



THEMES in the NEWS

IDEA's weekly commentary on education news

Week of Jan. 18-21, 2011

Safe Communities. Safe Schools. Safe Students.

By UCLA IDEA

On Tuesday, while in class at Gardena High School, a bullet that accidentally discharged from a student's backpack grazed a boy's neck and struck a girl in the head. On Wednesday, a Los Angeles Unified School District police officer was shot near El Camino Real High School in Woodland Hills. While searching for the assailant, nine nearby schools were locked down. Later that same day, a boy was shot near Bell High School near a popular student hangout.

Understandably, violence—in particular, gun violence—has students, their parents and communities very nervous. Predictably, public discussions have stressed familiar solutions and procedures, including increased random searches, metal detectors, even arming teachers with guns.

These discussions also take place in the context of gun control debates and public security. In spite of their common-sense appeal, each simple solution focused exclusively on safe school environments comes with its unique set of costs and dangers¹.

Educators, like others, can find merit in simple and direct responses such as screening for weapons or bringing security police on campus. But many also worry about the destructive consequences of constantly reminding students that they and their friends are potential law violators and that their schools are unsafe. That impression runs contrary to all that schools try to accomplish. So, along with hoping that one or another technical solution can solve school-safety problems, schools are advised to pay attention to what we know accomplishes both safe schools and sound learning environments.

"More than just machines with an uninvolved attendant standing in front of it, we need principals and parents and teachers and mentors who are engaged with the students all the time so when they have issues about safety, or isolation, we know about them," Teny Oded Gross, executive director at Institute for the Study & Practice of Nonviolence in Providence, R.I., told the Christian Science Monitor. "Communication is the key. There are no quick fixes."

Technology can't substitute for adults who talk with students about their concerns, angers, and fears—adults students trust to watch out for them and intervene to stop or prevent danger. Unfortunately, with tight budgets imposed, there are fewer adults available to keep watch, including teachers, counselors, librarians, janitors, security officers and principals.

Almost half of California high school principals surveyed by UCLA IDEA said that staff cutbacks at their schools had impacted school safety. Students, themselves, often mention safety as a school concern.

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Just prior to the Gardena shooting, an 11th-grade girl said one of her teachers asked the class if they felt safe. "I said no, because you never know what someone has in their backpack," she said, "So I don't trust anyone."

Perhaps "safe schools" is not the best way of describing our challenge. "Safe children" may be more to the point. Safety in school is just one location for a limited portion of the day where children may meet threats. And, in fact, schools are among the safest places children can be². The concern, then, is to create safe communities in and around schools where students can feel comfortable enough to engage in class and other learning.

¹Borum, Randy, Cornell, Dewey G., Modzeleski, William, and Jimerson, Shane R. "What Can Be Done About School Shootings? A Review of the Evidence," *Educational Researcher* 39.1 (2010): pp. 27-37

²Mayer, Matthew J. and Furlong, Michael J. "How Safe Are Our Schools?" *Educational Researcher* 39.1 (2010): pp: 16-26

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