

The Safe and Responsive Schools' Planning Process and Resources
For Violence Prevention and Discipline Reform

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The threat of school violence cuts across social class, age levels, and size or location of school. Concern about recent well-publicized incidents has prompted schools to take urgent action. As a response, many schools districts have turned to zero tolerance or increasingly punitive disciplinary approaches. Although limit setting has an important place in maintaining school order, harsh and punitive discipline cannot in itself foster a safe school climate or teach students alternatives to violence for resolving their problems. Rather, a broader perspective, stressing comprehensive planning and prevention, is necessary if schools are to develop effective strategies to address the disruptive behavior of all students, including those with disabilities, and to prevent violence and further tragedy in our nation's schools.

The Safe and Responsive Schools Project

The Safe and Responsive Schools Project, funded by a three-year grant from the U. S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs under the Projects of National Significance competition, seeks to enable schools and school districts to develop a broader perspective on school safety, stressing comprehensive planning and prevention using a clear conceptual framework, as well as parent/community involvement. The goal of the project is to implement our best knowledge of school-wide behavior planning to develop a comprehensive model of systems' change related to school discipline and violence prevention.

The project is grounded in a *preventive* model of behavioral planning (APA, 1993; Dwyer, Osher & Hoffman, 2000; Skiba & Peterson, 2000; Walker et al., 1996). It

assumes that a comprehensive approach to violence prevention is necessary to address the complexity of emotional and behavioral problems in schools. The framework of the Safe & Responsive Schools Project creates three levels: “Creating a Positive Climate for All Students”, “Early Identification and Intervention of At-Risk Students”, and “Effective Responses for Students with Chronic or Severe Behavior Problems.” As a result, the project organizes the overall efforts of schools to improve student behavior and reduce violence into interventions available to schools at each of these three levels.

The Project has worked with 14 schools in two states to develop and implement this preventive model of school discipline in an effort to significantly expand the array of options available to schools in addressing the issue of disruptive behavior. Based on the experiences of participating schools, the project has developed a *School Guide*, in two parts. A *Process Guide* provides a comprehensive planning process related to school safety and discipline, and a *Resource Guide* presents an array of strategies for addressing violence and disruption, as well a brief summary of the research support for each strategy, some ideas about what it might take to implement that strategy, and some additional sources of information about the strategy. The focus is on having schools implement empirically validated strategies that meet their needs by filling in the gaps between existing program within this three tiered structure.

In the first two years of the project, seven school-based teams composed of teachers (general and special education), school psychologists, counselors, administrators, school nurses, and parents engaged in a self-study process to assess the adequacy of their school’s responses to disruptive or violent behavior. They identified the key data on these topics which they already had available, gathered additional data

where necessary, and used the data they gathered to identify needs. With the guidance of project staff, they selected strategies to include their school's Safe and Responsive School plan, and coordinated their plan with other planning activities for the building such as the building level school improvement process. The participating schools then implemented those plans while monitoring the effect of these changes on behavioral outcomes. In the third year of the project, a new group of schools began the same process using the draft Guide prepared during the first two years. These schools with several others continued using and evaluating the process, and have provided suggestions for how to make the *Guide* more useful. The **Guide** is currently being revised based on this feedback, and more resources are being added. During the coming year, the *Guide* will be made available for use by schools wishing to undertake this self-study and reform process.

Resources

As a result of the Safe and Responsive Schools Project, schools will now have an example of a comprehensive planning structure, and guidelines for implementing a self-study process, as well as access to a variety of resources which may be helpful in addressing individual building needs related to violence and disruptive behavior in school.

Both the Process Guide and the Resource Guide as well as sample materials developed by participating schools will be made available on the project's interconnected websites. Further information on the Safe and Responsive Schools Project can be obtained on the project websites at www.unl.edu/srs or www.indiana.edu/~safeschl or by

directly contacting the project co-directors, Dr. Reece Peterson [rpeterson1@unl.edu) or Dr. Russel Skiba [skiba@indiana.edu].

Conclusions

The Safe and Responsive Schools Project has afforded the unique opportunity to develop and field-test a planning process that will enable schools to critically assess the programs and resources currently operating within their building and to consider how these supports can be integrated, added to, and improved upon to best meet the needs of all children. Through the three years, we as a project staff have also had the opportunity to observe how teams function within schools as well as some of the obstacles that these school teams experience. The materials developed during the course of the project have been subject to changes and revisions based on input from practitioners, who have participated in the project and utilized the project materials. It is the hope of the Safe and Responsive Schools Project that schools around the country will also engage in a similar planning process and utilize the materials and resources developed throughout the three years of this project in an effort to help create and maintain a safe and responsive school environment for children.

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