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

Marilyn Grady  
*University of Nebraska–Lincoln*, mgrady1@unl.edu

Jean Haar  
*Minnesota State University - Mankato*, jean.haar@mnsu.edu

Mary Ann Losh  
*Nebraska Department of Education*, maryann.losh@nebraska.gov

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School Violence Intervention

A PRACTICAL HANDBOOK

SECOND EDITION

Edited by

Jane Close Conoley
Arnold P. Goldstein

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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 to 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 mainte-
nance 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 1960 half of the professional staff members of state departments of education were assigned to federally subsidized programs; by 1960 that percentage had risen to 56%, and in 13 states to more than 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 legislatures 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 departments 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. These are 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 comprises 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, providing in-service education for all persons in the state engaged in educational work including standards, assessment and accountability systems.

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 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; Kaufman, 2000). In this context, we replicated our 1995 national survey (Grady, Krumm, & Losh, 1997) 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 45 of the 50 states.
The telephone interviews were conducted during the spring of 2001. Interviewees responded to a series of school-violence-relevant questions we developed. The length of each interview was between 15 and 90 minutes. The responses to the telephone interviews follow.

Findings

Four main categories emerged from the telephone interviews: legislation, prevention, services, and collaboration.

Legislative Mandates, Initiatives, Policies

Conversations with state department of education officials often began with comments such as “Because of legislation passed we are . . . ” or “Approximately a year ago, the governor mandated . . . ” Thirty-four of the interviewees mentioned legislative mandates, initiatives, or policies.

In connection to these laws, the state department of education officials are in liaison positions. They are responsible for overseeing compliance to state mandates, initiatives, and policies while providing schools with the assistance, training, and resources needed to reach compliance.

Mandates included establishing behavior standards, developing crisis and safety plans, developing policies, providing services for students in schools, and implementing specific programs such as Character Education, Codes of Conduct, Conflict Resolution, and Peer Mediation.

Mandates, initiatives, and policies were viewed as a means of reaching the ultimate goal of creating a safe school environment. As noted by one state department director, “A State Board meeting amended a state regulation that added a section on safe schools. What they said was that ‘Schools will be safe for all students without exception, optimal for academic achievement and free from harassment.' ”

In describing mandates, initiatives, and policies, the comments focused either on what was being addressed or on how it was being implemented. Participant comments related to “what was being addressed” follow.

“Last year legislation was passed that schools adopt behavior standards if they had not already done so. Those behavior standards were pretty loosely defined. They focused on issues of harassment, bullying, fighting and things like that.”

“Current legislative session talk is about conflict mediation and peer mediation. A lot of discussion in the legislature is about anti-hate-crime legislation and how that will have an impact on schools.”
"The state has legislation in place mandating that schools report certain incidents and that districts collect that information. Legislation also provides funding for program development in school climate and school safety programs."

"Basically, we were given our power under a Senate bill. It mandates that all schools create a comprehensive school safety plan. Under this bill they have to address hostage situations, incidents of weapons at school, violent incidents, bomb threats, incidents that occur in their school safety zones and during noninstructional hours."

"We are one of four states that have a regulation that mandates pupil services in our schools. So children have access to a school counselor, a school psychologist, and a school nurse."

The following participant comments are related to how legislative mandates, initiatives, and policies were being implemented:

"We go in and ensure that schools have plans in place to handle critical incidents. This is a state statute now, and schools are required to comply."

"In 1996 each school site was to have a safe school committee with a minimum of six members, made up of an equal number of parents, students, and teachers. There is current legislation to add someone from law enforcement, the fire department, and a community action agency. We also recommend that the school counselor, school nurse, custodian, and a bus driver be included in the safe school committee. They are to meet and make recommendations to their school principal regarding any school safety concerns that they feel are important."

"The General Assembly created a Center for School Safety with criminal justice services. There has been a good working relationship between the director and the Department of Education. The Center has done far more than we have been able to do in school safety. It took on the training of the school resource officers, for example."

"Legislation enacted the Safe Schools Act. It requires different sets of policies. Some of those policies were already on the books, but some statutes were moved around to create one comprehensive package. That law is to help remove disruptive students from a classroom sooner. It also allows those students to be given services much earlier on in order to intervene with disruptive behaviors. It's trying to beef up the efforts
for identifying problems earlier and getting them addressed—more of an intervention strategy.”

“Each school district is required to develop crisis plans and safety plans. The legislature also appropriated funds to assist the State Department of Education. We started an initiative with the State Highway Patrol here to establish a school safety hot line. The hot line gives students the opportunity to anonymously report any potential violence.”

“Having these mandates and policies is just one component of the effort. It’s such a complex problem that you need to address it at multiple levels and along multiple avenues. We always seem to promote the same message in many ways in order to shape social norms that will get people to either avoid the less desirable behaviors or adopt those that are desirable. Certainly, laws and policies have their place; we see that in the substance abuse prevention field a lot. If there are laws and rules, policies and mandates, they are proven to be effective in deterring certain behaviors.”

Prevention

The emphasis of the state departments of education in school safety is on prevention. Twenty-two of the individuals interviewed commented extensively about prevention being key to diminishing school violence. Although the departments of education are providing services and working on documents that address three areas: prevention, intervention, and response, the strongest emphasis is on prevention.

According to the interviewees, when state departments of education are addressing prevention, they should focus on student needs and concerns. Conversations centered on the need to establish a positive school climate as well as on the need to provide student services, especially in the areas of counseling and health. Assisting with student problems and issues immediately, rather than allowing them to escalate, was noted as key to curtailing violence. Bullying, harassment, and hazing are topics that are receiving considerable attention. Twenty of the interviewees noted that either one or all three of these issues were being addressed in their states. No longer is it acceptable to look at such incidents as a norm or as “part of growing up”; rather, they are seen as crucial to whether a safe and peaceful atmosphere is being provided for students.

The following are participant comments concerning preventive measures:

“The focus is shifting. At first it was mainly weapons and drugs and things of that kind. Now it is shifting to the internal climate of the
schools and what's going on there—what is causing the individuals to do what they are doing rather than how they are doing it. The aim is shifting to character building and the prevention of bullying.

"Each school system has developed a countywide action plan, which individual schools will have to incorporate into their school plans over the next year. The aim is to look at what we are doing about harassment and bullying, how we can eliminate these behaviors from our schools, how we can create safe, nurturing environments where kids feel as though they belong, where they are not harassed, and where there are consequences for harassment and bullying."

"We have developed a ‘reparative program.’ After any type of incident, we bring together all involved and, in a humane manner, address what happened. The idea is to establish a level of civility and order that will help kids feel safe."

"We work closely with the department of corrections, which is a progressive department and does a lot of work in reparative and restorative justice. And so we advocate that after a bomb threat, after a hazing incident, after any type of threat to the safety and security of the school or community, we bring victims and perpetrators and bystanders together and do what we can in a humane way to bring back a sense of safety and security. We believe that if you can do that right, you can make the school and community safer and more secure in the minds of people then it was before the event took place."

"We have a large grant that is placing school resource officers and probation officers in the classrooms to provide law-related education."

"Several districts employ school resource officers who are police officers with special training in conflict resolution and working toward peaceful schools. In addition, we have a school nurse in every school, and every high school has a school-based health center that provides counseling, referrals, and a wide range of services."

"We have created a Threat and Tip website in partnership with the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the net authorities. It provides a way for students to report tips anonymously via the computer. We have had a lot of tips on the website. Students can also get feedback on what they report. For instance, if a student reports that some kid has been bringing a gun to school, the student can include his e-mail address and get information back on the steps taken by the school and law enforcement."
It is also a way for parents, teachers, and students to get resources. This is an informational website for topics such as teen suicide, depression, alcoholism, and the like.

“We have anonymous hotlines. We have also endorsed some peer helping on how to recognize and reduce violence by empowering the kids to report violence.”

“On the prevention side of the effort, we offer credit classes in a program called ‘Get Real about Violence.’ We also offer credit classes in bullying prevention, and the granddaddy of all is our ‘Rough Rider Health Promotion Conference,’ in which schools can team to develop an action plan that is broader in total prevention. Violence prevention can be, and is encouraged to be, a part of it. The schools do the needs assessment to decide what aspect of prevention they want to address.”

“Most problems in our schools are not horrific incidents but classroom disruptions. What we find is that classroom disruptions, either physical attack on a student or fighting, are still significant problems in our schools. One of the things that we recognize is that we have kids who are coming to school with very diverse backgrounds and from very diverse communities. The behaviors that may be appropriate for their survival or their existence in those communities are inappropriate for doing well in school. So we are moving heavily in the direction of looking at schools in terms of positive behavioral interventions—teaching kids the social skills they need to be successful. One program in our department is called ‘Positive Behavior Interventions.’ It has schools look at schoolwide positive interventions—teaching kids what they need to know, having schoolwide policies, analyzing data. I feel very strongly that we need to look at prevention and teach kids that there are ways of getting along so that they don’t have those conflicts that need to be mediated. Our focus is very much on teaching social skills.”

“We are promoting violence prevention curricula. We are really going to have to concentrate on bullying. Now the governor has a bill for Character Education, and he is defining that as the Five Rs. Two of those Rs are respect and responsibility, and he wants to pass that respect and responsibility bill.”

A focus of the conversations was on meeting student needs, as shown in the following comments from participants:

“A lot of what is addressed is related to school climate. We are finding that students need more counseling services as opposed to medical ser-
Services—counseling services related to relationship problems and other problems that are often related to school violence. We just sent a team to do training on gay, lesbian, and bisexual students. We are providing a link for support services for kids. If we don't address the relationship issues, then the students turn to alcohol, tobacco, and violence in the school. The internal struggles and feelings of nonacceptance can be linked to school violence. I say to schools that there are certain factors—relationships, body image, and struggles with sexual orientation—that we feel are very important links to suicide. Another question, in this age of accountability and test scores, is how these pressures are affecting students. The most important question is how a student is dealing with all of these issues.

“What we are dealing with now are the other issues, the emotional and social issues. When looking at the profiles of the kids like those at Columbine, we recognize that we might be able to identify some potential candidates, but we will never be able to figure out who is actually going to commit such violence and who can't. But looking again at their profiles, we see that these kids, for the most part, were bullied, and so we recognize that bullying, teasing, and harassment are major issues in schools. We also looked at the mental health aspect and tried to put more mental health services in schools for kids.”

“We want to be on top—100% in prevention of dangerous situations. We want to be ready in the event of a disaster.”

Services

For the state department of education personnel charged with the responsibility of creating safe schools, the largest portion of time is spent in providing schools with services. Thirty-nine individuals described this service role. Services were categorized into two areas: the physical aspect of safety and the social and emotional aspects of safety. The physical aspect of safety included providing training, developing documents, administering funds, managing grants, and reviewing plans. The social and emotional aspects included the human side of school safety and addressing student needs. When describing social and emotional safety, discussions focused on social skills, behavior interventions, and counseling.

The following section highlights the physical or technical aspects of what state departments of education and, in a few instances, what other agencies are doing for schools. The social and emotional components are addressed in the preceding section on prevention.

Significant amounts of time and money have been spent on researching and developing information about school safety; the struggle to get that information to schools and others has been eased by technology. Thirty-two of
the interview subjects mentioned websites as a method of providing information. Websites were used for posting documents, providing agency names and numbers, listing available resources, and, in increasing numbers, providing a hotline for reporting possible incidents of violence.

The physical or technical aspects of safety include three areas: training and technical assistance, workshops and conferences, and documents and resources. The following are participant comments about each of these areas. Twenty-six individuals noted their efforts to provide training and technical assistance.

"The department provided training and technical assistance in each region regarding the four components of the plan as well as other facets of school safety. A plan was written for each of the schools with assistance from advisory councils. The plans came back to the department, where each plan was reviewed and read."

"We provide information and spend a lot of time talking to districts about research-based programs surrounding conflict resolution. We also work on policy development. We are working more with groups like the National Education Association (NEA) and the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) around this topic and are trying to reach their constituents with the best policies we can offer."

"We provide as much technical assistance as possible, everything is based on individual needs, ranging from those of large school districts to those of very small districts, as well as those of geographical areas."

"We are helping districts comply with Principles of Effectiveness. We also completed a study involving principals and lead health education teachers in middle schools and high schools. We asked questions about their backgrounds and certifications and, more important, about their staff development needs. We provide training based on this background information."

"We handle the programming aspect of the prevention programs, whether for violence, drugs, or another target. We are in the process of establishing a critical incident reporting system."

"The state legislature gave our department money to train a school safety specialist. We used the money to conduct a School Safety Specialist Academy. More than half of the participants are school administrators; some are school counselors. They are trained and sent back to the schools to pass on what they have learned. We bring in specialists for the training. The CIA, the Secret Service, and the State Police have pro-
vided programs on security, prevention of bullying, and school climate, among other subjects."

"We are providing expertise to local coordinators in how best to write measurable goals and objectives, how to identify research-based programs, and what can happen as a result of such efforts."

"We conduct classes on bomb threat management, visual weapons screening, and how to detect weapons on students. We also advise participants on how to develop their plans. We take them through the entire process. We approve the plans and provide the technical assistance training as well. We also do site surveys or site assessments, in which we go out to the school and work with the local public safety and school officials. We do a walk-through of the school and talk about policies and procedures to tighten up on their safety and security and then send them a report on our findings."

"We use funds for counseling services called Student Assistant Counselors. These are student assistant programs that help students on issues surrounding alcohol and drugs, but certainly they address issues of safety. There is a relationship between all of the behaviors involved. These programs cover a wide range of activities."

Workshops and conferences continue to be popular means of sharing information and strategies concerning school safety. Fifteen individuals noted the importance of these activities.

"We are organizing our third annual conference for preventing youth violence. This is not strictly for schools; we invite a wide spectrum of people. In most of the things we do, we try to make it a community-based presentation, because if something happens at the school, it's the community that is going to have to respond."

"We have a Safe and Healthy School Conference annually and co-sponsor a gang prevention workshop annually. These are statewide programs. We also offer monthly videoconference training in the area of health, safety, and physical education."

"We are getting ready to offer five half-day workshops around the state. They are designed especially for superintendents, assistant superintendents, and school board members, helping them to determine good local policy that supports student searches and protects students' rights."
“We had a 2-day safe school conference. We are really looking at what it takes to make our schools safe and what kinds of programs are research-based, effective programs to implement in schools.”

“Right now we are planning a summer institute, to which we will invite counselors, teachers, principals, child welfare and attendance professionals, members of law enforcement, and others in the community who may be interested. We have tracks in preteen sex, bullying, and violence. We are planning a back-to-school kickoff in August. We are joining with the attorney general’s office and doing a 2-day conference on health services and education and prevention.”

“One of our other state agencies, the Office of Emergency Management, offers, free of charge to any school district, a 2- or 3-day in-depth training on crisis response and emergency planning. It has included new components to consider student safety, such as how to protect students if an intruder has walked into a building and evacuation plans.”

Documents and other resources were described as important tools provided through the auspices of department of education personnel. Twenty participants made comments about resources that had been developed and distributed.

“The Center for Law and Civic Education, with the Attorney General’s Office and the State Department of Education, has been working on a document for the last 5 years, called ‘Play by the Rules.’ This is a handout booklet for the students, given in the seventh grade, that covers every law in the state and its consequences—a means of making students aware of the new laws.”

“Last summer we released our new health and education curriculum framework, which is a guideline for K-12 instructional programs on what kids need to know to be health literate. To that end, it is linked to the national assessment project, of which we are a part, that looks at what is required for safe and drug-free schools. This is a large document, but sometime soon we will have the framework part of it on our website.”

“We wrote a safe school guide. A copy was mailed to every principal and superintendent. The U.S. Department of Education, the Office of Civil Rights, and the Attorney General’s Office put together a manual called Protecting Students from Harassment and Hate Crimes, and we mass-produced it and sent it to every principal and superintendent.”
"We developed a Crisis Management Resource Guide and printed more than 20,000 copies of the document. We have held 17 different workshops across the state for our school administrators, and they are still asking for them. The General Assembly approached us, wanting a model of what a crisis plan looks like. We put a document together and have reprinted it many times; we have also given several state departments of education throughout the United States permission to reproduce it."

"Four years ago schools indicated to me that they needed teaching materials in inhalant prevention. The information didn't exist, so we had to create it. We first printed 5,000 copies; these ran out and we had to do another printing. We are also trying to put as much information as possible on the website."

"We worked on two documents dealing with student searches. One was in direct response to the General Assembly, which has said, 'We want you to develop guidelines that pertain to how to conduct student searches.' Before we could finish it, the Assembly added, 'We want you to include strip searches in the guidelines.' After completing that document, we developed a School Search Resource Guide."

"A subcommittee that was co-chaired by the Department of Education and the state police expanded on the current crisis plan. We developed a flip chart with law enforcement and crisis agencies. All of our schools have these crisis plans, which include not only loss and grief issues such as suicide, accidental death, and homicide, but also physical crises in other horrific events. It covers the continuum of crises that can happen."

"We are looking at the new Culture for Lawfulness right now. This program teaches kids what will happen to their families and friends if they go to prison. It changes their attitudes. This is a 40-hour course, recommended to be taught through ninth-grade health or social studies."

"We have distributed a multilayered, multicolored crisis management guide to every parish in the state and also provided a disk so that it can be customized for every school in a parish. We joined with the Attorney General's Office and the Office of Preparedness in this effort, and it has been a huge success.

Collaboration Efforts

Nationwide, people have realized that creating safe schools is an issue of concern for all, not just for those who work in school systems. Twenty-six of the
subjects shared examples of collaborative efforts among various departments, agencies, and organizations. The states’ attorney generals’ offices appear as frequent collaborative partners; also mentioned were law enforcement, social services, and health departments. Participant comments follow.

“We are a prevention-oriented state. We have a Prevention Institute that brings all agencies together.”

“We have a subcommittee of counselors, including not just school counselors but also counselors from the Health Department, the Department of Human Services, and the private sector, working on a guide or crisis manual that will be published. They will do training as well.”

“The Commissioner of Education is calling for an interagency task force on school safety to bring together people from the Commissioner level and all the state agencies and nonprofits to talk about these issues. This will include all state agencies, the president of the PTA, and the president of the NEA.”

“A committee that investigates student deaths has a meeting once a month for each county. Everybody takes part—police, social workers, people from the Attorney General’s Office, protective services—we all come to the table with our sides of the story and investigate case by case to see if there are any recommendations we can make to stop such things from happening.”

“We join with the administrator’s association, the fire marshal, and the school police and go to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) or for training in multihazard emergency management.”

“The governor and the state superintendent co-sponsored a statewide safe school summit last year. We invited national violence prevention and safety experts, including specialists in parenting. One session was for the Safe School Committee members, parents, students, and teachers, and the other session was for parents, community leaders, and other interested parties.”

“We are piggybacking with the effective practice project from the governor’s office and expanding on that original work. We are bringing mental health professionals into the same arena. They say ‘science based”; we say ‘research based,” and the reality is that every bit of it is exactly and precisely the same thing.”
“We work very closely with our health education specialist, and she adds the curriculum component to all the programs I have.”

“We developed a safe schools interagency steering committee that is co-chaired with our state superintendent of schools and our lieutenant governor. Several subcommittees developed as a result of that interagency committee. A subcommittee that was co-chaired by the Department of Education and the State Police expanded on the crisis plan.”

“We are joining with the Attorney General’s Office and holding a 2-day conference on health services and education and prevention.”

“The Attorney General’s Office is working with us and doing a walk-through of schools to make sure they are safe. The Attorney General’s Office is also working with us to help those schools that have not completed their risk management plan or that need some more work on it.”

“School safety isn’t just a school problem, it is a community problem. So the community is going to have to pitch in, and that means parents, mentors, and other interested parties, have to be part of the solution and support our kids, who are trying to keep our schools safe.”

**SUMMARY**

All interview subjects shared a focus on prevention as key to meeting the challenge of creating safe schools for all students. Those who described legislative mandates perceived the mandates as tools to strengthen and reinforce the programs, resources, and research they had identified as essential for establishing safe schools.

Research-based resources and the use of expert advice were two essentials for the training or programs provided by the state departments of education. Data collection efforts assisted in determining school needs, as well as in addressing the accountability concerns.

The state department of education personnel we interviewed are passionate and knowledgeable about creating safe schools, are confident that they are providing the type of services that schools need, and are committed to reaching the goal of providing all students with a safe learning environment. They are also busy people. Collaborative efforts, the necessity of collecting data, and the efforts to stay abreast with information and research cause these positions to be challenging and demanding. If these individuals are not organizing and providing training and resources to schools, they are attending national conferences, developing resources, or meeting with various constituents. Reaching each of the individuals we interviewed was diffi-
cult and involved many telephone calls to schedule the interviews. However, once the connections were made, the conversations were rich and detailed.

**IMPLICATIONS**

A state department of education provides leadership, guidance, staff development, federal program implementation, and supervision of the state school system. Although each state department's responsibilities vary by statute, the common core of duties generally includes consultative services, development and dissemination of materials that assist in the improvement of educational programs, establishment of the rules and regulations that govern standards of school operation, and accreditation of schools.

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, websites, 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 provided through a variety of sources, depending on the structure of the state department. From our survey, it is apparent that state departments of education are important sources 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 or 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 throughout children's entire school careers (Posner, 1994, 1996).

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 behaviors 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 of education 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 identifying 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.

The ability of state departments of education 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.

REFERENCES