The School Practitioner's Concise Companion

to Preventing Violence and Conflict

- Brief, focused chapters illustrate best practices

- Handy quick-reference charts, checklists, and cases

- Concise, at-a-glance format for step-by-step guidance

- Portable, practical advice from school services experts

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Creating a Violence-Free School Climate/Culture

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Getting Started

In an increasingly globalized world, rates of violence among the young appear to be increasing nearly worldwide (Buvinic & Morrison, 2000). The incidence of most types of violence is much higher in the United States, however, than in most developed countries. And although schools are the safest places for children, most schools are not safe. Fourteen percent of high school students carry weapons to school; a larger number carry them outside of school (Josephson Institute on Ethics, 2001). Rates of harassment, bullying, threat, coercion, humiliation, and intentional exclusion among children and youth are much higher than what adults usually recognize. Nearly a third of children are regularly involved in bullying (as bully, victim, or both), and those who are not directly involved report feeling threatened by the exposure. One third of U.S. high school students do not feel safe at school. Many others find school environments so socially toxic, so emotionally violent and threatening, that they do not wish to be there (Garbarino & deLara, 2002). Adults who are present often are not aware of the extent of these issues; Garbarino and deLara call this the "secret school life of adolescents" (p. 16). Continual exposure to physical and emotional violence produces damaging levels of stress hormones, upsets the neurochemical balance in the brain, and has a profoundly negative impact on social and academic development. The problem is serious, and it is widespread, spanning all socioeconomic groups.

What We Know

A review by the U.S. surgeon general (2001) found that many common violence prevention programs (including peer-led programs like peer counseling and peer mediation) are largely ineffective, and some (like boot camps) can actually be damaging. By contrast, the most effective programs focus on improving the social climate of the school, in conjunction with supporting other protective factors like parental effectiveness and building individual social competencies. A good deal is known about how to construct school cultures that maintain a positive school climate; combining projects targeting school climate with universal life skills training (discussed in other chapters of this book) can be particularly powerful.

A number of existing programs for constructing cultures that discourage violence and threat and support the development of positive alternative practices are listed in Table 2.1. The Good Behavior Game, Bullying Prevention, Effective Behavior Support, and Positive Action are well-established strategies, supported by multiple controlled studies. PeaceBuilders, Community Builders, and PEACE POWER, which are partial replications of one another, are based on strong science and can be viewed as probably efficacious or promising. Decisions about selecting programs draw in part on data, and also on the resources required. For example, Effective Behavior Support and CommunityBuilders as implemented so far require considerable additional staffing resources, and Positive Action and PeaceBuilders are commercial programs that can involve significant financial

Table 2.1 Key Studies Related to Creating Violence-Free School Cultures

Program and Key Reference	Findings
CommunityBuilders (promising; incorporates well-established practices) Metzler, Biglar, Rusby & Sprague (2001)	Levels of positive reinforcement increased, aggressive behavior declined, disciplinary referrals and harassment declined among some groups, reports of verbal and physical attacks decreased (but did at comparison school as well).
Effective Behavior Support (well established) Sprague et al. (2001)	Social skills improved, and office referrals for disciplinary action declined. Students' perceptions of school safety did not improve, however.
Good Behavior Game (well established) Embry (2002)	Antisocial behaviors declined even when evaluated in long-term follow-up. Results are from approximately 20 independent replications of the Good Behavior Game used with different grade levels, different types of students, and in different settings.
PeaceBuilders (probably efficacious) Flannery et al. (2003)	Prosocial behavior increased, aggressive behavior was reduced, and social competence improved. Results are somewhat variable among age groups, but maintain over 2-year period.
PEACE POWER (promising; incorporates well-established practices) Strickland, Erickson & Mattain (n.d.)	Levels of recognition, respect, shared power, and peacemaking increased in three of four schools.
Positive Action (well established) Flay, Allred & Ordway (2001)	Disciplinary referrals decreased by up to 85%, school performance improved, and number of arrests declined.