

A MODEL FOR SCHOOL SAFETY PLANNING

Assessing the Accomplishments of two
Brooklyn Neighborhoods in the First Year

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Executive Summary

How can we make our schools safe? While there is no one answer, research indicates that when schools, law enforcement agencies, and communities work together, they can maximize existing resources: School personnel, police officers, and safety agents can share their expertise and coordinate their efforts so they are not working at cross purposes. School safety can be seen geographically and across different school levels, so that problems are not resolved in one school only to resurface in another.

Employing these two concepts, Vera, the New York City Board of Education, and the New York City Police Department have been testing a communitywide approach to school safety. Since March 2000 two communities in Brooklyn, each consisting of a high school, two feeder middle schools, and a police precinct, have participated in the experiment. Meeting monthly, police officers, safety agents, teachers, administrators, and parents have identified safety problems and developed solutions. Law enforcement personnel and educators have solidified alliances.

In less than a year, the two communities have accomplished the following:

- they have designed and implemented a safe corridor for students traveling to and from school;
- they have designed and implemented a communications system that transmits information about safety incidents among schools;
- they are working with the local community board to address dangerous traffic congestion around schools;
- they are working with the Brooklyn high school superintendent to develop forums for improving relations between school safety agents and teachers; and
- they are holding roundtable discussions during which they share examples of recent safety incidents and get advice on how to respond to them.

Over time the two clusters have solidified their structure and are becoming self-sustaining. Members are starting to lead and facilitate meetings, and are integrating the clusters' work back into the schools, such as in the annual drafting of school safety plans. After finalizing and evaluating their current projects, this year the two clusters plan to address truancy, gang activity, cutting class, and the needs of kids at risk for violence or delinquency.

Safety planning in New York City's schools is diffuse and varied. Currently, the only common threads running through safety planning are the presence of safety agents and safety plans. The communitywide approach to safety provides a structure for planning that addresses both immediate needs and long-term goals, unifies the efforts of educators and law enforcement, and is responsive to issues that arise within or between schools and in the community.

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Introduction

A communitywide approach to school safety that involves middle and high schools in the same area and addresses incidents both within and beyond school walls underpins an unprecedented partnership between the New York City Police Department and the Board of Education, specifically the Board's Division of Student Safety and Prevention Services. Since March 2000, two Brooklyn neighborhoods surrounding Bushwick and Wingate high schools have been participating in a communitywide school safety planning process that has brought together principals, teachers, school safety agents, police officers, parents, and local residents to discuss how to make their schools and neighborhoods safer for children.

The benefits of the initiative are multiple: Middle and high schools in the same community are communicating about mutual problems; police officers, safety agents, and school staff are conscious of each others' perspectives and, as a result, are coordinating responses to safety issues; and people are collectively designing and implementing new violence prevention projects that address the needs of the entire community. They are also learning from one another as they seek advice on how to respond to recent or current safety incidents in monthly roundtable discussions.

In the Bushwick community, participants have designed and implemented a safe corridor program, and are presenting a proposal to the local community board for reducing dangerous traffic congestion around schools. In the Wingate community, participants have created a phone relay to communicate safety incidents among schools in the same community, and are developing a series of forums to improve relations between school safety agents and teachers. In addition, both clusters have articulated a desire for school safety agents to receive enhanced training in violence prevention. Based on these recommendations, Vera is designing a program to train school safety agents in identifying and reinforcing positive student behavior. The Institute will pilot the program in both communities this fall.

Integrating National Research and Experience

Vera examined research and experiences from around the country before designing the communitywide school safety planning process.¹ Two key components of the best school safety approaches are effective collaboration among the various agencies involved in the issue, and coordination among schools in the same community.² Police, schools, safety agents, and child welfare and juvenile justice agencies all have an interest in preserving safety. Their perspectives and approaches, however, are often different and sometimes in

¹ Melorra Sochet, *Approaches to School Safety in America's Largest Cities* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 1999).

² Los Angeles and Philadelphia have found it effective to bring high schools and their feeder middle schools together to approach safety problems, and have begun to encourage police officers and educators to work collaboratively.

conflict. To ensure everyone's resources and experience are maximized, they must work together when analyzing problems and planning solutions.

School safety concerns should also be coordinated geographically, linking middle and junior high schools with the local high schools where they send most of their graduates. This approach benefits students, schools, and surrounding communities. For students, it permits police and school authorities to frame their responses to misbehavior in light of each student's development and to put individual school incidents into a larger community context. For high schools, this relationship helps administrators anticipate the arrival of challenging students; while for middle schools, it allows administrators to respond constructively when troubled high school students act as bullies. For communities, coordination of school safety between middle and high schools means that merchants and residents receive more effective and rapid responses when they raise a concern.

Why New York City?

New York City is an ideal location in which to introduce communitywide safety planning. In December 1998, the New York Police Department's Division of School Safety assumed responsibility for the approximately 3,400 safety agents deployed in the city's schools. As a result, the NYPD and the Board of Education now share responsibility for school safety, making it crucial that their representatives develop collaborative strategies to promote the overall well-being of students.

Moreover, New York City's middle and high schools operate independently of each other, and the Board of Education monitors the two school levels through separate reporting channels. As a result, although middle and high schools in the same neighborhood have related safety problems and work with the same students at different phases of their development, they do not approach safety together. A communitywide perspective bridges the divide between middle and high schools.

Complementary Jurisdictions. As members of the NYPD's Division of School Safety, safety agents have authority over school incidents defined as criminal. The NYPD is organized geographically. Where middle and high schools operate independently and through different reporting channels, the police department can see and approach safety concerns in ways that connect these two levels. This structure, as well as the NYPD's knowledge of geographic patterns in adolescent crime or violence, enables the department to contribute crucial information and resources to any safety initiative.

School principals and superintendents retain complete control over discipline and all incidents noncriminal in nature. Seeing and talking to their students every day in a variety of situations, teachers and administrators know intimately what goes on in their schools and what their students need.

Due to different professional cultures and work environments, law enforcement officials and school staff sometimes have conflicting ideas about which safety issues take priority and how best to address them. Communitywide planning meetings provide a means for exposing and resolving these differences whenever possible.

Design of the Initiative

For the past year, the Vera Institute has organized and facilitated the communitywide school safety planning process, with extensive assistance from the Board of Education and the New York City Police Department. Our shared intention is to foster better communication and collaboration on safety issues among law enforcement personnel and educators working in the same community, as well as anyone else interested in or affected by school safety. To achieve these goals, Vera, the Board, and the NYPD created the following model:

- Principals or their designee from two high schools and their feeder middle schools (each collectively known as a cluster), along with safety agents and police officers from the local precincts, come together to discuss school safety concerns on a monthly basis.
- School safety concerns are defined as communitywide. As a result, the meetings focus on school-based incidents that reverberate in the surrounding neighborhood issues, and events occurring in the community that affect school safety.

Divided into clusters, participants work to achieve the following goals:

- To strengthen and solidify relationships among educators, safety agents, police officers, parents, and community members by sharing perspectives and fostering an understanding of each group's different role in school safety planning.
- To identify, design, and implement projects that benefit the schools and neighborhoods in each cluster.
- To create a forum in which cluster members share new or ongoing school safety problems and receive ideas from other members on how to respond to them.

Vera's own experience has shown us that while some cities and states have created temporary task forces involving many agencies responsible for youth and safety, it is a rare jurisdiction that has figured out how to sustain interagency collaboration that unites efforts within and beyond school walls. As a result, we had two additional goals for the planning initiative:

- Cluster members begin to facilitate meetings and sustain the initiative on their own.
- The Board and the NYPD determine whether to replicate the initiative around the city.

Launching the Initiative

Choosing Schools and Communities

We decided to launch the pilot in two communities, each with a high school, two middle schools, and a police precinct. We chose the participating schools and surrounding communities based on three criteria:

- The high and middle schools fall into a feeder pattern (that is, the high school receives the majority of its students from these middle schools).
- The schools experience problems with safety.
- The two communities are close enough to one another so that participants in the initiative can, with relative ease, meet to contrast and compare their experiences.

Fulfilling the second and third criteria was easy; unfortunately, a significant number of neighboring schools in New York City face safety problems. The greater challenge was finding schools that conformed to a feeder pattern. Given the separate reporting channels the Board of Education sets for middle and high schools, as well as the opportunity students have to attend not just their local high school but any in the city, high schools rarely receive the majority of their students from neighborhood middle schools. Their students usually hail from schools scattered throughout the city.

Eventually we located two clusters of schools in Brooklyn that, to a large degree, fell into a feeder pattern: Bushwick High School, I.S. 291, and I.S. 296 (the Bushwick cluster); and Wingate High School, I.S. 61, and I.S. 391 (the Wingate cluster).

Structure of the Initiative

Once a month, each cluster met separately to identify, design, and implement safety projects and to discuss their current safety problems. On a few occasions the clusters came together - when they jointly presented their proposed projects to staff from the Board of Education, the Police Department, and the Office of the Criminal Justice Coordinator, and two times in the fall to discuss the steps they were taking to implement their respective projects.

We accomplished a tremendous amount at each two-hour cluster meeting. Unfortunately, time constraints often forced the cluster members to rush through things, sometimes delaying project development. Starting in the beginning of 2001, we reserved time at each meeting for people to share a current safety problem they are confronting and discuss it with the group. The addition of the roundtable discussion has been a very successful and fruitful part of the process.

Groundwork for Project Implementation. Each month, cluster members identified and then took steps to implement their projects. They reviewed and integrated feedback from their different communities into their project proposals; refined the projects and their

goals; and discussed which project(s) to pursue and when, who would work on the project(s), and ways of marshalling community support. They made certain each project furthered the goals of the initiative, created work plans and time frames, and compared work across the two clusters.

Creation of Safety Projects by Each Cluster

Both clusters came up with many common projects or areas in which they wanted to create projects improving safety. These included:

- Communications systems linking school staff, police officers, safety agents, and members of the Board of Education's Division of School Safety.
- Programs to reduce truancy and gang involvement.
- Safe corridor programs.
- Clusterwide behavioral standards.
- Surveys of schools and the community about safety concerns.
- Expanding the role of school safety agents.
- Afterschool programs for students moving from middle to high school.
- Multidisciplinary teams to assess and develop programs for high-risk youth.
- Mentoring programs that pair safety agents and teachers with high-risk youth.

The clusters voted for the projects they felt should receive top priority in their community. The Bushwick cluster decided to work on a safe passages program, a communications system, and programs to eliminate gang activity. The Wingate cluster voted for a communications system, an alternative school and/or program for children at risk for involvement in violence, and programs to eliminate gang activity.

Defining and refining projects

Cluster members spent several meetings refining project definitions and identifying the outcomes they expected to arise from successful programs. They made certain their projects incorporated the distinguishing features of the safety initiative: coordinating safety geographically among high and middle schools; and creating working relationships among police officers, safety agents, and school representatives. The Wingate and Bushwick clusters decided their first projects would be, respectively, a communications system (also called an information relay) and a safe corridor program.

In terms of their remaining projects, each cluster, independently, decided to change their focus to address a recurring theme: the difficulty students have making the transition from one school level to another. Both clusters decided to design activities taking place afterschool and on weekends to support kids during the transition.

Wingate cluster members planned a program for kids moving from elementary school to middle school, and from middle school to high school. Bushwick focused only on the transition from middle to high school. In both cases, the programs would serve students

with behavioral and academic problems, providing activities that would help them deal with these issues. The clusters believed the activities, which would draw on existing programs at each high school, would help reduce disciplinary incidents among participating students; improve their behavior and grades; increase their self-esteem; and foster better communication among participating students, safety agents, and teachers.

Wingate's Communications System

Schools in the Wingate cluster lacked real-time knowledge about safety situations happening at neighboring schools, even when the incident could affect their students. For example, they brought up situations in which a fight dispersed in front of one school may regroup at another school. As a result, the cluster developed a telephone relay system by which participants could alert each other about school safety incidents or threats that might have ramifications beyond the school where they originated.

When any incident occurred, a person specially assigned to this task calls specific people at other schools in the cluster, as well as an officer at the police department. The system will only be used for certain types of incidents: gang activity, student walkouts and protests, large fights, neighborhood events, and threatening intruders or trespassers in the school. Cluster members believe that if the relay system is used effectively, schools will be more aware of one another's safety issues and better able to prepare for potential safety-related problems.

The cluster agreed that it would be most efficient to include only school safety personnel on the phone relay system. Safety personnel can more easily notify other schools of an incident through their walkie-talkies, and contact the principal quickly. (At least at the high school level, there is a clear chain of command in terms of reporting safety incidents; principals are notified as a matter of course.) It was decided that when they use the relay, the safety agent supervisor at the site of the incident will call the 71st precinct and supervisors at neighboring schools. Depending on the scale of the incident, these supervisors will, in turn, notify additional supervisors at schools adjoining their communities.

The cluster has incorporated all schools in the 71st precinct into the relay system, teaching representatives from each school how the system works and providing them with a list of people that are part of the relay, along with their telephone numbers. Eventually, the cluster will include schools in the nearby 77th and 61st precincts. The system is in place and a test has been successfully run.

Bushwick's Safe Corridor

Noting that students in the Bushwick community are often involved in confrontations on the way to school and while going home, Bushwick cluster members designed a safe passage program to provide students with a safe route to and from school. The safe passage operates during specified hours before and after the school day, is tailored to the

majority of students' travel patterns, and draws upon a heightened police presence and shop owners committed to assisting students seeking refuge from violent situations.

To staff the initiative and let parents, students, and members of the community know about its existence, cluster members informed the NYPD, local politicians, school administrators, business associations, local business improvement districts, and students, parents, local residents, and community boards. Together they have discussed how each of these groups might lend support to the corridor.

In Bushwick, police officers from the 83rd precinct, in consultation with school staff, identified the safe corridor route and police officers who will staff it. They also met with store owners along the route to guarantee their commitment to sheltering any youth who enters their establishment when in danger. In coordination with the District Attorney's Office, the police conducted background checks on each store to make sure they were appropriate for youth. Once a location passed inspection, it received a sticker identifying it as a safe haven and a list of emergency contacts should trouble arise.

Officers from the 83rd precinct have informed transit police about the route and the timing of its implementation. Police and school representatives have held assemblies at each of the three schools announcing the route. At the time this report was drafted, assemblies have been held for all students at Bushwick high school and are scheduled at each of the middle schools. Officers from the 83rd precinct have also agreed to draft a letter that participating schools will send to parents, telling them of the new program.

In addition, a school safety supervisor and principal from the cluster have agreed to sit down with representatives from the District 32 leadership team to discuss the program. The goal is to have the District 32 leadership team inform other parents in the district.

The Bushwick cluster members have also discussed how to sustain the safe corridor once it is in effect. Officers from the 83rd precinct will visit the safe havens frequently to make sure they are accommodating students, and solicit feedback from students using the route and businesses acting as safe havens. Cluster members will publicize the program by placing an announcement in local newspapers (the *Bushwick Observer* and the *Ridgewood Times*), highlighting it on the school web pages, and organizing an celebratory event with local politicians.

Developing a Demonstration Project with Vera

At the six-month point in the initiative, the clusters came together to present their projects to representatives from the Board of Education, Police the Department, and the Criminal Justice Coordinator. Cluster members noted important themes running across each of their projects. First, the projects emphasized the importance of collaboration not only among schools within a cluster, but also among safety agents and the schools they serve. Second, the projects revealed the need to ensure that safety agents are used properly and to the fullest extent possible. Finally, many of the projects noted that the transition from

middle school to high school is a particularly difficult time for students, worthy of focused attention.

It became clear to both clusters that helping students successfully graduate from eighth to ninth grade and establishing a clear and meaningful role for safety agents are crucial to maintaining a safe environment for everyone. The Board of Education and the NYPD's School Safety Division also expressed the desire to more fully engage safety agents in violence prevention by training them to interact with students in a clearly defined and substantive manner.

As a result, the clusters agreed that the Vera Institute, with guidance from cluster members, would design a brief training program for safety agents to help them play a more constructive role with students. Safety agents will learn proven strategies for rewarding positive behavior and handling tense situations, and learn about the challenges students face as they move from eighth to ninth grade.

This project should help prepare safety agents to play a more active role in schools while also supporting students. Vera is currently designing the project's training curricula in partnership with the Oregon Social Learning Center, a nonprofit agency with extensive experience helping to train adults who work with children. With full support from the Board of Education and the NYPD, Vera will launch the program in September 2001.

Other Projects Undertaken by the Clusters

Building on School Safety Plans. Each autumn, every public school in New York City develops a safety plan designed to address a comprehensive array of safety concerns. As fall approached, cluster members discussed ways to ensure that safety plans for the 2000-2001 academic year reflected their new communitywide approach to safety. Cluster members identified several areas in the plan to expand upon. They decided that the school safety committee could include a cluster representative, and neighborhood schools could be added to the list of entities identified for emergency notification. Finally, the clusters proposed that an additional duty of safety agents should be following up on incidents that start in school and culminate in the community, and vice versa.

The two clusters also discussed concrete steps each will take to ensure that their schools' safety plans incorporate clusterwide concerns. Schools in the Wingate cluster will integrate their information relay into the safety plan. The Bushwick cluster decided to designate a liaison between the communitywide safety planning process and development of cluster schools' safety plans. The cluster liaison will sign each school's plan, act as a contact person in case of an emergency, disseminate information generated at cluster meetings, and oversee the safe corridor program.

Roundtable Discussion on Current Safety Concerns. In the beginning of the new year, both clusters added a component to the meetings during which members would bring up

examples of safety incidents they confronted in the last month, learn how others deal with similar issues, and see how their experiences and approaches are complementary.

During these sessions, cluster members have spoken about the unmanageability of students at dismissal time, the lack of personnel available for supervision, the difficulty of preventing fights, and the chaos that arises when students from other schools arrive at their school at dismissal time. During a recent roundtable, an assistant principal described an incident in which a student attacked a faculty member in the lunchroom and how security staff contained the situation. Other members described strategies they use to prevent incidents from escalating and enveloping more and more students.

The roundtable discussions have generated additional issues for the clusters to work on. For example, members of the Bushwick cluster expressed particular concern about traffic congestion outside of school buildings at dismissal time. Because of double and triple lines of cars awaiting students exiting the building, it is difficult for moving vehicles to see students darting across the street. In response, cluster members have formally requested that the local community board and the commissioner of transportation install speed bumps on the streets surrounding each of the cluster schools. As of the writing of this report, cluster members have convinced the Department of Transportation about the importance of speed bumps, the issue is on the community board's cabinet meeting agenda, and cluster members are preparing a joint presentation with the Department of Transportation for the community board.

Members of the Wingate cluster noticed that teachers do not fully understand the role of safety agents. Concerned that this lack of knowledge interferes with the ability of safety agents and teachers to collaborate effectively, the cluster is working with Brooklyn's high school superintendent and the superintendents of District 17 and District 85 to organize forums. At these meetings, the role of school safety agents will be explained to teachers, who then have the opportunity to exchange their views about safety issues with agents.

Both clusters have identified additional issues that they would like to discuss and pursue in the future. These include truancy, cutting class, loitering, crowd management, bullying, mentoring programs, and the development of multidisciplinary teams to work with students who are prone to violence, cutting class, or truancy.

Challenges of the Communitywide Planning Initiative

Vera, the Board, and the NYPD recognized they would confront challenges throughout the communitywide planning process. The precise nature of the challenges, ranging from difficulty scheduling meetings to problems completing the tasks necessary for project implementation, revealed themselves at different moments. When they did, we spent the time necessary to address them so that they would not impede our progress.

Finding Schools in a Feeder Pattern

The schools in the initiative were chosen, in part, because they fell into a feeder pattern—the majority of students from a given middle school move as a group to the same high school. In this case, middle school staff know most of the students at the high school, and can provide a lot of helpful information.

Since New York City’s eighth graders can choose to attend high schools anywhere in the city, very few schools here fall into a feeder pattern. As the clusters began working together, however, they began to see that while the feeder pattern was valuable, the more important bonds between the two school levels were their shared community and similar safety concerns. Cluster members decided a feeder pattern was not necessary for success.

Overcoming Apprehensions About the Process

We recognized that cluster members were from different professional backgrounds and had not previously worked together as a group. We began the initiative by airing people’s concerns and asking what the group could do to help overcome them.

Each cluster member was asked to discuss their apprehensions about the process, and where it came from. People were concerned that something useful come from the initiative; they did not want to start something that would not go anywhere. They were worried they did not have enough resources to implement and sustain projects in the long term. They also wanted to make sure that students, faculty members, parents, police officers, community boards, and teachers were kept up-to-date about the work.

Every concern was addressed in turn. To assure that something beneficial came from the initiative, cluster members agreed to commit themselves to the process and to formulate benchmarks for measuring progress. To make sure that necessary resources were available, participants identified sources within the community, such as block associations, civil patrol, the fire department, emergency medical services, community boards, churches, the parks department, libraries, the boy scouts, the transit system, and local merchants. They also decided that they could garner support for particular projects from their own agencies, police precincts, the PTA, school superintendents, and the Board of Education’s Support Services and School Safety Divisions.

To ensure the projects’ longevity, cluster members agreed to integrate systems into each project that would become institutionalized in the schools. Finally, to ensure that the different groups participating in the process maintained open lines of communication with one another, the group agreed to create opportunities for school personnel, students, parents, safety agents, and police officers to become familiar with safety plans, the responsibilities of different safety personnel, resources, and procedures and operations.

By taking time to discuss cluster member’s concerns at the beginning and by devising methods for overcoming some of the bigger ones, we were able to bring to light issues that may have otherwise laid dormant for some time and then exploded, seriously jeopardizing the work of the initiative. While some of the initial concerns did resurface,

the group, having already dealt with them, was better equipped to address them without risking the gains they had made.

Sustaining Personal Responsibility and Commitment

All of the cluster members lead very busy lives and are burdened by competing professional and personal obligations. In addition, cluster members changed regularly as people were promoted or moved on to different jobs and were replaced by others. In light of this, we wanted to be sure that the process was intrinsically valuable and challenging, employing tools designed to help members maintain a sense of personal commitment and responsibility.

We made certain that people left each meeting with a set of tasks that needed to be completed before the next meeting. By dividing these tasks among cluster members and asking them to report back on their accomplishments, members developed a deeper sense of involvement and investment in the initiative. In addition, at the close of most cluster meetings, people rated their level of participation in the meeting on a scale from one to five. Five indicated their participation was so valuable that the meeting could not have occurred without them, and one indicated that while they had some good ideas, they did not share them with the group. Cluster members then described what they would do between now and the next meeting to raise their level of participation to a five. People took this process seriously and were thoughtful in their responses, sometimes chastising themselves for not being involved enough and promising to be more active at the next meeting. The check-in at the close of meetings was a useful means of taking the group's pulse and keeping everyone committed.

Allocating Scarce Resources

The safe corridor and the information relay are currently operating with existing resources, but whenever cluster members discussed expanding the initiative or involving additional schools in their projects, the question of resources arose. Cluster members repeatedly asked why Vera could not provide or locate funding. Vera explained that it was not a foundation or grant maker and while it would, when possible, help the cluster locate funding, that was not its role.

The Bushwick cluster encountered some funding concerns in the development of its safe corridor. Currently, two officers from the 83rd precinct patrol the cluster schools. The program would run more effectively, however, with a van, driver, and three school safety agents patrolling the route. The van could survey the area between cluster schools. The safety agents could intervene if there was an incident or a truant student. And while the program currently only involves the cluster schools—Bushwick High School, I.S. 291, and I.S. 296—other schools from a wider geographical area could be added: P.S. 106, P.S. 377, P.S. 45, P.S. 299, P.S. 151, St. Elizabeth's, and St. Mark's.

Integrating Parents, Students, Community-Based Organizations, and Elementary Schools
Cluster members recognized the importance of involving students, parents, and community-based organizations. While some parents attended cluster meetings, there was no active participation from students and no representation from community-based organizations.

The clusters also regularly discussed whether to bring elementary schools on board. Elementary school parents regularly participated in cluster meetings and reiterated how much the group would benefit from including their schools. The clusters would be able to begin violence prevention efforts much earlier in students' development. Elementary schools, students, and community-based organizations were not included in the initial pilot because we wanted to start with a smaller group and solidify it before integrating additional participants. Now that the process is firmly established, they could be included from the beginning.

Taking Ownership of the Initiative

In the beginning, because none of the cluster members were willing to do so, Vera staff prepared an agenda and facilitated each meeting with assistance from representatives from the Board of Education. This prevented cluster members from assuming responsibility for the tone, structure, and results of the meeting. In the fall of 2001, cluster members began to volunteer, on a rotating basis, to facilitate meetings. Vera staff continued to prepare an agenda and to review it with the facilitator, but facilitators were responsible for running meetings. Serving as facilitators, cluster members became more engaged and began initiating projects on their own. By rotating responsibility, every member had the experience of planning and managing a meeting, and no one person became overtaxed.

Firsthand Perspectives of the Communitywide Initiative

Members from both clusters repeatedly spoke about the value of communitywide school safety planning process. In February of 2001, Vera staff conducted telephone interviews with cluster members about the initiative. (Eight school safety agents, six school representatives, four police officers, and two representatives from the Board of Education were interviewed). During these interviews, they noted how the process gives educators and law enforcement a broader perspective on safety. As someone from the Wingate cluster described it, "The meetings give educators a chance to see safety problems that exist in areas of the school outside of their classroom, as well as in the surrounding community. It gives law enforcement an understanding of how their activities affect education." A Bushwick cluster member said, "[While] both law enforcement and educators are limited in what they can do, it's exciting for me to see how we can work together to create innovation." From a practical standpoint, he felt the initiative provides

a useful organizational structure for safety planning. “[Because] everyone needed for planning an initiative is right there in the room, you’re able to get things done without a lot of meetings or paperwork,” he commented.

Cluster members value having different high and middle schools in the same community addressing safety together. “The interactions between the schools have increased because of the cluster work,” said a safety agent. Another member stated that he likes getting an idea of what is going on in terms of safety in other schools and for kids of different ages in the same community: “We don’t normally work on safety issues that affect kids from different school levels.” He believes that having this broader picture allows people “to anticipate problems and address them earlier.”

By participating in the initiative, cluster members are establishing and solidifying relationships that they can later draw upon when they need assistance with a particular safety issue. For instance, an assistant principal described a situation in which he was concerned about an incoming transfer student causing safety problems. Drawing upon someone he met through the communitywide planning process, he phoned the assistant principal of the student’s former school to discuss the child’s disciplinary history.

Future Plans of Cluster Members

Having accomplished several projects, the two clusters want to determine where to go from here. Before the initiative is self-sustaining, the clusters must address several challenges. First, participants, especially representatives from the NYPD, are constantly changing. When people are promoted or take another job, it can be difficult to sustain continuity and a historical memory over time.

Second, while the clusters are successfully acting as facilitators, Vera staff continue to prepare and circulate meeting agendas and minutes, elicit project ideas and feedback from cluster members, and follow up with cluster member who volunteer for certain tasks. To operate independently, each cluster needs to designate a person, or group of persons, to assume these responsibilities.

Finally, the clusters must define their mandate moving forward. Do they want to identify, plan, and implement safety projects, or do they want to use the meetings to discuss immediate safety concerns?

The cluster members have already identified future topics for communitywide school safety meetings. These include:

- Finding financial support for clusterwide programs.
- Evaluating and revising new and ongoing programs.
- Assessing additional safety concerns of the clusters.
- Evaluating the structure and value of cluster meetings,
- Involving other people in the safety meetings, such as parents, students, and staff from mental health agencies or community-based youth organizations.

- Expanding the initiative to include other nearby middle, high, and elementary schools.
- Collaborating with other programs, such as Beacon schools.
- Instituting new projects focusing on truancy, gangs, bullying, and the needs of youth at risk for violence or delinquency.

Replicating the Initiative

Given the value of having educators and law enforcement, and different school levels in the same community addressing safety concerns in a concerted fashion, the Board and NYPD should consider replicating this initiative in other parts of the city. One or more coordinators from the Board and the NYPD, with assistance and training from Vera, could facilitate this process in each of the remaining four boroughs. Vera could develop a road map and guidelines to shape the structure of meetings and provide groups with program ideas. Once potential cluster sites are identified, representatives from the pilot cluster schools could describe the projects they implemented and help the new clusters institute similar initiatives. Newly formed clusters could benefit from the mistakes and knowledge gained by the pilot clusters, and more quickly start up their projects.

If the process is replicated, lessons from the pilot should be applied. First, it is not necessary (though it is helpful) to have the schools conform to a feeder pattern. Regardless of where their students came from, different school levels in the same neighborhood usually face similar safety issues. Second, elementary schools should be included in the clusters from the start. Third, cluster members should facilitate meetings, creating the agenda and circulating minutes. Fourth, the clusters should actively involve parents and find ways to integrate students and community-based organizations. Finally and most important, new clusters could choose from a menu of successful projects and ideas generated by the pilot initiative, rather than start the entire process from scratch.

Conclusion

The two clusters accomplished a great deal during the first year of the communitywide initiative. Safety agents, parents, police officers, and educators are working together collaboratively; middle schools and high schools in the same community are designing unified responses to safety problems; and cluster participants are designing and implementing violence prevention programs.

In the upcoming months, we hope to take the work of the clusters to a higher level. Cluster members will determine whether to start new violence prevention projects or to turn the meetings into forums for discussing immediate safety concerns. They will prepare, run, and follow up on meetings on their own. Vera will reduce its role until each cluster is completely independent.