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Ten Rules for Making Schools Safe Harbors for Learning

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I will first, and briefly, describe the Vera Institute of Justice, and then offer you ten straightforward rules that I hope can usefully guide the work of governors across the country.

Vera conducts research and builds innovations in the administration of justice. We operate demonstrations testing those innovations in New York City, but, like Teachers College, we do so with an eye to what will be useful and practical across the country. One of the principal areas of our work—Youth Safety and Justice—includes a focus on adolescent violence and school safety. My remarks today draw on three specific pieces of work we are conducting in that area. They are:

(1) A long-term ethnographic research project studying adolescents in three very different neighborhoods of New York City. Our researchers are examining their exposure and response to violence over a three-year period, as they move from seventh through ninth grades.

(2) A collaboration with the New York City Board of Education to improve the support that school safety officers and the division of school safety provide to principals, students, and school-based management teams. Vera began working with the New York City Board of Education in 1998, helping the Board revise its classification and reporting of school safety incidents. We recently completed a survey—*Approaches to School Safety in America's Largest Cities*—that we are using as we begin to design a demonstration of “school safety clusters” linking middle schools and high schools in distinct neighborhoods with the Police Department and other resources.

(3) A collaboration with the New York City Police Department on the deployment of 3,200 school safety agents recently transferred from the Board of Education to the Police Department. We are working with the Police Department to design a more robust role for these agents—a role that allows them to support school staff while taking advantage of their ability to operate outside school boundaries and school hours.

While I cannot provide a formula for making schools and students safe, I have distilled ten rules from our work.

#1: Don't panic. Kids are pretty safe in schools, and pretty much as safe as they were ten years ago.

Not only is victimization fairly low, it is fairly stable as well. For example, students in the mid-1990s reported being the victim of theft or violence at school at about the same rate as their predecessors in the late 1980s. And the rate of violent victimization was very low: between two and four percent, including victimization to and from school.

#2: Don't be complacent. Kids are more fearful, and they have good reason to be.

The same federal report that tells us that victimization in schools has remained low over the last ten years tells us that students were growing more afraid over this same period. The numbers of students who fear certain areas of their schools, and the numbers who are afraid on their way to and from school have risen between 50 and 90 percent.

Given what is happening in our neighborhoods, it is not surprising that there is a climate of fear in the schools. Outside of school, rates of violence committed by kids have grown substantially and steeply over the years. Take homicide, for example, where we have the best data. Rates of commission have roughly doubled for both black children and white children 13-to-17 years old from the mid-1980s; and, while the rate began to fall for black children in the mid-1990s, it continued to rise among whites. In short, while our schools remain relatively safe, the dangers in the larger community give our kids good reason to be increasingly frightened.

#3: Keep a focus on middle school. For two decades now, lots of research has confirmed that violence is more frequent in middle school (or junior high school) than in either elementary school or high school.

The violence in high school is generally more serious, but middle schools have more fights. This is why we started our own research into adolescent violence with students in seventh grade, and followed them for the next three years. The kids we studied encountered dozens of school safety programs and initiatives, from prevention through enforcement, just as some of the papers for this meeting lead us to expect. Our research was not designed to evaluate one or another of these programs, but to understand the experience of kids passing through a wide and changing set of programs.

At the school level, even in schools with the most sophisticated, research-driven programming, we found that fights after school were very frequent, occurring almost every day. In all the schools, while the after school fights involved only a small number of kids, they suffused the culture. At the individual level, we found substantial overlap between victimization and participation in violence. Specifically, while some of the kids we studied were victims but not perpetrators, all of the perpetrators we saw were also victims.

In our own research, we were particularly interested in patterns of desistance: how kids removed themselves from violence. I personally expected that we would find that kids used the transition to high school to reduce their participation in fights, but I was surprised. In fact, we found that desistance occurred principally during the year before the move to high school. Participation in fights was highest in seventh grade, and it was high for both boys and girls. By the middle of eighth grade most boys and virtually all the girls had ended their participation, but the ones who persisted became much worse. We also found no difference between boys growing up in one- or two-parent households.

#4: Keep a focus on adult relationships to help children avoid violence. Why did some kids remove themselves, and others not? The answer in almost every case in our research involved engagement with an adult. This, also, was not what I had expected to find. Early adolescence is generally characterized by a weakening of adults' place in the in kids' lives, and the growing importance of peer groups. The change to middle school, where students no longer have a single classroom teacher but rather a succession of teachers and subjects through the day, reinforces the importance of peers over adults. But the Vera research suggests that in terms of managing violence and finding safety, the role of adults remains crucial.

That means that states would be well advised to focus on programs that build strong relations between children and adults. Some conflict resolution courses, like the well-evaluated Resolving Conflicts Creatively program in New York, fit this description; as do some mentoring programs, such as the program run by Big Brothers, Big Sisters.

These programs seem to do well precisely because of the adult-student engagement they foster. Mentoring programs that do not provide training, good matching between adult and child, and a consistent approach over a long period do not produce the same results. Indeed, where a mentoring relationship is established and then abandoned by the mentor, the results can be worse than if the mentor had never begun.

And only where Resolving Conflicts Creatively was well-implemented by the teacher did it have positive effects. It may be that what the evaluation was really measuring is more the effect of good teachers than of the specific curriculum.

The same may turn out to be true about afterschool programs more generally. Dr. Larry Aber, whose Center on Children in Poverty here at Columbia has been conducting a large, sophisticated study of a mix of interventions, points out that kids in afterschool programs report less involvement with violence than do uninvolved kids. But when he compares the students in afterschool programs with kids who are not in afterschool programs but who tell him that an adult knows and cares where they are in the afternoons, the apparent benefits of the afterschool program disappear. The key ingredient again may be adult engagement at the program or elsewhere in the child's life.

#5: Don't be distracted by school size or location. A well-structured school of any size in any neighborhood is often safer than a poorly structured school, even a small one or one in a safe neighborhood.

Research since the 1970s has consistently shown that schools that organize themselves well to prevent violence can do so, even in the middle of a violent neighborhood. School structure—by which I mean class size, internal discipline, and leadership by the principal—is more powerful than the disorder, poverty, or violence in the surrounding neighborhood in determining whether a school provides a safe environment for learning. Student-to-teacher ratios matter a lot, but the overall size of the school is not as important, and should not be an excuse for a lack of safety.

It is within this structure that good programs, well implemented, can make a difference.

We are halfway through, so let's review. Don't panic: schools are pretty much as safe as they were ten years ago. But don't be complacent, because kids are much more fearful, and their fear is entirely understandable when you look at what is happening in the society as a whole. Be sure that your efforts keep a focus on middle schools, where there are more fights, and be sure that you stress programs that build strong adult-student relationships. And don't let school size or neighborhood by itself serve as an excuse for a lack of safety. Good school structure, good adult-student ratios, and good management can overcome the effects of school size or neighborhood.

#6: Define school safety broadly. The responsibility of school staff should extend beyond the school day and should include trips to and from school.

It is always tempting for officials to define the problem narrowly. It would be easier if their responsibility began and ended with the school day and at the school property line. Indeed, there are good policy arguments for this approach: the school should be a special place of safety for kids. School officials can't be responsible for what kids do after school or off-grounds. But defining the problem in this way can encourage poor school safety practices. In the schools we studied, we found good teachers telling students, when a fight was clearly brewing, "take it across the street." Is that the way we want to teach adolescents to resolve their problems? In another instance, when school safety officers heard that a fight was brewing between two groups about a disrespectful comment made to a female student, they confronted the students as they massed at the exit at the end of the day, and moved them down the block. Sure enough, the fight happened down the block, provoking a huge police response, newspaper headlines, and a series of community meetings in the school with local police commanders about what could be done about youth violence in the neighborhood. But it wasn't school violence, because the security team had moved it away.

The same impulse leads schools to close their doors and sometimes shut their eyes to kids who arrive late, especially if they are troubled. When a Vera researcher arrived at one middle school last year about half an hour after the start of school, he found young adolescents hanging out on virtually every corner in the neighborhood. One of them explained that he had arrived late for school and had not been admitted. A few yards away, school safety officers were also hanging out, but they were not engaging the kids on the corner, except to tell them to move on. Defining school safety narrowly as an issue only about what happens inside the school discourages engagement with the trouble right outside.

Parents and students see the issue more broadly. In our research, we documented parents coming to school to complain about fights that erupted before and after school, often on transportation routes, sometimes with kids shut out of school. The parents thought of these as school safety incidents. So do the merchants along those routes, and the kids who are forced to walk them, or ride them on unsupervised buses.

This question of how we define the scope of school safety raises important questions for statewide data collection if we are to keep our measurement systems in line with accountability. A report on school violence that counts incidents differently from the way a principal or police chief thinks about them will not help that official nearly as much as measurements that correspond to the official's scope of responsibility. State monitors and local practitioners need to define school safety in tandem.

#7: Create long-term interagency partnerships. At both the state and local level, serious interagency partnerships require good structure and staffing.

Schools and boards of education need to work with police and probation, with mental health and substance abuse agencies, and with child welfare agencies. They can work better together than alone, but you have to avoid dispersing responsibility and accountability too broadly. A big tent is important, but the bigger the tent, the more the need for confident leadership.

Many state education departments have school safety offices. California's Safe Schools and Violence Prevention Office operates a School/Law Enforcement Partnership that has one hundred trained staff providing help to local youth service agencies, schools, parents, police, and others on how to work together. New York and Texas fund entities to provide training and technical assistance to all or part of the state. Illinois created a Violence Prevention Council, co-chaired by the attorney general and director of the state department of public health.

At a local level, interagency partnerships can be stronger if schools in the same neighborhoods work together in clusters. This cluster concept is being used in different ways in Philadelphia and Los Angeles, and Vera is using the same idea to move interagency partnerships forward in New York. At their best, these clusters bring together the principals of high schools and the middle schools from which they get most of their students. The cluster structure helps keep the school officials focused on incidents involving kids from multiple schools, and incidents that happen outside the school boundaries. It also helps the police department and other agencies bring their own special competencies to bear on the issues of student safety.

The structure of local initiatives can also include how they are funded. Funding streams can encourage partnerships at both the state and local level. One possibility is to create a pool of funds at the state level available only for interagency operations.

#8: Reward schools for inclusion. Unfortunately, some performance measures for academic achievement can give principals unintended incentives to exclude kids who are doing poorly. This is because of the link between poor academic achievement and

behavior problems, particularly aggressive behavior. For example, a school required to raise its average test scores will be able to do so by excluding those testing at the bottom of the range, without attempting to improve anyone's abilities. This becomes an incentive to quickly exclude troublemakers from school.

On the other hand, a school required to raise its bottom scores, or required to raise the average percentage of improvement between tests, will have a greater incentive to help those with the lowest achievement improve. Whatever your measurement system, you should be sure to align the incentives in your academic and safety programs. In short, harmonize safety programming with academic performance.

#9: Reward all agencies in your state when the young people they serve succeed in school. Stress the links between academic achievement and the positive outcomes for other agencies, such as your state's mental health agency, child welfare agency, and juvenile justice system. A foster care system that is rewarded for the academic achievement of its foster children will work more closely with schools to help the children most at risk succeed. Schools get a special value out of this kind of interagency partnership, because the kids in the foster care, mental health, and juvenile justice systems are often the same kids whose aggressive behavior creates problems for staff and students.

The Vera Institute's newest demonstration project, Safe and Smart, is designed to do just that. The project is a partnership between New York's child welfare agency and middle schools in the Bronx that aims to improve school performance and reduce violence among adolescents in foster care. School specialists employed by the city's Administration for Children's Services are based in each of the schools involved in this program, providing the students with counseling and homework help, and reinforcing the commitment of the school's teachers to help these children raise their grades and attendance. The program will improve the climate in the schools for all children, but it is only possible because the child welfare agency is committed to measuring and improving the school performance of the children it serves.

#10: Respect children. One of the frustrations of statewide, interagency initiatives is that the benefits are hard to see at the level of the individual child. You can work for a year to pull together the heads of the many state agencies that serve kids, and build a common commitment to improve safety in their schools, yet not see any real difference for any specific children.

Meanwhile the children are coping with their fears every day. Easing their burden just a little in the short term, reinforcing their own strategies for safety, and showing them that the adults around them can work together to improve their safety are all important ways to show respect.

These ten rules are not a guaranteed formula for safety, but they are the best guides we have for state action that promotes safe schools. Don't panic, but don't be complacent.

Keep a focus on middle schools and on adult relationships with children. Don't let school size or locations become an excuse for failure. Define school safety broadly, extending beyond the end of the school day and beyond the property line. Create long-term interagency partnerships at both the state and local level. Reward schools for improving the performance of all children, not just for excluding the low performers. Then reward other agencies, such as foster care agencies, when their children succeed in school. Finally, respect the children. Level with them, help them succeed. Make sure your state initiatives are present in their schools—if only in a small way—from the start.