

REINFORCING POSITIVE STUDENT
BEHAVIOR TO PREVENT SCHOOL
VIOLENCE

Enhancing the Role of School Safety Agents

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Executive Summary

Across the country, local officials are placing law enforcement personnel in schools to help keep students safe. In New York City, more than 3,500 unarmed law enforcement personnel, known as school safety agents, monitor school entrances; patrol hallways, stairwells, and other areas of the school; and direct students to classes. The New York City Police Department trains these agents to intervene when students violate school rules or engage in violence on school grounds. However, the agents are not trained to prevent violence and the negative behaviors that often lead to violence.

The New York City Police Department, the New York City Board of Education, and local school officials have been working with the Vera Institute to develop a specialized training in violence prevention for school safety agents. That program is designed to teach safety agents how to reinforce positive behavior, a strategy shown to reduce disorder, aggression, and actual violence in schools. The curriculum and approach draws on programs created by the Oregon Social Learning Center, an organization that has developed and successfully tested techniques adults can use to reduce aggression and improve healthy development among children and adolescents.

The training will occur in two phases. First, agents will spend a day learning how positive reinforcement leads to behavior change and how they can become skilled observers and reinforcers of positive behavior. In the second part of the training, safety agents will have an opportunity to apply what they have learned under the guidance of trainers who work alongside them in the schools. For approximately one month, these trainers will help safety agents refine the use of positive reinforcement techniques. Vera plans to test the training program in New York City, adjusting its design to reflect lessons learned. Working initially with safety agents in Brooklyn schools, the demonstration program will gradually involve agents working in communities across the city.

Vera aims to demonstrate that enhancing the role of school safety agents to include reinforcing positive behavior contributes to a safer school environment. Specifically, the training program should reduce disruption and violence in schools, make students feel safer, and make the work of safety agents more satisfying. Vera will evaluate the training program's impact on school safety and, if it shows success, will work with the New York City Police Department and Board of Education to determine how it should be institutionalized. Ultimately, this training program could offer law enforcement personnel in schools across the country a better way of interacting with students, one that not only enforces rules but also prevents violence.

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I. Origins of the Demonstration

In December 1998, New York City transferred control of its approximately 3,200 school safety agents from the board of education to the police department. Located in schools around the city, these agents primarily monitor school entrances, hallways, and lunchrooms and oversee metal detectors. They do not carry weapons but do have the power to arrest students.

Since the transfer, the board of education and police department have been exploring their new, complementary authority in schools. Believing that educators and law enforcement staff in middle and high schools must coordinate efforts to keep students safe, in March 2000 officials from both city agencies asked Vera to facilitate a year-long safety planning process in two Brooklyn communities. A local high school and two of its feeder middle schools formed the heart of a safety “cluster” in each community. School safety agents, principals, assistant principals, and parents from the three schools, as well as police officers drawn from the local precincts attended cluster meetings. By discussing mutual problems and sharing their perspectives and expertise, cluster members developed initiatives that address the needs of the schools in their community. During these discussions, members of both clusters said that they wanted training in violence prevention.

At the same time, the head of the police department’s school safety division was looking for ways to bring more definition to the role and work of school safety agents. In the year following the transfer, the police department tackled complex administrative challenges such as establishing personnel policies, setting up payroll, and defining command chains and titles. With these parts of the transfer in good shape, senior managers were able to think about how their agents could make an even greater contribution to the safety of school environments.

Nationally, the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Justice’s office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) were seeking ways to help counties and cities better incorporate law enforcement personnel in school communities. Since 1998, the COPS office has provided funding to place law enforcement personnel in schools. The COPS office and the department of education recognize that the role of enforcement personnel in schools is different from other law enforcement staff and from educators and, therefore, requires special training.

Based on the local and national interest, Vera began working with the New York City Board of Education and the New York City Police Department to design and run an innovative training program for New York City school safety agents. The demonstration will test the value of using positive reinforcement to prevent disorderly and aggressive behavior among students. Senior officials at the school board and the police department helped shape the content and format of the training program. Vera staff conducted focus groups with school safety agents, students, and parents; attended a session of the current

training program for safety agents; observed safety agents at work in schools; and researched programs across the country. Vera staff also discussed the idea of teaching agents how to use positive reinforcement with principals, assistant principals, and other school administrators. A consensus emerged from these discussions that school safety agents have many opportunities to interact with students during the school day and, if appropriately trained, could use these encounters to support positive behavior as a way of preventing disruption and violence in schools.

II. The Problem

Violence and Disruption in Schools

The experience of violence—whether as a victim, perpetrator, or witness—can hinder educational achievement and personal development.¹ Students who feel unsafe in school are more likely to miss classes than students who feel safe. Violent incidents in schools not only harm the individual students involved, they also interfere with teaching and learning for everyone. And while the most serious incidents get the most attention, the many minor incidents, like teasing and disobedience, are significant because they disrupt the learning process, can escalate into these serious incidents, and can be warning signs of future violent behavior.

In a single year nationwide, kids aged 12 through 18 were victims of more than 2.7 million crimes that occurred while they were at school.² About fifty percent of all public middle and high schools reported incidents of physical attack or fights, theft or larceny, and vandalism to the police or other law enforcement representative.

In New York City, a study of criminal and non-criminal incidents in schools from December 20, 1999 to June 30, 2000 revealed a total of 5,178 criminal incidents.³ Not surprisingly, a recent survey of 1,001 New York City public high-school students showed that they view safety as an area needing more attention.⁴ Twenty-five percent feel their personal safety while at school is “just passable,” and 15 percent believe it is poor or very poor. One third of all students said they frequently witness a student being threatened by another student, fights between gangs, and drug dealing at or near their schools.

Violent incidents are often preceded by minor problem behaviors. Moreover, children who frequently engage in minor problem behavior are the ones who are most likely to become violent later on.⁵ A recent study of violent incidents among students in public middle and high schools shows that these episodes usually begin with a relatively minor

¹ Mercer Sullivan and Nancy Vorsanger, *Understanding Adolescent Violence: An Ethnographic Approach* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 1999). See also: Howard Snyder and Melissa Sickmund, *Juvenile Offenders and Victims: 1999 National Report* (Washington, DC: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice, 1999).

² Phillip Kaufman et al., *Indicators of School Crime and Safety* (Washington: U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Justice, 2000), 4.

³ Joint Committee on School Safety, *First Annual Report* (New York: Mayor’s Office, November 2000), 50-56.

⁴ Belden Russonello and Stewart Research and Communications, *Class Dismissed: The Diminished Potential of New York City High School Students*, commissioned by the Citizens’ Committee for Children, June 2001. *Citizens’ Committee for Children of New York*. On-line. 3 July 2001. <http://www.kfny.org>.

⁵ D.M. Capaldi and G.R. Patterson, “Can Violent Offenders be Distinguished from Frequent Offenders: Prediction from Childhood to Adolescence,” *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, vol. 33 (1996): 206-231.

offense, an “opening move,” that later escalates into violence.⁶ Examples of such moves include unprovoked contact, interference with another youth’s possession, teasing, and gossip. The study found that 45 percent of these opening moves took place in school, largely in less structured settings such as the hall, stairs, playground, and cafeteria.

In New York City, minor incidents are common. Almost a third of school-based incidents during the six-month period examined were harassment and disorderly conduct, relatively minor offenses.⁷

How Adults Influence School Violence

Kids who have positive relationships with the adults in their life are less likely to become involved in violence and other negative behaviors.⁸ This is especially true during adolescence when physical and emotional changes, as well as newfound independence and vulnerability, put teens at higher risk for violence and victimization. Too many young people, unfortunately, do not receive enough support from adults to diminish these risks.

With insufficient resources to draw from and thousands of students to keep track of, teachers, guidance counselors, and school administrators are hard pressed to become as involved as they would like to be with students. In New York City as of December 2000, for example, there was an average of one guidance counselor for every 215 students.⁹ Large classes also make it difficult for students to get the individual attention they need and want.¹⁰

Often students get more attention from adults when they misbehave. Naturally, teachers, administrators, and other staff charged with managing student behavior feel compelled to react. They may reprimand students who routinely interrupt class, refer

⁶ Daniel Lockwood, “Violence Among Middle School and High School Students: Analysis and Implications for Prevention,” *National Institute of Justice* (October 1997): 8. An “opening move” is defined as an action of a student, a student antagonist, or third party that initiates a violent incident.

⁷ Joint Committee on School Safety, *First Annual Report*, November 2000, 50-56.

⁸ Alan McEvoy and Robert Welker, “Antisocial Behavior, Academic Failure and School Climate: A Critical Review,” in *Making Schools Safer and Violence Free: Critical Issues, Solutions, and Recommended Practices*, a compilation of articles from the *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*, eds. Hill M. Walker and Michael H. Epstein (Pro-Ed: Austin, 2001), 37. See also J. Mark Eddy et al., “An Elementary School-Based Prevention Program Targeting Modifiable Antecedents of Youth Delinquency and Violence: Linking the Interests of Families and Teachers (LIFT)” in *Making Schools Safer and Violence Free: Critical Issues, Solutions, and Recommended Practices*, 129-130.

⁹ The New York City Board of Education employs 2,420 guidance counselors for approximately 527,000 middle school, high school, and District 75 students. “Facts & Figures 1998-1999,” *New York City Board Of Education*. 5 December 2000.

¹⁰ *Class Dismissed: The Diminished Potential of New York City High School Students*. Thirty-one percent of public high school students polled in this study reported that class sizes do not allow them to get enough attention.

disruptive students to the principal's office, and contact parents when students fight in school.

When adults give more attention to bad behavior—as opposed to recognizing students when they behave well—they may unintentionally reinforce the negative behavior, increasing the likelihood that it will re-occur.¹¹ Researcher Gerald Patterson and his colleagues studied the patterns of family interactions to help understand the cycle of negative actions and counteractions.¹² They found that parents who engage in “coercive management,” such as harsh punishment, threats, hitting, lead their children to respond with coercive reactions. For example, when a mother yells at her daughter for not doing homework, the child counter attacks by arguing and whining. Put off by her daughter's behavior, the mother stops yelling. Once the mother backs off, the child ends her counter attack. The short-term effect is that the child does not complete her homework. The long-term outcome is an increase in the likelihood that during future confrontations, the child will choose the same coercive behavior to avoid the situation. As a result, children learn to be aggressive during episodes of conflict.¹³ Children often repeat these learned behavioral problems in new settings and new relationships, such as in school. The researchers also found that such parents not only reinforce negative behaviors, they also fail to reinforce their child's positive behaviors, such as appropriate play with siblings.

Consider how coercive management might play out in a classroom situation. A boy routinely interrupts his teacher and other students. In a moment of understandable frustration, the teacher scolds him in front of his peers. In defense, the student yells back. Eventually, the teacher sends him to the principal's office. As this cycle of events reoccurs in the days and weeks to come, the student learns that his negative, aggressive behavior provides a way out of conflicts and a way to get additional attention from adults. And if the teacher also fails to notice any of the boy's good behavior, she will provide even more reinforcement for his negative actions.

As a student's problem behavior persists, school officials may introduce even more negative consequences, but without success. A chain reaction of failures then occurs as adults and peers who could model and reward positive behavior become frustrated with and reject a student whose conduct is aggressive or disruptive.¹⁴ Their rejection, in turn, undermines the student's bond with school. A student who is punished time and again for

¹¹ George Sugai and Robert Horner, “School Climate and Discipline: Going to Scale,” (framing paper presented at the National Summit on the Shared Implementation of IDEA, June 2001), 2. *IDEA Partnership*. On-line. 22 July 2001. http://ideainfo.org/Summit/school_climate.PDF.

¹² G.R. Patterson et al., *A Social Learning Approach: Vol. 4 Antisocial Boys* (Eugene, OR: Castalia, 1992).

¹³ “Antisocial Behavior, Academic Failure and School Climate: A Critical Review,” 31.

¹⁴ Cicchetti and Schneider, “An Organizational Approach to Childhood Depression,” in *Depression in Young People: Developmental and Clinical Perspectives*, eds. M. Rutter, C.E. Izard, and P.B. Read (New York: Guilford, 1986), 71-134; D.M. Capaldi and M. Stoolmiller, “Co-occurrence of conduct problems and depressive symptoms in early adolescent boys: Prediction to young-adult adjustment,” in *Development and Psychology* 11 (1999).

disruptive behavior in one class may begin reacting negatively to school in general, to the point where he regularly skips all his classes.¹⁵ “From the failing students’ perspective, school then assumes more aversive properties that increase the likelihood of escape, rebellion, uncooperativeness, and other negative behaviors.”¹⁶ Without the approval of their teachers and peers, these students become vulnerable to a broad range of risk behaviors.¹⁷

¹⁵ Robert L. Crooks and Jean Stein, *Psychology: Science, Behavior, and Life* (Fort Worth: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1991), 216-217.

¹⁶ “Antisocial Behavior, Academic Failure and School Climate: A Critical Review,” 30.

¹⁷ J. David Hawkins et al., “Preventing Adolescent Health-Risk Behaviors by Strengthening Protection During Childhood,” *Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*, vol 153 (March 1999): 226.

III. School Safety Personnel: Adults Charged With Keeping Students Safe

In response to school violence, more officials across the country are putting law enforcement personnel in schools. Their authority varies from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. In Chicago, for example, school safety staff are unarmed and do not have the power to arrest, whereas in Houston and Los Angeles, they carry guns and can make arrests. In 1998, the federal office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) created the COPS in Schools (CIS) program to help jurisdictions increase the presence of police in public schools. Since its inception, CIS has awarded \$420 million in grants to law enforcement agencies to hire 3,800 “school resource officers” and is expected to support another 1,400 new officers next year. The National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO), a Florida-based nonprofit organization that serves as a national networking, information, and training resource for school resource officers around the nation, reports about 7,000 members. Some estimate that the total number of school resource officers in schools nationwide could be twice that, with the last two years witnessing the most explosive growth of law enforcement staff in schools.¹⁸

For these officers, the school building and grounds is their beat. They get to know students where kids hang out and where violence originates, and see a range of behavior, good and bad. And their roles and responsibilities are varied. They not only investigate incidents and arrest students who break the law, they also serve as educators, teaching students to resist drug use and prevent gang violence, and as mediators and problem solvers, bringing together the community to promote school safety. Different from other types of law enforcement personnel and from educators, their role is unique. As more law enforcement personnel become responsible for safety in schools, policy makers are struggling to define and improve the role. While they must enforce the law, they must also build a healthy rapport with students. They can serve as role models for students but must interact with them in ways that do not set up unrealistic expectations or lead to inappropriate relationships.

Training Programs for School Safety Personnel: A National Picture

Policy makers recognize that law enforcement personnel working in schools need special training. CIS, for example, requires the law enforcement agencies it funds to send at least one school resource officer and one school administrator from the school district to a three-day training. By bringing law enforcement officers and educators together, CIS hopes to create a team-based approach to school safety. The CIS training curriculum was developed by the National School Safety Center in collaboration with the National

¹⁸ Aisha Sultan, “School safety is a boon for trainers, officers; Millions more spent by districts fuels new mini industry,” in St. Louis Post-Dispatch, July 9, 2001, page B1. See also: National Association of School Resource Officers, <http://www.nasro.org/>.

Association of School Resource Officers, the National Crime Prevention Council, the Yale Child Study Center and other organizations.

The training focuses on: school safety and the law, child development, cultural fluency, classroom teaching strategies, safe school planning, mental health interventions, and creating a common vision for school safety.¹⁹ While the child development session briefly explains the importance of praising and encouraging students when they behave well, it does not offer strategies for becoming skilled observers of good behavior or techniques to support and shape good behavior.

The National Association of School Resource Officers provides training courses for officers relatively new to the job, courses for those with more experience, and separate course for supervisors and administrators. The courses teach the history of school-based policing, safety planning, counseling skills, how to develop lessons on drug-abuse prevention and avoiding gang involvement, and how to deal with legal issues.

While these organizations provide school resource officers with strategies to meet many of the demands of their job, the techniques usually focus on reacting to problems. There is no thorough training on how to support and shape positive behavior as a way of preventing school violence.

School Safety Personnel in New York City

In New York City, more than 3,500 unarmed school safety agents employed by the police department protect more than a million public school students.²⁰ Each high school has between ten and twenty safety agents. Three to five agents work in each middle school, and one or two work in each elementary school. Their main function is to enforce the school's disciplinary code and respond to criminal incidents. To fulfill this obligation, they monitor entrances, patrol the school, oversee metal detectors that scan students for weapons, and challenge unauthorized personnel who want to enter the building. When warranted, they work with police officers to issue youth cards or summonses, and under certain circumstances are permitted to arrest students.

Fifty-seven percent of school safety agents are women. At 63 percent African-American and 27 percent Latino, school safety agents are more representative of New York City's public school students than many of the other adult figures in schools, such as principals, assistant principals, and teachers.²¹

¹⁹ At the invitation of CIS, a Vera planner attended the CIS regional training in Albuquerque, New Mexico from February 26 - 28, 2001.

²⁰ Additionally, there are approximately 160 police officers stationed in schools.

²¹ According to the New York City Board of Education's "Facts & Figures 1998-1999," 35.7 % of New York City public school students are African-American, 37.7 % are Latino, 15.5 % are white, 10.8 % are Asian, and .3 % are other. The same document shows that public school principals and assistant principals are 64.9 % white and that teachers are 64.3 % white. *New York City Board of Education*. 31 July 2001.

Each class of new recruits (approximately 300 to 350 people) goes through eight weeks of classroom training at the police academy. The course covers three main topics: police science, law, and behavioral science. While the behavioral science section emphasizes communication skills, including verbal judo—a technique to “deflect critical insults and break through resistance”—it is designed to help agents react to problem situations and gain control, not to prevent them.²² Following the in-class training, recruits are paired with experienced safety agents in schools around the city for two weeks to watch as the experienced agents operate scanning equipment, question students, and patrol the school.

During focus groups led by Vera staff, some agents said that they were discouraged from interacting with students for any purpose other than to interrupt or respond to a criminal or violent incident. One agent working in a Manhattan high school said that he avoids talking with students because he fears getting reported for unprofessional behavior. This reflects the police department’s concerns that, without boundaries on their behavior, safety agents might become overly friendly with students or get involved in inappropriate relationships.

Yet it is not uncommon for students to turn to school safety agents for attention and support. “A lot of them can relate to you,” commented one tenth grader in Brooklyn. “They live in your neighborhood and understand your background and what you’ve been through. They’re interested in your life and want to help.”²³ Vera staff observed one student in a Brooklyn high school proudly display a math quiz he did well on to a school safety agent. At a Manhattan middle school, students lined up to ask a school safety agent to sign their yearbook.

And many safety agents want to expand their role. An agent in a Brooklyn high school told a Vera staff member, “We could reach kids more effectively if we had a larger role in their lives. It would allow kids to see us as something more than an authority figure.” Under the current training program, with its focus on identifying and responding to negative behavior, safety agents are not prepared to play this larger role. Those who do take the initiative to support students and encourage positive behavior must do so without instruction about which behaviors to reinforce and how to do it effectively and uniformly.

²² New York City Police Academy School Safety, *School Safety Agent Guide – Behavioral Science*, as of January 2000, Lesson 3-3.

²³ In September 2000, Vera staff interviewed New York City high school students, principals, and assistant principals about safety in their schools.

IV. A Promising Technique for Reducing Violence: Positive Reinforcement

Several organizations around the country that focus on child development have designed programs using positive reinforcement to support good behavior and prevent violence. Positive reinforcement has more lasting effects on behavior than punishment.²⁴ Punishment tells individuals what they are doing wrong but gives no direction for what they should do instead. Some punishments might temporarily stop the unwanted behavior but will not extinguish it, and punishment often cultivates fear and defensiveness.²⁵ Positive reinforcement, on the other hand, encourages people to continue behaving well, gives them a clear direction for which actions to pursue, boosts their self worth, and motivates them to seek more positive consequences.²⁶

The Oregon Social Learning Center, an organization that specializes in developing techniques adults can use to discourage aggression and other problem behaviors in adolescents, uses positive reinforcement as a key component in all its interventions. One such intervention was Linking the Interests of Families and Teachers (LIFT).²⁷ Designed to prevent aggressive and antisocial behavior among first and fifth graders, the program invited elementary schools in the Eugene/Springfield area with a higher than average rate of juvenile crime to participate. LIFT introduced classroom-based social skills training for children, playground-based behavior modification, and group training for parents. On the playground, staff members were instructed to verbally praise and give an armband to students who were acting in an overtly positive manner toward their peers. At the end of recess, class members put their armbands in a jar, and when the jar was full the whole class earned a special privilege. To assess the program's impact, staff compared the behavior of kids who participated in LIFT with a similar group of kids who did not participate.

OSLC found that children in the LIFT group were less aggressive on the playground and were perceived more positively by their teachers than children in the control group. Kids who participated in LIFT also did not exhibit problem behaviors that often accompany association with deviant peers. Before the intervention, a child on the playground exhibited six aversive behaviors (such as, hitting, arguing, yelling, and teasing) during a thirty-minute recess period. Following the intervention, children in the LIFT group averaged 4.8 aversive behaviors per day, and those in the control group

²⁴ *Psychology: Science, Behavior, and Life*, 217.

²⁵ Donna K. Crawford and Richard J. Bodine, "Conflict Resolution Education: Preparing Youth for the Future," in *Juvenile Justice* 8, no. 1 (June 2001): 24.

²⁶ *Psychology: Science, Behavior, and Life*, 217.

²⁷ J. Mark Eddy et al., "An Elementary School-Based Prevention Program Targeting Modifiable Antecedents of Youth Delinquency and Violence: Linking the Interests of Families and Teachers (LIFT)" in *Making Schools Safer and Violence Free: Critical Issues, Solutions, and Recommended Practices* (Pro-Ed: Austin, 2001), 134-135.

averaged 6.6 per day. Overall, kids on the LIFT playground experienced 1,700 fewer negative events than youth on the control playground.²⁸

The Social Development Research Group based at the University of Washington in Seattle also uses positive reinforcement in its programs to reduce violent behavior and help students bond with school and family. In one program for a multiethnic group of elementary school children, researchers examined the long-term effects of combining teacher training, parent education, and social competence training. Teachers and parents were trained to provide consistent positive reinforcement for desired behaviors, model good social skills, recognize and reward students' efforts to comply, and suggest alternatives to negative behaviors. Following-up six years later and comparing these kids with a similar group who did not participate in the program, the researchers found that the package of interventions had improved kids' attachment to school, their academic achievement, and their behavior in school and had reduced the number of violent incidents.²⁹

Another example of using positive reinforcement is the Behavioral Monitoring and Reinforcement Program (also called Preventive Intervention). The program is for adolescents in the seventh through tenth grades who demonstrate characteristics associated with delinquency or drug use, including little motivation for school, disregard for rules, and feeling alienated from school. Program staff compile a weekly report card for each student based on conversations with teachers, asking such questions as: Did the student come to class with the correct books and materials? Did the student arrive on time? Did the student complete the assigned work? Each week, the students meet with a staff member to discuss their recent behavior. During these meetings, program staff reward students for refraining from disruptive behavior. Recent evaluations show that teens who participate in the program have higher grades and better attendance compared with other students; less self-reported delinquency and drug abuse; and fewer school problems such as suspension, absenteeism, tardiness, and academic failure.³⁰

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ J. David Hawkins et al., "Preventing Adolescent Health-Risk Behaviors by Strengthening Protection During Childhood," *Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*, vol 153 (March 1999): 231-233.

³⁰ *Blueprints: Promising Programs, Preventive Intervention*, 2 August 2001. Blueprints Programs for Violence Prevention. On-line. 2 August 2001. <http://www.colorado.edu/cspv/blueprints/>

See also: B.H. Bry, "Reducing the Incidence of Adolescent Problems Through Preventive Intervention: One- and five-year follow up," *American Journal of Community Psychology* 10 (1982): 265-276.

V. The Innovation: Training School Safety Agents to Reinforce Positive Student Behavior

Different methods of identifying and reinforcing positive behavior among children and adolescents have been shown to reduce violence and the disruptive acts that often lead to violence. A familiar adult presence in schools, school safety personnel are well positioned to use such techniques. In New York City, they are representative of the student body, know many of the students by name, and often live in the same communities as the students they help keep safe in school. They have an important law enforcement function to perform but also are interested in helping students.

These safety personnel could be trained to reinforce positive behavior as they patrol school hallways, stairwells, entrances, and grounds. They could learn what types of behaviors to reinforce and how to interact with students appropriately, and could do both without compromising their enforcement role. Over the course of the school year, they could give students enough positive reinforcement to cultivate good behaviors and reduce the behaviors that cause problems for these and other students, and in the school environment generally.

Vera proposes a program to train school safety personnel how to use positive reinforcement. The training will occur in two phases. First, agents will spend a day in a classroom setting learning how positive reinforcement leads to behavior change and how they can become skilled observers and reinforcers of positive behavior. Safety agents will then have an opportunity to apply what they have learned in their daily work and, with the help of field trainers, hone their new skills.³¹ For approximately one month, these field trainers will work alongside safety agents during the school day to guide their use of positive reinforcement.

Although no other training for school safety personnel takes this approach, research on positive reinforcement and the experience of educators and law enforcement officials in schools suggests that such a specialized training program will reduce disruption and violence in schools, make students feel safer, and give safety agents a structured opportunity to take on a larger and more nurturing role in students' lives, something many of them are eager to do.

³¹ Some violence prevention programs succeed by following classroom instructions with on-the-job training and guidance. See: Karin S. Frey et al., "Second Step: Preventing Aggression by Promoting Social Competence," in *Making Schools Safer and Violence Free: Critical Issues, Solutions, and Recommended Practices* (Pro-Ed: Austin, 2001), 94.

VI. Design of the Demonstration

In partnership with the New York City Board of Education and the New York City Police Department, the Vera Institute of Justice has designed a program to train school safety agents to support positive student behavior as a way of preventing violence and the disruptive acts that often lead to violence. With guidance from the Oregon Social Learning Center, Vera will develop and educate a small group of instructors who will then train school safety agents. Ideally, these trainers will have prior experience working in schools and with troubled youth in New York City or another large city, and have experience training adults in a classroom setting and/or in the field.

Trainers will spend approximately eight hours in a classroom teaching safety agents about adolescent behavior and positive reinforcement. For approximately a month following the initial classroom instruction, the trainers will work with safety agents in schools, providing feedback and guidance about how and when to apply the positive reinforcement techniques.

Beginning in November 2001, Vera will pilot the training program in one Brooklyn high school and prepare to expand the training to reach school safety agents from around the city during the full demonstration phase beginning in January 2002. The purpose of the initial phase is to test the curriculum and field training procedures. We will document how school safety agents apply positive reinforcement techniques in their daily interactions with students, gather lessons from their initial experiences, and determine whether one month of guidance and supervision by a trainer in the field is enough. Based on these lessons, Vera will adjust the curriculum, consider including other school staff in the training program, and revise the field training procedures. The demonstration program will train approximately 250 safety agents per year.

The Training Curriculum

The in-class training gives safety agents the background knowledge and practical tools they need to reinforce positive behavior. The following summarizes each of the four lessons.

Lesson 1: Understanding How Behavior Is Learned. School safety agents discover how behavior is learned. They also learn the difference between negative and positive reinforcement and how positive reinforcement encourages desired behaviors in students and prevents aggressive behavior that leads to violence.

Lesson 2: Positive Reinforcement Techniques. Safety agents learn the importance of becoming skilled observers of positive behaviors. They also learn to shift their emphasis from the negative to the positive aspects of students' behavior and what types of behavior to reinforce. The following are examples of behaviors to reinforce that are included in this lesson:

- A student, who often hangs around in the hallway and teases fellow students before going to her next class, walks directly to her class.
- A student defends another student who is being picked on.
- A student who hangs out with a negative peer group befriends a student in a positive peer group.
- A student refuses to fight with another student.
- A student who usually wears gang paraphernalia is not wearing it.
- A student holds the door open for someone.
- A chronically late student arrives at school on time or earlier than usual.

Agents learn a variety of positive reinforcement techniques, including verbal reinforcement (for example, praising a student for walking to class on time), nonverbal reinforcement (for example, nodding or giving a thumbs up to a student who helps another student pick up something that he or she dropped), and incentives for good behavior (for example, creating a system that gives students tokens for positive behavior that they can redeem for supplies at the school's general store). School safety agents also learn how to shape good behavior by breaking down behavior into small parts and regularly reinforcing even the slightest positive actions.

This lesson distinguishes between professional and unprofessional techniques for reinforcing positive behavior. For example, complimenting students on their behavior or abilities is appropriate, whereas complimenting students on personal appearance is not appropriate.

Lesson 3: Using Positive Reinforcement to Change Behavior. Trainers guide safety agents through a five-step process that makes the best use of the positive reinforcement techniques they have learned to change behavior. The steps are as follows: (1) identify the problem behavior, (2) brainstorm strategies for reinforcing good behavior (3) determine pros and cons of each strategy, (4) develop a plan and implement it, and (5) review and adjust the plan. Agents work through sample problems in small groups and then come together to devise an appropriate strategy to change the problem behavior.

In one sample problem, a safety agent notices that a student is continually late getting to her class and bothers other students as they try to move along to their classes. Having identified the problem, the agent learns to think of the most appropriate ways to encourage better behavior, such as using nonverbal reinforcement to support the student

as she takes even small steps to be more punctual. Agents then imagine the outcome of applying these techniques and how to adjust their approach as needed.

Lesson 4: Understanding Adolescents. Safety agents receive an introduction to the key intellectual, moral, physical, emotional, and social developmental characteristics of young adolescents. For example, agents will learn that young adolescents desire recognition for their efforts and achievements and greatly need, and are influenced by, adults who listen to and support them.

One section of this lesson focuses on the difficult transition from middle to high school. The stress of entering high school, a confusing and threatening environment, can exacerbate a teen's academic and social struggles. Left unchecked, these troubles may lead to delinquency and academic failure.³² Common problems that ninth graders experience are withdrawal from the learning process, unwillingness to interact in positive ways, and disorderly conduct in class. School safety agents learn to appreciate the complexities of this transition and encourage positive behavior as a way to help teens through the transition.

Work in the Field

Following the classroom instruction, the trainers will spend a month helping school safety agents apply and hone positive reinforcement techniques. They will coach them on the job and facilitate weekly meetings with school safety personnel. Even after the month of intensive field training is over, trainers will return to the schools periodically to offer some continued support.

Coaching School Safety Agents. Trainers will provide daily support and guidance to school safety agents, helping them develop and sharpen their use of positive reinforcement to change negative behavior. They will patrol the hallways, stairwells, cafeteria, and other areas of the school with the safety agents and be present at the entrances during arrival and dismissal times. The trainers will help agents see the many positive behaviors that students exhibit, reinforce those behaviors, and develop techniques for shaping the behavior they want to encourage.

During the first week of field training, trainers will assess school safety agents' positive reinforcement skills by watching them in action. They will:

³² Cicchetti and Schneider, "An Organizational Approach to Childhood Depression," in *Depression in Young People: Developmental and Clinical Perspectives*, eds. M. Rutter, C.E. Izard, and P.B. Read (New York: Guilford, 1986), 71-134; D.M. Capaldi and M. Stoolmiller, "Co-Occurrence of Conduct Problems and Depressive Symptoms in Early Adolescent Boys: Prediction to Young-Adult Adjustment," in *Development and Psychology* 11 (Cambridge University Press, 1999).

- Count how many times agents notice appropriate positive behavior and appropriately give verbal and nonverbal positive reinforcement.
- Determine the ratio of positive to negative reinforcement.
- Assess their ability to use positive reinforcement to change specific behavioral problems.

In each of these areas, there is a goal. In most cases, trainers will encourage school safety agents to maintain a 4:1 ratio of positive to negative reinforcement. The trainers will use many of the same positive reinforcement techniques that the school safety agents use with students. Trainers will record and track the school safety agents' use of positive reinforcement techniques using laptop computers and custom case management software.

Facilitating weekly meetings with school safety personnel. During their month-long field assignment, trainers will convene weekly meetings with the supervising school safety agent at the school—who will also participate in the training program—and with the assistant principal for security (or with the principal or his/her designee in schools that do not have an assistant principal for security) to discuss the ability of safety agents to successfully apply positive reinforcement techniques.

Conducting periodic site visits for continued support. After spending approximately a month working with school safety agents in one school, the trainers will move on to work with agents at another school. However, they will continue to provide technical assistance by conducting site visits every two to three months, at which time they will observe safety agents and, if necessary, meet with them to discuss their work.

Challenges of providing on-site assistance. Providing on-site assistance should present many rewards, also challenges. Trainers may encounter agents who resist using positive reinforcement and those who overstep their boundaries with students. Trainers may witness fights among students and/or school personnel and feel pressured to take sides. School personnel may ask trainers to perform duties beyond the scope of their role. The trainers will need guidance on how to address these and other challenges. Vera is creating a manual of policies and procedures, in coordination with the New York City Police Department and the New York City Board of Education, to guide the fieldwork of trainers under both ordinary and particularly challenging circumstances.

Demonstration Staff and Location

The demonstration program is designed to operate with ten full-time staff. A director manages relationships with the program's primary government partners and with local school officials and supervises all other staff. A senior trainer leads the classroom instruction, trains the six other trainers, and works with the director to adjust the program

as necessary. A data analyst manages data about the program and helps to prepare reports. A program assistant provides administrative support to the director and coordinates training assignments.

The program will have a main office for the director and support staff. The trainers will have temporary workspaces in the schools where they are working.

A national advisory board composed of approximately ten people with expertise in education, social service, research, and law enforcement meets twice a year to advise program and research staff. The board also ensures that the demonstration remains nationally relevant.

The Future of the Program

If the training program proves effective, the police department may consider adding the material covered during the day-long classroom instruction to the training for school safety agents conducted by the police academy. Vera will work with the board of education and the police department over the course of the demonstration to determine the most effective way to institutionalize the field component of the training program to ensure that safety agents actually apply the positive reinforcement techniques they learn at the academy. The department might, for example, use staff who currently supervise safety agents, including level III safety agents and assistant principals for security, to oversee and guide agents as they begin to use positive reinforcement in their daily work. Additionally, the police department and the school board might create a new position in each of the nine borough commands for someone to provide on-site assistance to level IIIs, assistant principals, and anyone who supervises safety agents in schools.

VII. Evaluating the Program

Vera’s research department will conduct process and impact evaluations. The process evaluation will assess the program’s implementation in one high school in Brooklyn, New York. The impact evaluation will measure to what degree the full demonstration project reduces disruption and violence in schools, makes students feel safer, and makes the work of safety agents more satisfying.

Before the program begins, Vera staff, in consultation with the Oregon Social Learning Center, will develop a formal research design. This work will involve identifying specific research questions posed by the program, identifying the information necessary to answer those questions and explain the outcomes adequately, examining existing databanks to locate the most reliable sources for this information, and developing data collection instruments. The following is an initial list of indicators and data sources:

Indicator	Data Source
School-based violence and disruption	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• New York Police Department incident reports• Incident reports generated by schools• Surveys of teachers on class disruption
Perceptions of personal safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Surveys of students• Surveys of teachers• Surveys of school safety agents
School safety agents’ job satisfaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Surveys of school safety agents• New York Police Department’s statistics on SSA attrition
Quality of the relationship between school safety agents and students	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Surveys of students• Surveys of school safety agents

The research design will compare these indicators in each participating school before and after the intervention.