

# **THE STATE OF SCHOOL SAFETY IN AMERICAN SCHOOLS**

A Report by the SERAPH Research Team

The following report covers all aspects of school safety in the United States. This report will provide information to legislators and the public on the complexity of school safety. The report will also provide information on solutions to these problems.

This report was created after two years of research by our research team. Two sources of data were used in this report. First, research studies on school safety and child on child aggression. We choose the research studies based on an internal test requiring that they meet scientific review procedures for accuracy.

Secondly, the SERAPH Research Team collected data. This data included internal assessments of school polices and their effectiveness on safety and interviews with more than 1,200 teachers, 320 administrators and 925 law enforcement professionals in rural, suburban and urban school districts.

The final report was studied and analyzed by members of our educational advisory board. This board consists of teachers, administrators, educational specialists and law enforcement officials.

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## 1. Introduction:

School Safety has become a significant part of education. Until a rash of school shootings in the mid 1990s, suburban and rural school districts placed little effort into safety and security procedures and training. Until the events of the 1990's, school safety was seen as an urban problem.

After the Columbine shooting, school officials began to ask questions about their own vulnerability, very slowly they began to experiment with new safety procedures and policies. At this point in time, various individuals and companies began marketing school safety services to American school districts. This glut of services created a state of confusion for many school officials who had never addressed security issues before. With this new business trend came many radical ideas on child aggression and school safety.

Along with these "experts", non-profit social and political organizations began to aggressively promote their ideology through school safety programs. These organization used the rise in school safety awareness to promote themselves through the positive publicity they received working with school officials and education organizations.

However, "9/11" changed everything. After the terrorist attacks, school officials began what we call the second phase of school safety awareness. Because schools and children were affected by the attacks in New York and Pennsylvania, money from public sources began to grow and more energy was placed on security concerns by local school boards.

Today, school safety and security is inconsistent at best in American schools. Many school districts spend the majority of their time and money focused on one aspect of security rather than addressing all of the issues related to school safety. SERAPH found very few school districts that focused their efforts equally between emergency response and school based violence.

This report will provide specific information related to all aspects of the problems faced by school districts today and provided specific solutions to many of these problems.

## 2. School Complexity and Safety Issues

Schools are complicated entities. Unlike corporations or government agencies, schools work under the umbrella of many influences. Schools are influenced by union contracts, state and federal regulations and children and adults interacting together on a daily basis. All of these factors combine to create a complicated and sometimes chaotic environment.

Many people factor into the management and decisions making done on a daily basis in American schools:

- \* School Boards
- \* Superintendents

- \* District Specialists [special education, English as a Second Language, curriculum, etc.]
- \* Administrators [Principals and district department heads]
- \* School based psychologists, social workers and counselors
- \* Teachers
- \* School Resource Officers, Security
- \* Support Staff [office, custodians, food service, maintenance]
- \* Volunteers

Each of these people has a direct or indirect involvement in the daily security management of a school.

Outside people also influence school safety: family members, vendors, uninvited visitors, legislators and extremists' socio political groups.

### 3. The Issues

Safety issues in American schools are many. Urban, suburban and rural schools all face the same general problems:

- \* Student to student violence
- \* Robbery
- \* Sexual aggression
- \* Psychological and emotional abuse
- \* Staff on staff violence
- \* Student on staff violence
- \* Visitor to student violence
- \* Visitor to staff violence
- \* Vendor to student violence

SERAPH found that these issues may vary in frequency from school to school but they are present in most American middle and high schools.

#### 4. Current Facts about School Safety

The Bureau of Justice Statistics (2002) provides the following statistics.

- \* 2.7 million crimes are committed at schools each year.
- \* Students ages 12 through 18 were more likely to be victims of nonfatal violent crimes such as rape, sexual assault, robbery and aggravated assault. The total crimes committed in schools to this age group are 253,000.
- \* Teachers were victims of 1,603,000 violent crimes from 1996 to 2000.
- \* Juvenile girls are the largest group of victims for sexual assault, kidnapping and simple assault.

#### 5. Lack of Accurate Information Lack of Problem Solving

Our team found that research from the United States Department of Justice and its various entities is the most accurate on the subject of school safety. However, these research documents are only as good as the information collected.

Collecting complete and accurate information from schools has been difficult. On numerous occasions, our research team found that school officials lacked a complete understanding of the problems in their schools because they had not preformed a complete security / safety assessment.

Most of the security assessments that have been preformed in U.S. schools have focused either on security hardware [cameras, locks, etc.] or exterior crime prevention. Since school safety is primarily about the management of a school environment and the people in it, an accurate assessment of safety must include analysis of the management systems in place on a daily basis that affect daily security issues.

In the late 1990s, various business-consulting firms had decided, for economic reasons, to enter the school safety business. These companies lacked an understanding of the complex issues connected with American education and consequently provided little assistance to schools in their development of safety management systems.

To date few schools in the United States have been accurately assessed.

#### 6. Many Problems Little Success

In this section, we will examine specific problems and the current methods being used by school officials to resolve these problems.

## Social Issues

### Parenting

"Parenting plays a critical role in the development process of children. Early discipline failures are a primary causal factor in the development of conduct problems. Harsh discipline, low supervision, lack of parental involvement all add to the development of aggressive children" Patterson (1992).

When our team surveyed educators about parents, they identified, 'emotionally immature parenting' as the most crucial problem they face. These parents are detached from their children academically and developmentally. Many of the educators say that parents will defend their child's bad behavior to the point of denying their children counseling for severe learning or emotional problems.

We also ask educators to provide a number to help us understand how serious the problem is. The consensus was 6 out of 10 parents exhibit these immature behavior patterns.

In a 2004 New York Times article, Dr. Laurence Steinberg pointed a finger at parents, who are less likely now to side with school officials: "I think in the past the threat of getting in touch with a kid's parents was often enough to get a kid to start behaving.... Now, kids feel parents will fight on their behalf." Child psychologist, Dr. Bill Maier, discussed in a 2004 USA TODAY article that, "many adults seem to put their wishes ahead of their children's well-being."

A recent study by the University of Chicago found that many people do not believe a person reaches adulthood until the age of 26. The study conducted by Tom W. Smith (2003), found that people believe that finishing school, getting a full time job, and raising a family qualifies someone as an adult. Many child experts have identified delayed adolescence as a major factor in developmental issues in young adults. This extended adolescence philosophy by many parents creates serious behavioral problems in high school aged children because of its lack of accountability for personal conduct. Divorced and single parent families are creating serious problems in schools related to aggression and behavioral problems. Numerous studies over the past two years have found that children growing up in single parent homes are twice as likely to have serious psychiatric illnesses, addictions, and aggressive behaviors as their counterparts are.

Research by noted psychologist Judith Wallerstein shows that children of divorce have serious problems later in life:

- \* Lack role models for a healthy marriage.
- \* Grew up in families in which the parents stayed angry.
- \* Endured a longer adolescence, as they extended childhood while providing emotional support for wounded parents.

- \* Entered adulthood as worried, underachieving, self-deprecating and sometimes angry.
- \* Encountered difficult stepfamily situations. Two-thirds grew up with multiple divorces and remarriages of one or both parents and found bonding difficult.
- \* Greater substance abuse - and earlier sexual experience for girls.
- \* Have less social competence.

An extensive 2003 survey of parents by Public Agenda, a non profit research group, found that critical issues such as good money management, honesty and manners were not being taught to children. By their own admission only 38% of parents in the survey admitted to teaching their children critical life skills and morality.

Discipline and violence problems in schools can be directly traced back to parenting problems in our society. Dysfunctional parents must be held accountable for their actions if educators are to teach effectively in a safe environment.

### Young Children and Aggression

Educators interviewed, unanimously agreed that aggression and violence by young children is on the rise.

Experts in the criminal psychology field predicted these issues many years ago. A 1990 study by Dr. Susan Campbell found that 67 percent of 6-year-olds with significant behavior problems met the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders III criteria for an externalizing personality disorder by the age of 9. A 1993 study by Dr. R. Loeber found that children who became violent could be identified with almost 50 percent reliability as early as age 7.

A 2003 USA TODAY article entitled, School Violence Hits Lower Grades, details death threats, biting, punching and kicking by children toward teachers. In the same USA TODAY article, Richard Barbacane says more children are arriving at school from stressed, single-parent homes. Mr. Barbacane chairs disciplinary hearings for the Lancaster, Pennsylvania School District. He also suspects that many of these children have medical problems, such as fetal alcohol syndrome. "Children now are surviving pregnancies and births that ten years ago they weren't, and they're coming to school with minimal brain dysfunction and growing needs," said Barbacane. "We're just now seeing these children in our schools."

School violence happens on all grade levels and it is important that staff have proper training on how to identify and manage aggressive children. Social workers, counselors, teachers, and principals need a more accurate scientific understanding of how aggression increases in children and how this relates to family dynamics and the management of school environments. This training should focus on scientific research from credible sources not theoretical ideology. In addition, a meeting with lead teachers, principals, and school board members should be held to discuss the aggressive child

interaction philosophies used in the district. This meeting should require participants to evaluate effectiveness of the current procedures and philosophies.

## Educational Philosophies and Student Aggression

Over the past 40 years, schools in America have been heavily influenced by various educational philosophies. Many of these philosophies such as 'open classrooms' saw a decline in their popularity over time. However, some of these philosophies have endured and are now being directly linked to student aggression. The self-esteem movement has had the most obvious impact on school curriculum and teaching. Moreover, the impact has not been positive.

Many educators are unaware of the genesis of the self-esteem philosophy. In the early part of the 20th century, various members of the new socialist political movement Alfred Adler, Erich Fromm and John Dewey authored various theories about learning and personal awareness. From these political ideologies, the self-esteem ideals grew.

By the 1980s, the philosophy had entered the main stream of public education. At the same time, however, a series of studies began to emerge that have cast a dark cloud over the movement.

In 1986, the California Legislature passed a bill creating the California Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility. After three years, the research was published in a book titled, *The Social Importance of Self-Esteem* (1989). The conclusion of the study was not favorable. The San Francisco Examiner summed up the report by saying, "Save yourself the 40 bucks the book costs and head straight for the conclusion: There is precious little evidence that self esteem is the cause of our social ills."

Studies by researchers at notable institutions such as Iowa State, Brown, University of Virginia Carnegie Mellon University, San Diego State University and Case Western Reserve University concluded that self-esteem curriculum would produce a personality disorder in some children called narcissism. These children develop an unrealistically optimistic opinion of themselves. When they are rejected or criticized, they see it as an attack on themselves and they respond violently.

However, even after two decades of research, educators are still unaware of the negative effects this philosophy has on their daily management and safe operation of schools. In fact, the father of the modern self-esteem movement Nathaniel Branden has stated, "When your own good opinion matters more to you than someone else's, you have the foundation for self-esteem." Branden's organization provides self-esteem trainers nationwide to educational organizations and schools each year.

Dr. Stephen Wallis (1996) a Maryland school administrator, believes that " ...the notion of self-esteem as a sunny, feel good exercise is undermining real education, self-discipline and achievement. It is largely false and obscures the need for students to work hard, demonstrating perseverance and understanding honesty, responsibility, opportunity, and possibilities to achieve success. Every school should be characterized by the warmth, security, and meaningful work conducive to academic achievement and extracurricular participation."

A frank discussion with teachers and administrators should be held to discuss this issue and its effect on school safety. A survey of teachers on this issue will provide much needed feedback regarding the effects of this philosophy on aggression. In addition, schools should emphasize self-respect versus self-esteem through teaching children to humble themselves by helping and doing things for others.

## Health Issues and School Safety

Over the past ten years, schools across America have found themselves becoming de facto social services agencies. Inadequate city and county social services agencies have placed schools in a precarious situation in their effort to curb aggression and assist troubled youth. One of the primary areas where this has become a serious problem is with health related issues.

## Sleep and Diet

Our research on school aggression has shown that most aggression by 12- through 18-year-olds occurs in the early morning hours of the school day and aggression by 5- through 11-year-olds occurs mid to late afternoon. Medical research point to two factors that influence this aggression. These factors are sleep deprivation and low blood sugar.

The National Institutes of Health has determined that teens need nine and a half hours of sleep per night to function properly. However, many teens do not get this amount of sleep. Younger children also need an average of seven hours of sleep per evening, which they are not getting.

Exercise programs and reminders to students and parents about sleep discipline are crucial in the management of a safe school. School counselors must make sleep discipline a part of the discussions they have with parents of students who are having academic performance problems and absenteeism / lateness issues. Lastly, a plan of action must be designed to provide extra coverage by hall monitors or security personnel so that proper coverage of these critical times can occur each day.

## Sexually Transmitted Diseases

Syphilis, gonorrhea, human papillomavirus and Chlamydia have become a daily nightmare for school health workers. In our work with over 7,400 middle and high schools nationwide, all have reported increasing cases of these diseases among their female and male populations. For several decades, the numbers of these diseases in children under the age of 17 was nominal. Beginning in the late 1990s that all changed. Today, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, sexually transmitted diseases have grown to epidemic levels among teenaged males and females. The dramatic increase can be linked to specific behaviors by teenagers, including multiple sex partners, the popularity of oral sex among middle school-aged children, and the increase of students involved in same sex relationships.

A study by the University of Texas Health Science Center (2000) concluded that teen females were nearly three times as likely to have Chlamydia as males. A recent study in the state of Mississippi in

tandem with the CDC found that that HIV infected teens had initiated sex at a younger age than their uninfected counterparts and the young women infected reported having had sexual partners much older than themselves (at least 10 years).

All school districts have problems related to sexual aggression. It is imperative that school staff be trained to understand sexual issues and adolescents. It is also important that administrators and department directors be trained to understand how sexual aggression by students and adults affects the management of a safe school specifically sexual relationships by staff with students. It is also important for school officials to investigate any and all dating relationships that may involve statutory rape and work with local law enforcement to eradicate this behavior.

## Piercing and Tattoos

Over the past five years, piercing and tattooing have become commonplace among American youth. Influenced by motorcycle gangs, the drug culture and alternative lifestyles, young people have created a craze. What is the down side to this phenomenon? Research by pediatrician Dr. Timothy Roberts has concluded:

- \* Serious infections and permanent disfiguration are increasing with the piercing craze.
- \* Females with tattoos have higher rates of Chlamydia.
- \* Females with body piercing were about two and a half times more likely to have had sex, smoke, used marijuana, and skipped school.
- \* Boys with piercing were five times more likely to have skipped school in the past year and had high risks for smoking and drinking.

Schools must address these issues as safety concerns for the students who are involved in this behavior and the students they interact with each day. Children, who wear visible tattoos or multiple piercings in areas other than their ears, are usually involved in anti social cliques. Dress codes should address the exposing of tattoos and the wearing of piercings outside of the ear area and parents should be told about the health and emotional risks of piercings and tattoos.

## Dress Codes

Dress codes have always been an issue of contention between school officials and parents. School officials seek to have a disciplined learning environment, which is difficult if students are wearing inappropriate clothing that distracts from the business at hand, learning.

Dress codes are important for many reasons. They create a professional attitude among students and staff. Sloppy or distractive clothing creates a casual atmosphere, which does not aid in the management of a disciplined school. Revealing attire on the other hand can create the potential for sexual harassment of females or outright assault. Dr. Nicholas Rizzo of Midwestern University

Medical School supports the belief that uniforms are the best way to resolve this potential threat. Rizzo surveys psychiatrists who treat male sexual offenders. His studies do not blame the victims for being assaulted, but do reveal the thought processes of male sex offenders, many in their teens.

\* Female attire that appears to the male to invite direct sex attention tends to increase the risk of sex crimes.

\* A male may interpret sexually teasing attire as uncaring and unfair, subjecting him to temptation while rejecting him. This may result in thoughts of revenge against the female who brought on the distress, sometimes expanded to hostility against females in general.

Dress codes properly designed and aggressively enforced do reduce these problems but create a management nightmare for principals. The logical solution to this problem is the use of uniforms.

### Girl Aggression, Sexism and School Safety

Male aggression has been the focus of most of the anti-bullying programs and school safety conferences throughout the U.S., even though female aggression has been a growing problem in America's schools for more than ten years, according to studies and statistics gathered by various agencies within the U.S. Department of Justice. The question is, why?

According to the National Criminal Justice Reference Service, there were 2,260,066 female arrests nationwide during 2002, and juvenile girls accounted for 20.8 percent of the females arrested. It is part of a rising trend, according to the NCJRS. Between 1992 and 1996, the number of juvenile females arrested for Violent Crime Index offenses increased 25 percent, with no increase in arrests of male juveniles for the same offenses.

A political attitude has existed for many years among the national educational organizations, which has focused for many years on correcting the inadequacies of education and extracurricular activities for girls. This focus has placed girls in the victim role and boys in the predator role; however, this is not supported by existing research or crime statistics. In studying female aggression, Dr. Wendy Craig (2003) found that girls are just as aggressive as boys are. Unlike male aggression, which is physical, female social aggression is covert and difficult to detect. "Girl aggression tends to be social in nature -- that is, emotionally rejecting, dismissive, and verbally abusive," said Craig. "This kind of aggression has as many negative consequences as physical aggression. The victims of social aggression become anxious, depressed, fearful, and have a lower self-concept. The implication is that, as future parents, socially aggressive females have the potential to inflict great harm, which can go undetected by society."

Staff members must be trained to understand how sexism can affect school safety. This training should include the development of personnel assessment skills to uncover bias, which affects policy development and implementation. Policies and discipline must be deliberately balanced when dealing with aggression from males and females.

## Sexual Aggression

### 1. Staff Abuse of Students

A recent study commissioned by the AAUW Educational Foundation and presented to congress found that 4.5 million students are the victims of sexual misconduct by school staff members yearly. The study was lead by Carol Shakeshaft (2004), of Hofstra University. The study used surveys by the American Association of University Women and over 900 documents on the subject of school sexual aggression by staff members.

The report describes schools as places where abusers can target vulnerable and marginal students who are afraid to complain or unlikely to be believed if they did. In a particularly troubling finding, the report says that in elementary schools, the abuser is often one of the people liked most by students and trusted most by parents.

Sexual misconduct is defined in the report as physical, verbal or visual behavior. Shakeshaft did not limit her findings to sexual abuse because, she says, that would exclude other unacceptable adult behaviors that can drive kids from school and harm them for years.

### 2. Youth on Youth Sex Aggression

Various studies conducted over the past several years have acknowledged the issue of teen sexuality and its consequences.

An American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (1996) study found that both dislike of school and "socioeconomic disadvantage" were associated with risk factors for teenage pregnancy. The study also found that, teens that disliked school, [despite having knowledge about sex and contraception], were more likely to have sexual intercourse, expect sexual intercourse by age 16, and expect to be parents by age 20.

A National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescents (2004) found that 14% of girls who have had intercourse have attempted suicide compared to 5% of sexually inactive girls. The survey also found that 6% of sexually active boys have tried suicide compared to less than 1% of sexually inactive boys.

Rebecca Collins (2004) a psychologist for the RAND Corp conducted a recent study of teen sex and television viewing. She found that, watching TV shows with sexual content apparently hastens the initiation of teen sexual activity. Dr. Collins study also found that sexual talk on TV has the same effect on teens as depictions of sex.

Finally, a study by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention titled "Sexual assaults by juveniles peak in the hours after school"(1999) found that the most likely hour of a school day for a juvenile to commit a sexual assault is between 3 p.m. and 4 p.m. In fact, more than 1 in 7 sexual assaults by juveniles occur in the 4 hours between 3 p.m. and 7 p.m. on school days. Unlike other violent crimes, sexual assaults by juveniles on non-school days are most likely to occur between noon and 1 p.m.

Society must take action to reduce teen sexual contact. We believe that this issue has become political and must be dealt with scientifically to prevent the problems associated with adolescent sexuality.

### 3. Special Education

According to the 2002 U.S. Census, 5.2 million children and teenagers have a physical or mental disability and special education enrollment has increased twice as fast as overall school enrollment. The SERAPH Research Team has found that since the implementation of inclusion [Title I] sexual assault has increased dramatically in this area of education.

While inclusion has had some benefit for children with physical disabilities, it has also had a dramatic effect on school safety. Because of the policy, children with physical disabilities have been placed in classes with children who have personality disorders. These personality disorders are not physically based and usually include aggressive behavior patterns. The sexual assault of disabled children has been a consistent problem in schools.

### Hazing

Researchers at Alfred (N.Y.) University (2003), in the first study of its kind say about 1.5 million high school students are hazed each year, and about half of those victims are athletes, the group facing the greatest risk of enduring these often-dangerous initiations.

"One of the things we find is that the teammates who perpetrate the hazing are the ones who suffered it the year before, and they want to make it that much more dangerous, to validate their experience," says Norman Pollard, Alfred's director of counseling/student development.

### 7. Conclusion

Over the past two years, American education has been the focus of much government and public focus in the areas of safety and security.

New programs have been initiated and money has been spent in the tens of millions to combat aggression and prepare for emergencies. However, success has been sporadic across the country. The following is a list of suggested solutions for the problems defined in this report.

1. Dysfunctional families produce children with socialization, emotional, and aggression issues. Children from these types of families are routinely late or absent from school, have poor diets, lack proper amounts of sleep and have numerous addictions. Students with dysfunctional parents also fail to complete assignments and most importantly have no ethical standards to control their negative behavior.

While some private and public programs have helped parents to correct their problems, many more refuse to change their poor parenting and require punitive measures to bring about changes in the household. Local courts must hold parents responsible for their children's behavior.

2. A lack of quality social services in many communities has exasperated the school safety problem. Schools have become frustrated with the lack of services available for troubled children. Many school districts have created their own in-house systems using social workers. However, in many cases these social workers have created additional problems by interfering in the court ordered management of violent students.

Also in many communities, children with deep-seated emotional problems are not receiving early intervention. This lack of intervention can be directly attributed to budget issues and poor training of judges and social service personnel on issues such as sexual aggression.

3. Favoritism has also created problems. The problem is extensive. From teachers, principals and school board members, showing leniency to certain students during disciplinary procedures has become a serious problem.

Favoritism creates an unbalanced disciplinary system and divides students into distinctive groups, those with "connected" adults in their lives and those who do not have this insider influence. Favoritism was a contributing factor in the massacre at Columbine high school. Balance in the execution of school-based discipline is critical for a safe and well-balanced school.

4. Security management is a daily problem. Over the past four decades, experts from the U.S. Department of Justice and law enforcement established the science of security management. These protocols for the daily management of a secure facility have been scientifically tested and have been proven effective in the prevention and management of negative human behavior. The problem is that many schools have poor or non-existent security management system in place; rather they rely on technology [cameras, etc.] to secure their facilities. A camera cannot predict and prevent problems it can only record them.

Schools personnel must be trained in the management of a secure facility and the prediction and prevention of crime. However, many national education organizations have for political reasons frowned on the use of prediction techniques with students. Psychologically profiling students and adult staff for violent tendencies is critical to a safe school. Research proving the effectiveness of this tool is plentiful, Dr. R. Loeber (1993) and his team of scientists found that children who became violent could be identified with almost 50% reliability as early as age 7. In addition, Dr. Susan Campbell (1990) and her team found that 67% of 6 year olds with significant behavior problems met the DSM-III criteria for an externalizing disorder at age 9.

If early intervention with students is to be done, then we must use effective tools to determine which children have these tendencies to violence and provide appropriate medical help. Those in educational organizations need to understand how violent children affect school environments. Loss of good teachers due to stress, lawsuits, and emotionally and physically damaged victims are left in the wake of violent students. Prediction and prevention techniques provide a tool for the management of these problems.

5. Sexual issues have also been a difficulty for school officials. Sexually transmitted diseases and sexual aggression are a daily problem that requires specific policies based on scientific research not political ideology. It has become clear to many researchers and educators that children have become more sexualized since the 1990s. This sexualization has been fed by various entertainment mediums, which influence's children's culture but also by family members who sexualize their homes with promiscuous behavior, internet based pornography and informality regarding nudity or revealing attire.

It is critical that society ask and answer the difficult question, "Is it emotionally healthy for adolescents to engage in sexual activity?"

For the past 20 years, research has been conducted on the causes and pathology of aggression by children. The research has also been conducted on the effective process of securing a facility from crime. It is time for communities to understand that school safety does not happen in a vacuum, it is everyone's problem.

We hope that this report assists the public, state and federal legislators to understand the difficulty faced by school communities and provide the support to resolve and control this serious problem.

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