The State Department of Education's Role in Creating Safe Schools

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School Violence Intervention
A PRACTICAL HANDBOOK

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The authority for public education in the United States does not stem from the Constitution, but rather is a “reserved” power remaining with the states. It originates from the Tenth Amendment, which reserves to the states those powers neither expressly given the national government nor denied to the state governments. However, most states have not exercised their authority for public education directly until recent decades. Education is a state function that is largely locally administered (Alkin, Linden, Noel, & Ray, 1992).

Each state exercises its education function completely or in part through a state department of education that has varying degrees of responsibility. The state educational authority gains its powers and responsibilities specifically from the state’s constitution and statutes (Deighton, 1971).

State departments of education emerged and became firmly established during the period from 1812 to 1890. Although the first responsibilities of these departments during this period were advisory, statistical, and exhortatory, state departments of education began to come into their own with the swift expansion of public education after the Civil War.

During the 1890–1932 period, the regulatory functions of the state departments of education were expanded with the general acceptance of compulsory education. Only a state department of education could determine that compulsory attendance requirements were being enforced. The maintenance and operational functions of the state departments of education were
strengthened. The need for stronger state educational agencies that could determine whether minimum standards were being met was demonstrated. The years from 1932 to 1953 saw the expansion of the service and support functions of the state departments of education and the emergence of their leadership role. One of the first significant leadership activities that was aimed essentially at the rural United States can be traced to statewide reorganization efforts.

From 1953 to 1970, federal influence on education increased, and state departments of education were strengthened through the concept of "federal partnership." This phase marked the beginning of the modern federal aid program for education. In many ways federal involvement was encouraged by the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) of 1958, through which the federal government dealt directly with local school districts, colleges, and universities.

The NDEA, enacted after the launching of Sputnik I, actually resulted in an upheaval in the structure of state departments of education rather than in stability. An infusion of federal funds enabled a few states to move out of their former passive roles, but the most notable effect was an imbalance within the organization of the departments. By 1950, half of the professional staff members of state departments of education were assigned to federally subsidized programs; by 1960, that percentage had risen to over 56%, and in 13 states to over 70% (Deighton, 1971). In 1963, the Advisory Council on State Departments of Education pointed out that most departments could not fully perform the duties expressly delegated to them by state legislation because of personnel shortages (U.S. Office of Education, 1966).

Subsequent acts helped state agencies to improve and establish their leadership roles in areas such as civil rights and educational planning. In addition, state agencies have developed modern data systems and more effective personnel procedures, have found more effective ways of disseminating educational information, and have adopted modern curriculum materials. State agencies have also assumed leadership in designing and expediting research; in studying methods of financing education in the state; in providing advisory, technical, and consultative assistance; in improving working relationships with other state education departments; in identifying emerging educational problems; and in promoting teacher improvement courses (Deighton, 1971).

**FUNCTIONS AND STRUCTURE OF STATE DEPARTMENTS**

In general, each state department of education has four major functions or roles: regulation, operation, administration of special services, and leadership of the state program. The structure and staffing of the department vary widely from state to state, however.
Regulation

The regulatory role consists of (1) determining that basic administrative duties have been performed by local schools in compliance with state and local laws; (2) ascertaining that proper safeguards are employed in the use of public school funds; (3) enforcing health and safety rules for construction and maintenance of buildings; (4) enforcing and determining the proper certification of teachers and educational personnel; (5) ensuring that minimum educational opportunities are provided for all children through enforcement of compulsory schooling laws and child labor laws, as well as through pupil personnel services; (6) ensuring comprehensive programs of high quality and ascertaining that required procedures are used; and (7) ensuring that schools are organized according to the law. The regulatory function of all state departments of education is based on the acceptance of the fact that education is a state function and that local school districts' operational authority flows from state statutes.

Operation

The operational role of the state education department varies greatly from state to state, with a general trend away from having the state department of education perform direct operational functions. The state department of education is the logical agency to step in and fill a need if there is no existing institution capable of doing so; as emergencies pass, however, provisions are generally made to turn the operational reins over to organizations designed to carry out specific functions, and few people would seriously propose a completely state-controlled school system operated through the state department of education. Historically, states have accepted responsibility for the operation of educational agencies and services when no other agency could provide the necessary statewide direction, especially during the developmental stages of a particular program or enterprise.

Administration of Special Services

The role of the state in the administration of special services developed because of the need for statewide uniformity and efficiency in educational services. Examples of these services include teacher placement and retirement programs, and services that because of their scope, technical nature, or expense can be offered more efficiently on a statewide basis. A state department of education can provide local school districts, the legislature, the executive office, and the general public with basic information about the status of education in the state (e.g., comparative studies and statistical information; clarification of all statutes, rules, and regulations on education).
Leadership

The leadership function of a state department of education includes conducting long-range studies for planning the total state program of education, studying ways of improving education, providing consultant services, encouraging cooperation, promoting balance among all units of the educational system, informing the public of educational needs and progress, encouraging public support and participation, and providing in-service education for all persons in the state engaged in educational work.

Staff and Structure

Although all states have departments of education, these departments differ in structure, as well as in size and organization, and specific functions. All states have some type of state board of education, but there is great variation in the amount of control exerted by the board on the department and on the overall state educational system. Every state has a state school officer responsible for the department, but again, the responsibilities of this officer vary among the states. Some officers are political leaders and others are educational leaders; some are appointed and others are elected; some are regarded as the chief educational officers of their states, and others are among many in the educational hierarchy who have state educational responsibilities.

Creating Safe Schools: A Survey of State Departments

One area of state education departments’ leadership is creating safe schools. Providing a safe school environment is imperative. For many children, schools are the safest places in their lives. The concept that schools should be safe havens has found support in law throughout the history of public schools. For teachers to teach and children to learn, there must be a safe and inviting educational environment (Curcio & First, 1993). In this context, we undertook a national survey to determine what each state was doing to create safe havens for children.

Procedures

To obtain the information needed to answer the questions addressed in this study, we conducted interviews with individuals who work in state departments of education. Subjects were identified through a listing of persons involved with activities promoting safe and drug-free schools. In all, we were able to visit by telephone with individuals from 47 of the 50 states and the District of Columbia.
Telephone interviews were conducted during the summer and fall of 1995. Interviewees responded to a series of school-violence-relevant questions we developed. The length of each interview was between 15 and 30 minutes.

One of the noteworthy challenges in identifying individuals to be interviewed was the current transitory nature of state department of education personnel. No matter which state we called, we were reminded that funding cuts were causing a number of changes in staff assignments in the departments. Many of our efforts to interview the individual responsible for attention to school violence issues necessitated three or four telephone calls to reach the appropriate person.

The responses to the telephone interviews follow.

Findings

The Allocation of Federal Funds

The central concern of our study was an assessment of what each state was doing to create safe schools. The most frequent response we received from the state departments' representatives when we asked this question was a cause for great surprise. Although we expected the personnel we interviewed to describe particular state problems or exciting programs, we found that their initial responses were almost uniformly fixated on funding. The state departments of education are primarily involved in determining how federal funds will be allocated to local schools.

New Federal Regulations. Title IV of the Improving America's Schools Act of 1994 (P.L. 103-382), Safe and Drug Free Schools and Communities, changed the manner in which funds to promote safer schools are distributed to school districts. The funding available to local school districts for this purpose is now distributed in this fashion: 70% is allotted to schools on the basis of their student enrollment, and the remaining 30% is made available to districts having the greatest need. "Need" is defined according to the 1994 federal statute's criteria, which are as follows:

(I) high rates of alcohol or drug use among youth;
(II) high rates of victimization of youth by violence and crime;
(III) high rates of arrests and convictions of youth for violent or drug- or alcohol-related crime;
(IV) the extent of illegal gang activity;
(V) high incidence of violence associated with prejudice and intolerance;
(VI) high rates of referrals of youths to drug and alcohol abuse treatment and rehabilitation programs;
(VII) high rates of referrals of youths to juvenile court;
(VIII) high rates of expulsions and suspensions of students from schools; and
(IX) high rates of reported cases of child abuse and domestic violence.

Furthermore, the statute stipulates that the distribution of the 30% of funds based on "need" cannot go to more than 10% of the districts in the state or five such agencies, whichever is greater. The responses from the state personnel we interviewed reflect the complexity of implementation of the 10% requirement, given a short time line and limited available data.

Equitable Distribution. We heard many explanations of how states would "meet the 10% guideline." We were told of the number of districts in each state. We were told, "We have more than 550 districts in the state," or "We have 176 districts, so this means we will only use 17 districts to meet the 10% guideline." Another individual responded that "Twenty-nine school corporations received the 70% + 30%." One state "targeted 50 school districts." Another state reported that they had "distributed [the] 70% money. The 30% money will be allocated to the five districts most in need." In a different state, "the 30% safe money was allocated to the top 10 districts." Yet another individual said, "There will be 19 school districts involved and five will receive extended monies in this area."

Strategies for Identifying Need. A corollary concern for the state department of education personnel was identifying the districts whose need for this funding was greatest. Some individuals described using documents such as the Kids Count Data Book 1994 (Center for Study of Social Policies, 1995) to identify demographic data for the counties. Other respondents reported changes that had to occur to identify those districts that would receive the 30% funding. Some individuals reported using the Title IV federal statutory criteria (quoted above) for identifying the districts of greatest need.

One state representative reported that the state department "ended up using the drop out rates, poverty (based on school lunch), county data, including juvenile arrests, overall adult substance abuse, and teen pregnancy figures, as a basis for identification." Another state representative reported that when the schools were rank-ordered according to the federal criteria, six schools consistently stood out. Still another respondent reported, "We have districts apply for the 70% and then supply further information if they are interested in the 30%. We use the Title IV criteria." An official in a different state described a more complex set of criteria for identification, including point loading (which required information on student rates of expulsion, dropout, gang activity, and juvenile crime). In this system, "Points were earned for having two of the following: high rates of referral, high rates of violation of law, reported arrests, incidents of child abuse, or low education
assessment scores." In another state, "a base and a ceiling limitation for the money of between $50,000 and $500,000 was developed. The geographic distribution of money was good." Needs determine direction in one state, whose representative reported that "whatever the districts do has to be needs-driven." Typical identification criteria were to use suspension and expulsion rates, dropout rates, and enrollments. Another state reported "waiting for the data to be available from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey to identify districts that could receive the 30%.” Yet another state has an "open competition for the monies. Need is based on juvenile arrest records, drug and alcohol violations, and violent acts."

Reactions to the Federal Regulations. These comments concerning funding and identification strategies for fund distribution were the dominant responses given to the question, “What is your state doing in the area of safe schools?” As individuals gave these responses, they frequently noted that the funding formula was a headache or a nightmare. There was a general perception that the 30% funding was a reactive rather than a proactive response from the federal government. Districts with successful prevention programs were punished through the distribution of the 30%. The sense was that the federal statute provided extra support for districts with problems. This is contrary to supporting prevention strategies.

State Departments as Conduits of Information and Resources

Caveats about State versus Local Control. The state department of education personnel we interviewed were adamant in stating that it is not the purpose of their departments to make specific program recommendations. Respondents made comments such as these: “It is the local option to choose.” “No specific programs are suggested for schools . . . this is a home rule state.” “This state is strong on local control.” “We do not provide specific programs or suggest them.” “This state takes a nondirective stance . . . the state can’t exert influence on a local program.”

Conferences and Workshops. Conferences and workshops are resources frequently offered by state departments of education. Annual statewide gatherings to which educators and other interested individuals are invited is one way of showcasing programs related to safe schools. Attendance at these annual events, which usually last 2 or 3 days, is often over 1,500 individuals in some states. The “safe” component is frequently included as an add-on to an existing “drug-free” conference. The conferences provide access to nationally known speakers and a wide range of methods and strategies, including both prevention and intervention. Workshops on single issues are delivered regionally within the states as well.

States also sponsor conferences that focus on planning strategies. The conferences include workshops on writing goals and objectives, sharing
information on resources and programs, developing methods for assessing problems, and connecting safe school initiatives to overall school improvement planning. Collectively, these activities are linked to creating safe schools.

Curriculum Materials and Programs. Another significant task for the state department of education personnel is providing curriculum materials related to increasing the safety of schools. Respondents described topical curriculum guides that had been distributed. Resource directories listing agencies that could provide relevant information and assistance were provided in some states. Resource libraries at the state departments of education also provided information including videos as well as written materials. Second Step—A Violence Prevention Curriculum was cited as frequently used and distributed by state departments of education (see the Appendix to this chapter).

A number of other programs were mentioned during the interviews. These programs were ones currently being used by school districts; the programs, however, were not sponsored by the departments of education. These programs (described in the Appendix) included Project DARE (Drug Abuse Resistance Education), Lions-Quest, and Here’s Looking at You 2000. Those interviewed noted that these programs, though popular, often lacked effectiveness data.

Important topics addressed in the states included the following:

- Conflict resolution
- Anger management
- Peer mediation
- Student assistance teams
- Mentoring
- Peer leadership

Comprehensive Approaches

Prevention programming does not fit easily into the present structure of schools or of state departments of education. Survey respondents often commented on the need for issues relating to safe schools to be part of a comprehensive approach. Programs including peer mediation, student assistance, youth leadership, and counseling components were often mentioned as being part of creating a safe school environment. As one respondent stated, “The question to ask is, ‘How does “safe and drug-free” become integrated within the school?’” The research on building resilient youths was mentioned as a needed component in prevention; yet this research indicates the need for a school, community, and family partnership. Comprehensive planning processes are used by some states to initiate the development of connections among curriculum services, special services, and personnel services, as well as connections with families, communities, and community agencies. Some
states are using health education as an option for connecting violence prevention with the curriculum structure.

**Ideals**

The ideals sought by the individuals we spoke with included secure funding and a greater emphasis on prevention. In conjunction with respondents’ desire for greater emphasis on prevention was the directive that efforts should be proactive, not reactive. The earlier the prevention can occur, the better, according to these individuals. There should also be clarity about what outcomes can be achieved through a prevention program.

**Funding.** As indicated earlier, funding is a major, overarching concern for those who work in state departments of education. According to the individuals we interviewed, there has been a decline in the amount of funding available for safe and drug-free schools. This has led to a reduction of personnel available to assist schools and school districts. Secure funding permits consistency for long-range planning, but there is little security for programs when there is the perennial threat of funding cuts. There needs to be a long-term financial commitment to education.

**Local/Community Involvement.** As the state department of education personnel described their “ideal” efforts related to safe schools, they were adamant that initiatives would have to come from the local level. Each program must be designed to fit the needs of the locality and the needs of its young people. Involvement of the community in program planning and implementation is essential, since safety concerns are a reflection of the community and society. Community collaboration is a key to effective planning for prevention. There are many relevant community agencies that can and should participate in the planning for and implementation of prevention programs. Both problems and solutions must be owned by the community. This essential “community piece” must complement the school’s efforts.

**School Environment.** Considerable emphasis was given to the need to create a safe environment in schools. An appropriate, positive environment was described as the ideal means to the prevention of violence. Spending time and effort on the creation of such an environment was identified as a priority. Prevention needs to start when children are very young. Pulling in parental support is essential.

**Violence-Related Issues**

When queried regarding violence in their states, the survey respondents noted gangs, guns, and discipline as central concerns. Rural needs, racial issues, and “latchkey kids” were also cited as important considerations.
Gangs. Gangs were cited as a concern in 26 states. Gangs were mentioned as a phenomenon of both rural and urban settings, and as existing in both large and small schools. Respondents noted that gangs often became established in a "trickle down" manner, as individuals who had been involved in gangs in urban areas moved into a school district. Gang signs (certain types or articles of clothing, graffiti, etc.) appeared to be clear indicators of emerging gang activity. Law enforcement agencies were helpful in identifying gang-related activities. Prevention programs were a key agenda item in these states.

Guns. Guns were commented about consistently. The individuals interviewed described having their eyes opened to the reality of the presence of guns in their schools. Easy access to guns was perceived to be a real problem. Instances of students carrying guns to school were seen to be increasing. The presence of guns was noted in rural, suburban, and urban schools. One individual noted that teaching gun safety was part of junior high science in the state. Those interviewed noted that recent legislation with regard to weapons in schools gave them the authority and processes to deal with this issue.

Other Issues. Other violence-related issues mentioned during the interviews included the need for more and better discipline in schools. Increased incidents of disruptive behavior extending to fighting and hitting, bullying, and harassment were noted. Respondents perceived a general need for students to develop the ability to "get along with each other."

The respondents also emphasized that rural schools' needs were similar to urban schools' needs. Violence is not limited by the size or locality of schools. Rural administrators and teachers need to be as aware of violence-related issues as do those in urban schools.

In addition, racial problems were cited as related to violence in schools. The existence of hate groups and a general attitude of intolerance were noted as troubling phenomena.

Finally, the number of "latchkey kids" was seen as contributing to the increase of violence. At present, children and youths have too much unsupervised time; adults are not in the homes or with the young people. This was perceived to be a major contributory factor in school violence.

IMPLICATIONS

A state department of education provides leadership, guidance, and supervision of the state school system. Though each state department's responsibilities vary by statute, the common core of duties generally includes consultative services; development and dissemination of materials which assist in the improvement of educational programs; establishment of the rules and regulations that govern standards of school operation; and accreditation of schools.
Violence prevention activities vary from state to state. Since the study described in this chapter was conducted at the beginning of the first school year (1995–1996) in which federal funds were available for violence prevention efforts under the new regulations of P.L. 103-382, respondents typically first identified issues reflecting the funding of programs (i.e., allocation formula, eligibility, criteria for selection). The individuals interviewed identified areas in which they were receiving questions from school districts; state department staffs needed expertise about funding, program options, and promising practices.

State departments also provide a conduit or connection to information not easily available at the local district level. Often this information is shared with districts via conferences/workshops, curriculum materials, on-site visits, phone assistance, and networks of expertise. Local districts develop or adopt programs to serve students. These programs are, or can be, tailored to meet the unique needs of students in each school building. Assistance in learning about violence prevention programs and resources is sought through a variety of sources, depending on the structure of the state department. From our survey, it is apparent that state departments are an important source for connecting local school district staff with resources.

Violence often results from a complex interaction of environmental, social, and psychological factors. Among these factors are the learned behavior of responding to conflict with violence; the effects of drugs or alcohol; the presence of weapons; and the absence of positive family relationships and of adult supervision. Few violence prevention programs are capable of affecting all the possible causes. The key to providing students with the skills, knowledge, and motivation they require to become healthy adults is a comprehensive program that responds to the new risks and pressures arising with each developmental stage. Addressing these risks requires a sustained effort over children's entire school careers (Posner, 1994).

Evaluation, or the lack of it, is a concern. Schools and school personnel may not have the expertise to evaluate and select prevention programs. Few administrators under pressure to "do something" about violence have the resources or the expertise to assess the extent of their schools' violence problems, to judge whether the programs they have chosen are appropriate for their students, or to find evidence that the programs actually work.

The key to success is knowing "which types of programs should be offered to whom, by whom, and at what age." Programs must take into account the age group being targeted, the drugs being targeted, the selection and training of leaders, and the influence of the community. Many of the most promising strategies are family interventions that teach parenting skills and improved family relationships. The need to involve parents as well as teachers in violence prevention training programs is critical (Grady, 1995).

An emerging role for state departments is providing assistance in the selection and implementation of promising practices. This developing role
reflects a nationwide movement among state departments of education from simply enforcing regulations to providing consultation services. The selection of promising practices includes assisting schools with the evaluation of student needs and appropriate program options. Dissemination of research results, program implications, and ways to use this information locally in the development of a comprehensive plan is becoming a function for state agencies.

State departments' ability to provide such assistance is dependent on their having the financial resources to do so. Historically, federal funding has provided state departments with resources that have included "flow-through" dollars to districts, as well as state agency staffers who give districts leadership assistance. Federal dollars for safe schools have been used to provide program stability. As those dollars decrease, the existence of safe school programs is threatened.

APPENDIX

Lions-Quest

Lions-Quest is an academic skills program that aids parents and teachers in helping K-12 students to learn basic life skills in the areas of self-discipline, respect for others, problem solving, goal setting, interpersonal communication, self-esteem, prevention of drug and alcohol abuse, and conflict resolution. There are three levels available: Skills for Growing (elementary), Skills for Adolescents (middle school), and Skills for Action (high school). Skills for Action is based on learning skills through application. For more information, contact this address:

Quest International
1984 Coffman Road
Newark, OH 43058
(614) 522-6400
(800) 837-2801

Other programs available from Quest International include complete curriculum packages and 1-day workshops for educators and other adults. Working It Out (K-6), Working Toward Peace (6-8), and Exploring the Issues: Promoting Peace and Preventing Violence (9-12) are programs directed at conflict management and violence prevention.

Here's Looking at You 2000

Here's Looking at You 2000 is a program that emphasizes social learning theory. It is designed for K-12 use; there are kits for every grade level, with resources including books, videos, posters, displays, and puppets. Lessons are set up with clear objec-
tives, fact sheets for instructors, and parent information. For more information, contact this address:

Comprehensive Health Education Foundation
22419 Pacific Highway South
Seattle, WA 98198
(206) 824-2907

Second Step—A Violence Prevention Curriculum

Developed by the Committee for Children, Second Step is a violence prevention curriculum designed to change the attitudes and behaviors that contribute to violence. Addressing the three skill areas of empathy training, impulse control, and anger management, Second Step uses lesson techniques that include discussion, teacher skill modeling, and role plays. The curriculum is divided into four kits: preschool-kindergarten, grades 1–3, grades 4–5, and grades 6–8. There is also a video-based parent training program available. For more information, contact this address:

Client Support Services Department
Committee for Children
2203 Airport Way South
Suite 500
Seattle, WA 98134-2027
(800) 634-4449

REFERENCES


