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# School-Based Violence Prevention Programs

## Offering Hope for School Districts

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Over the past decade, three events have significantly transformed the way schools decide which prevention programs they implement.

The first event was the shooting at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, on April 20, 1999. The killing of twelve students and a teacher by two students, who later committed suicide, made schools painfully aware that violent attacks could happen anywhere—in urban, suburban, or rural areas—at any time, and that when it came to issues of student well-being and school safety, schools needed to be prepared to deal with both. Although schools were permitted to use their Safe and Drug Free School and Community Act (SDFSCA) funds for alcohol and drug prevention programming, as well as violence prevention programming, since passage of the Improving America's School Act in 1994, many were reluctant to, for a variety of reasons. These reasons ranged from inadequate resources (although schools were given the authority to expand into another area, eg, violence funding, funding was not increased) to not fully understanding the need to address violence prevention (up to this time, violence in schools was erroneously viewed primarily as an urban problem). Columbine, an event that occurred in what many called an idyllic suburban community, changed this.

Columbine was the period on the sentence of a long list of school shootings that occurred during a relatively short period of time in non-urban communities (Bethel, Alaska; Moses Lake, Washington; Pearl, Mississippi; Paducah, Kentucky; Jonesboro, Arkansas; and Springfield, Oregon). The shooting sent a clear signal to “all schools” regardless of where they were located that they needed to do something about school violence. There was a clear recognition that no matter where the school was located, what the size of the school was, or what the socioeconomic makeup of the school was, the clear potential for violence to occur existed, and educators had a responsibility for identifying and implementing violence prevention programs that would help stop the violence.

The second event was passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001, Public Law 107-110.

President George W. Bush signed the NCLB into law on January 8, 2001. The NCLB was meant to radically change the way we educated students. It stressed reform of the education system by emphasizing four major principles of reform: accountability, parental and community involvement in the educational process, local decision making, and use of science-based programs. This last principle, the use of science-based programs, applied not only to those portions of the NCLB that dealt with teaching and learning but also with prevention programming such as provided for under Title IV, Part A of the NCLB, the SDFSCA. This principle (use of science-based programs) was one of five “principles of effectiveness” by which schools receiving Title IV funds (approximately 95% of all school districts in the country) were required to abide. The others related to conducting an assessment of the problems faced by the school, establishing performance measures, analyzing and using as the basis of analysis data on the prevalence of risk factors experienced by the target population, and consulting with parents in the development of prevention programs. Essentially, the principles were meant to be a road map for the successful design, selection, implementation, and evaluation of high-quality alcohol, drug, and violence prevention and early intervention programs.

The NCLB Act caused schools not only to be much more discriminatory in the programs they selected for use but also resulted in administrators being much more careful in the types of programs they selected. School personnel began to search for strategies and practices that could be infused in the school day rather than discrete curricula-based programs that had to be squeezed into already-crowded class schedules.

The third event related to a rating given to the State Grants Program (Title IV, Subpart 1) of the NCLB Act under the Program Assessment Rating Tool. The Office of Management and Budget, which was charged with assessing the effectiveness of federal programs, conducted its initial assessment of the State Grants Program in 2004 (this program provides funds on a population basis to State and local education agencies) and gave the program the lowest rating possible: Ineffective. There were multiple reasons for this score, but one of the primary reasons was that it could not be demonstrated that the federal dollars supporting prevention and early intervention programs were being

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used for programs that could demonstrate that they were effective in achieving their stated goals in reducing or preventing alcohol and drug use and violent behavior. This rating was tied to budget submissions and eventually led to a reduction in funding for the State Grants Program (from \$469 million in 2003 to \$351 million in 2007). Although another assessment of the State Grant Program (in 2006) increased the score and rating for the State Grants Program (from Ineffective to Results Not Demonstrated), the Program was still viewed as deficient in key areas, especially in areas related to measuring the number of schools that were using effective prevention programs or strategies.

Receiving an Ineffective rating caused the U.S. Department of Education to take a series of actions to improve the quality of programs. One action was the development of a series of seven program performance measures. The performance measures will be used to assess the effectiveness of the State Grants Program and to make the budget formulation process more transparent and objective. Two of the performance measures relate directly to assessing the quality of programming selected by schools. More specifically, they measure the percentage of drug and violence prevention programs/practices supported with SDFSCA state grant funds that are research based and the percentage of SDFSCA-funded research-based drug and violence prevention programs/practices that are implemented with fidelity.

Establishing clear performance measures for schools that use federal funds for support of prevention programs means that unless schools drop ineffective prevention programs, many of which are extremely popular and switch to ones that may not be as popular but which are effective, they will likely continue to lose financial support.

Whereas each of these events individually caused schools to reassess some part of what they were doing regarding prevention programming, taken collectively, the three events converged to help form a tidal wave of change. School personnel had to reassess every aspect of their alcohol, drug, and violence prevention strategy.

These administrators examined everything from how they assessed problems to how they went about selecting the right programs, policies, and practices. They also began to reassess how they measured the effectiveness of their prevention and intervention efforts, how they linked to community groups and organizations such as the local police and mental health organizations, what types of training their faculty and staff needed, and how the programs were going to fit within what many saw as an entirely new school day that had almost a singular focus on academics. This has been a somewhat slow and laborious process, but most districts have decided to undertake it, for they realize if they do not, there may not be any more federal funding to support their prevention efforts. Although most school districts clearly understand the need to move in a different direction, many are struggling to do so as they do not have the requisite skills or resources necessary to bring about or sustain the required change.

The article entitled "Effectiveness of Universal School-Based Programs to Prevent Violent and Aggressive Behavior: A Systematic Review"<sup>1</sup> provides school districts with hope as it has demonstrated four things: (1) effective violence prevention programs are available for schools to adopt; (2) the programs work in various environments; (3) many of the programs do not necessarily have to take precious time away from the academic calendar (adopting the programs could add time to the calendar as teachers will spend less time on disciplining students); and (4) the cost of some of the programs is very reasonable, making them available to most schools.

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## Reference

1. Hahn R, Fuqua-Whitley D, Wethington H, et al. Effectiveness of universal school-based programs to prevent violent and aggressive behavior: A systematic review. *Am J Prev Med* 2007;33(suppl 2):S114-S129.