point.

—Peter Cummings



“...was I supposed to get some training?”

Are we preparing our new teachers to deal with issues of discipline in the classroom? What kind of training do teachers get? I know that I came in as a new teacher: “Hi, how you doin’, you’re hired.” Okay, day two you’re in a classroom dealing with special ed, you’re dealing with X, Y, and Z. And maybe with my personality I can deal with it; but, hey, was that what I was hired on, the strength of my personality; or was I supposed to get some training?

—a former teacher



“conflict resolution classes...”

We have implemented an anti-violence curriculum called “Alternatives to Violence.” We have established clear behavior expectations in school roles for everyone, teachers inclusive. We are providing our supervisors and staff and kids intervention skills, we are teaching everyone mediation skills and we are trying to get conflict resolution classes in almost all of our schools.

—Dr. Bernard Brown



“we want police officers to talk to kids...”

A program that we hope to enhance is the Adopt-a-Class program in which we want police officers, we want local precincts, to adopt different schools—to go into schools and to talk to kids. Because it is too late once that encounter between police and youth happens in the street. At that point it is probably more than likely a negative encounter, and what happens at that point is that things escalate and exacerbate and then relationships are broken down.

—Yolanda Jimenez, Assistant Commissioner, NYPD

P *“the help of our decent police officers...”*

Students and parents can't do it alone. We need the help of our decent police officers who protect us, and not provoke us. Those few officers who are not doing their job have taken the spotlight off of those who are keeping the peace. These officers, who are doing their job, can be a great asset to those of us who are ready to push forward and get our safe schools back.

—a student

q *“they must know the school culture...”*

My direction to my principals is to invite the captain of the precinct in, and the community policing officer. They must be regular, frequent, and friendly visitors to the school, so that they know the kind of school it is and have some idea of the school culture.

—Patricia Black

r *“the police come in regularly...”*

What I have found that is really important and rewarding is the relationship that they [the school administrators] have with the precinct.... I mean the police come in regularly and they are friendly. When they need somebody, the principal calls directly and any problem is usually solved quite efficiently.

—Jacquel Smith,

President of Parents Association, Manhattan Center High School

S

“if the kids feel they have a stake...”

We can tap dance around the issue of alienation and not say it, but that’s what you have to deal with. There is definitely a sense of alienation.

I think that in junior high school you can set a discipline code, and the schools should have discipline codes. But until students themselves are empowered to believe that that school is theirs, so that if we’re talking about how the school building looks—what color should the walls be, should there be a mural—if the kids feel like it’s their building and they have a stake in what happens in that building, that’s half the battle.

And if you have a school principal who does that from day one, who sets that kind of tone, “I respect the students, their decisions their ideas are important to me, and therefore I demand that my staff does the same thing.” You do that from day one and the school building environment is very different.

—an educational administrator

t

“a rational structure of order...”

Regardless of the type of community or the type of student, the safe schools in this study are characterized by clear norms, students’ belief that the school is providing something of value to them, and a sense that the school as a social system is not a meaningless environment. The safe schools are characterized by a rational structure of order, with consistent positive incentives and negative sanctions, maintained by an effective administrative leadership. They are well-governed schools.

Violent Schools—Safe Schools: The Safe School Study Report to the Congress, Volume I, January 1978, US Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, National Institute of Education, page 135.

Appendix: List of Conference Participants

Keynote Speaker:

Fritz W. Alexander II, *Deputy Mayor for Public Safety*

Panelists:

Patricia Black, *Superintendent of Manhattan High Schools*

Dr. Bernard Brown, *Superintendent, Community School District #5*

Peter Cummings, *NYC Board of Education, Office of School Safety*

Sheila Freidman, *Coordinator, UFT Victim Support Program*

Yolanda Jiminez, *Assistant Commissioner, New York City Police Department*

Jacquel Smith, *President, Parents Association of Manhattan Center for Science and Math*

Ronald Taylor, *student, A. Philip Randolph Campus High School*

Participants:

Roahl Aarons

Alma Alston

Darrell Alston

Vivian Assing

M. Atkins

Valerie Barton

Cassandra Blunt

Kim Bowen

Liz Brock

Shirley Burnside

Cesarea Castillo

Dawn Chapple

Thelma Christian

Don Cox

Police Officer Crumm

Helen Daniels

Raymond Daughters

Sherman Edmonds

Richard Freeman

Louise Gibbs

Sam Givens

Linda Hassan

Ellen James

Glorious Johnson

E. Malone

Sara Mitchell

Curtis Moore

Philip Osborne Mott

Geneva Myrie

R. Nelson

John Netter

Pam Palmer

Steven Pearse

John E.D. Porter

Ernestine Roach

Nanette Sheppard

Pat Stewart

Shirley Stroud

Mignone G. Taylor

Bea Thomas

C. Walker

V. Walker

Leon Winfield

Police Officer Wright