

Studies Show Relationship between School Connectedness and School Safety



School connectedness generally refers to factors such as feeling close to people at school, feeling like part of the school, being happy at the school, having all students treated fairly by teachers and feeling safe at school.

Data from the National Longitudinal Study of adolescent Health, a U.S. federally funded survey of 75,515 junior and senior high school students, found that when a student feels like a part of a school and cared for at school, negative behaviors significantly decrease. Students who are connected have shown reduced violent behavior, substance abuse, suicide, and pregnancy. Disengaged students are more likely to smoke cigarettes, have early sexual intercourse, or become involved in weapon-related violence.

Additionally, Dr. Paul McCold's recent research at the International Institute of Restorative Practices found that restorative justice practices, which emphasize building connectedness, result in higher levels of perceived safety. Restorative practices empower young people to develop their own behavioral standards, their own classroom norms, and their own behavioral contracts for persistent misbehavior. Conflicts and problems are addressed immediately by empowering students to take responsibility for finding their own solutions. This results in the students building a community of support which provides for a sense of responsibility and concern for each other.

These described factors have been determined to allow the students a feeling of safety while at school. On the other hand, zero tolerance policies **do not** necessarily increase either the students' feeling of safety or result in safer schools. The studies above have shown that students in schools with harsh discipline policies actually report feeling less safe—one of the factors related school connectedness.

Many studies have questioned the rationale of suspending or expelling students for relatively minor offenses. In many jurisdictions children are suspended or expelled for shooting wads of paper or possessing certain banned items, such as fingernail files that may be considered weapons. Research has long shown that suspension is a predictor of dropping out of school. With no alternative placements, these children are

at greater risk of getting into serious trouble. Also, studies have shown that a disproportionate number of poor and African-American students are suspended under zero tolerance policies.

While the safety of students and teachers in school is of paramount importance, it is imperative that effective, research-based programming be implemented and continuously evaluated to be sure that all that can be done is being done to improve school connectedness and increase the safety of our schools.

Sources: Blum, R.W., McNeely, C.A., Rinehart, P.M., (2002) *Improving the odds: The untapped power of schools to improve the health of teens*, Center for Adolescent Health and Development, University of Minnesota ; McNeely, C.A., Nonnemaker, J.M., Blum, R.W., *Promoting School Connectedness: Evidence from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health*, Journal of School Health, April 2002, Vol. 72, No. 4; McCold, Paul and Wachtel, Ted, *The Worst School I've Ever Been to: Empirical, Evaluations of a Restorative School and Treatment Milieu*, International Institute for Restorative Practices

A Comprehensive Approach to School Connectedness

The responsibility for fostering school connectedness is a joint effort among students, faculty, parents and the community. All parties need to work together to provide schools with an environment that meets the developmental needs of the students so that they can feel like they belong and are cared for at school. Working together also has the added benefit of fostering relationships among those with vested interests in healthy children, safe schools and stronger communities.

Policies that address school safety have a greater chance of keeping students connected if they:

- ✓ Have clear consequences for misbehavior that are applied consistently
- ✓ Are flexible and have alternatives to expulsion
- ✓ Clearly define what constitutes a weapon, a drug, or an act of misbehavior
- ✓ Comply with state due process laws and allow for student hearings
- ✓ Develop the policy through a collaborative process including all stakeholders and students
- ✓ Learn from research results of zero tolerance policies with a track record, good and bad.

Source: *Zero Tolerance Policies*, ERIC Digest Number 146, Tobin McAndrews

Best Practices

Research has indicated that the following programs are effective improving factors related to school connectedness:

- *Mentoring Programs*, such as Big Brothers Big Sisters, match school age children with an adult for a consistent and stable relationship.
- *Bullying Prevention Programs* are school based programs that aim to reduce victim/bully problems among primary and secondary school children.
- *Quantum Opportunities* is an educational incentives program that works to provide a stable peer group and caring adults to help disadvantaged teens stay connected to school and graduate from high school.










Initial research indicates that the following programs hold promise of long-term positive outcomes:

- *School Resource Officers* (SROs): Many schools across the country have SROs whose main functions are law enforcement, law-related counselor, and law-related education teacher. SROs also provide a positive role model for youth, are able to identify potential problems very early, and can coordinate appropriate interventions.
- *Peer Mediation*: students are taught conflict resolution and actively participate in dispute resolution. Students are empowered because they are directly involved in ensuring the safety of their schools.
- *Restorative Justice*: Concepts such as accountability, empathy building, and victim awareness can be built into already existing best practice programming.



A society that will trade a little liberty for a little order will lose both, and deserve neither—*Thomas Jefferson*

School Connectedness Factors

-  Classroom management
-  School size
-  School demographic composition
-  Class size
-  School type—parochial, private, public
-  Discipline policies
-  Teacher qualifications
-  Rates of participation in extracurricular activities
-  Friendship groups among students in the school

Source: Blum, McNeely Rinehart, cited above

Laws Address Connectedness and Safety



The following initiatives, if their provisions are integrated and implemented wisely, have the potential of addressing school safety within the larger context of school connectedness:

- Federal Gun Free School Act of 1994—funding contingent upon passing state law requiring expulsion of students for carrying a firearm to school. Louisiana has passed such legislation.
- Federal No Child Left Behind—2002—includes the Safe and Drug Free School Program administered by state Department of Education. Department of Education will convene a task force to address components of No Child Left Behind to promulgate policies relating to schools that are declared persistently dangerous. Will also establish community services for children who are expelled or suspended.
- Act 230 of 2001 allows, but does not require, school districts to implement zero tolerance policies addressing weapons, drugs and violence on school campuses.