

# Recommendations for Addressing Violence in Schools

By:

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The unthinkable realities of the school killings in Littleton, Colorado and similar tragedies involving today's youths naturally cause us to address the issue of blame. Hit lists posted on Internet sites and plans made by high school students to get even when they are teased continue to cause questions. Bullying, teasing and discrimination are big problems for American children. Our nation's schools are again under that microscope.

For the most part, our schools are getting it right. Nationally, the school dropout rate has steady decline, the number of students with disabilities who are educated in regular classrooms has increased by nearly 20 percent in ten years, and almost sixty percent of our high school seniors go to college.<sup>1</sup>

The focus on academic achievement has been quite strong during the past 20 years, almost to a fault. Necessarily, our teachers have been stressing the education of "things." However, there needs to be a renewed emphasis on the education of "character." We need to focus on the development of good people as well as good learners. Philosopher Martin Burber advised teachers that "education worthy of the name is essentially education of character."<sup>2</sup>

Do good people taunt and ridicule those who are different? Exclude and isolate those who are not able to make the athletic team? Harass gay and lesbian students because of their differences? Mock individuals with learning disabilities because they cannot "make the grade?" Bring guns and bombs to school and blow away their classmates?

Maybe good people do these things because they lack the information and understanding that lead to empathy. Maybe our students would behave like good people if they knew that hundreds of students commit suicide each year because of harassment. (Gay and Lesbian youth account for approximately one-third of all youth suicides).<sup>3</sup> Maybe fewer students would be less tempted to act out their frustrations in negative ways if they were shown how to be kinder to each other.

Schooling, as we know it today, with its emphasis on competition, academics, and "being on top" often does nothing to promote generosity or a commitment to the welfare of others. To the contrary, students are graduating thinking that being smart means looking out for themselves.

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<sup>1</sup> Barber, Martin. (1947). Between Man and Man. (R.G. Smith, Trans.). London: Kegan Paul.

<sup>2</sup> National Center for Educational Statistics. (2000). Digest of Education Statistics. Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

<sup>3</sup> United States Department of Health and Human Services. (1989). Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. As reported in Prevention of Health Problems Among Gay and Lesbian Youth. Boston, MA: Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth. August 1994, p. 13.

Many factors contributed to the atrocity in Columbine High School and other schools around the country. We might think of the concept of three legs of a stool. One is fascination with violent media. Another is easy access to weapons. A third is flawed character. It is unlikely that by itself, no element will turn a brooding student into a killing machine. But taken together, all three elements spell trouble. What we need to realize is that it takes more than just three legs to stabilize a chair.

Teachers and school officials need to look at the forth leg of the stool – the taunting, teasing and harassment that causes students to crawl into a shell or, in the case of some students, helps push them over the line.

No longer can teasing and harassment be thought of as “kids being kids.” In today's society, such taunting can create a hostile environment causing some students to feel hatred and plot revenge. If schools fail to develop and implement policies reasonably designed to bring incidents of harassment to the attention of appropriate officials, they are missing opportunities to create safer learning environments and shape better people. If these officials do not take harassment seriously it may be inferred that the school allowed the inevitable result – a hostile environment, where the unthinkable could happen.

Can we totally prevent violence in schools? No, we can't. Can we focus on a proactive intervention process that is more than likely to curtail such violence? Yes, we can if teachers, administrators, parents and students make sure the following policies and procedures exist in their schools.

**Recommendation One: Establish, publicize, update and enforce school policies that protect all students of diversity.** Written, formal school policies help prevent discrimination, harassment and verbal abuse of students perceived to be different by their classmates. Policies and guidelines should address:

1. Anti-discrimination;
2. Equal access to education and school activities;
3. Anti-harassment; and
4. Multiculturalism and diversity.

**Recommendation Two: Train teachers, administrators, counselors, and students in violence prevention.** To reduce incidents of harassment and violence, teachers, administrators, school counselors, and students must be trained. To become certified or re-certified, teachers, counselors and administrators should be required to receive training in the following areas:

1. Violence prevention – how to intervene when students who are different are harassed or threatened by other students;
2. Crisis intervention – how to respond to students who seek help because of isolation or emotional and physical problems;
3. Counseling referrals – how to make appropriate referrals for students to counselors, including family counselors and youth-service agencies;
4. Diversity workshops – how to meet the needs of students who are different, isolated or have a history of being harassed; and

**Recommendation Three: Develop school-based, peer support groups for students.** Students are best supported by other students. Isolation and loneliness can lead to suicide attempts, running away, dropping out and a host of behavioral problems. Weekly support groups help to counter isolation and give an ongoing voice to young people who need to

talk about their feelings and self-image. The following should be considered when starting any support group:

1. Groups should be open to all students.
2. A faculty advisor trained in the needs of disenfranchised students must be assigned to attend each meeting, listen to students and communicate their needs to the administration
3. The existence of peer support groups should be widely publicized within the school to all students, faculty and parents.
4. Faculty advisors and their peer groups should work with school counselors, who aren't specially trained to help the untrained counselor gain experience to reach out to students who are becoming isolated.

**Recommendation Four: Schools should include diversity issues into their curriculums and provide opportunities to connect with isolated students.** The classroom is the heart of the school experience. Discussion of student issues and recognition of the contribution that all students can make to the school community should be integrated into all subject areas and departments in an age-appropriate fashion. The following should be considered:

1. Diversity programs, which address a variety of prejudices such as those against women, people of color and gay and lesbian people, should be instituted and available to all students.
2. Academic departments should research ways to include the experiences and contributions of all types of individuals as they pertain to their disciplines.
3. Schools should identify students who aren't in a minority group but are still isolated and develop programs of inclusion.

By incorporating these strategies, schools will be able to create safer and more inviting learning environments where tolerance and understanding are the norm. School would be a place where character development is not left to chance and is as high a priority as academics. It would be a place that would not accept that it is the norm for the "jocks" to harass the "nerds." Instead, counselors and administrators would mediate potentially volatile situations by conducting interventions that would help enable conflicting groups of students to have a better understanding of each other. A proactive approach to conflict resolution is not foolproof but is our best strategy for preventing more unthinkable killings at our schools.

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