Addressing Gangs in our Schools

NATIONAL CRIME PREVENTION COUNCIL

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According to the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, decades of research have identified a clear link between truancy, adult criminality, and incarceration. With 80 percent of incarcerated adults having never completed high school, addressing truancy and other criminal behavior in schools is imperative to minimizing the potential for future criminal offenses. The *Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2010* publication stated that in 2007, 23 percent of students reported that there were gangs in their schools (National Center for Education Statistics, p. 34). Despite best efforts to keep school grounds free from violence, drugs, and theft, some of which could be gang-related activity, these problems still manage to infiltrate our school systems. However, with diligent communication and partnerships, instituting prevention strategies, challenging barriers, and implementing policies, schools can be successful in suppressing gang activity and growth on their campuses.

Barriers To Solving the Problem

- **Funding**: Many programs and strategies to combat gang violence in schools require funds. Countless schools across the country are under-funded, under-staffed, and under-resourced, with limited enrichment courses and afterschool activities. Funding may not always be available to address this need. In these cases, schools often have to find innovative and creative means to address this issue.

- **Repercussions**: Schools are bound to maintain confidentiality and fear legal repercussions if information is mishandled. Educators have a duty to protect student privacy, as well as ensure that students are in a safe and secure environment. Fear of breaking confidentiality can sometimes paralyze schools from getting information from students and taking action.

- **Reputation:** Schools do not want to be labeled as having a gang problem. Oftentimes, schools stay in a state of denial

as gang issues emerge. There can be several repercussions for schools that admit to having gang challenges, such as earning a negative reputation, parents possibly transferring their children to another school, and a potential loss of funding.

Some Prevention Strategies

The most effective prevention efforts involve participation of all stakeholders working cohesively to address the gang challenges, including law enforcement, school resource officers (SROs), teachers, administrators, parents, and students. As a collective group, below is a sampling of what can be accomplished:

- Engage students through an organized, self-run effort to create a safe, nurturing, and encouraging environment that will empower them.
- Provide students, through activities and lesson plans that can be incorporated into the school curriculum, with the tools, guidance, and self-confidence to achieve the prevention of crime, violence, and drug abuse by doing the following:
  - Demonstrating that togetherness, affiliation, and partnerships are powerful responses to threats that require more than individual action
  - Building upon positive values and motivating youth toward

responsible action through an array of youth-led activities
  - Helping young people to capitalize on their inherit desire to do well in school, to be respected, and to succeed in life

- Educate students about the dangers of joining gangs, as well as how to identify them:
  - Encourage discussions in the classroom when incidences happen in school or the surrounding neighborhood.
  - Implement an afterschool program that discusses gang-related issues, but also instills the importance of positive relationships. The Gang Resistance Education And Training (G.R.E.A.T) program offers free training to schools and involves youth in the classroom, afterschool, and in the summer (www. great-online.org/) or the Community Works program can be incorporated into the school curriculum (e.g., social studies, health, or English classes) or offered as part of an afterschool program or summer camp (www.ncpc.org).

- Educate parents on the dangers of gangs and give parents tips and tools on how to identify if their child is a gang member:
  - Arrange presentations during PTA meetings or at special safety events.

  - Send letters home to the families of students or create a listserv for parents to receive email updates about activity in and around the school. Communication devices like these encourage opportunities for parents to be active in their children's school.

- Train teachers and faculty about indicators of gang involvement and how to recognize and respond to it:
  - Conduct afterschool or in-service trainings.
  - Bring in experts from the field to talk to teachers and faculty during in-school training or staff meetings.
  - Invite your local law enforcement's gang prevention unit or community policing officer to inform faculty about gang issues in the community that may infiltrate the school.

- Encourage law enforcement and student partnerships that will allow students to learn the importance of safety and preventing problems:
  - Develop a comprehensive crime prevention strategy for your school and be sure to include the following:
    ‣ Anonymous crime reporting
    ‣ Bus safety
    ‣ Student patrols
    ‣ Mentoring and tutoring
    ‣ Drug, gangs, violence, and crime prevention education
    ‣ Conflict resolution
    ‣ Peer and cross age teaching

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- If funding is available, add additional security measures in the school, such as installing metal detectors and video cameras, hiring security guards, and adding more school resource officers.
- Get creative in implementing safety strategies:
  - Contact local businesses for partnership opportunities and donations, such as surveillance equipment and snacks when hosting a meeting, or fun give-away items for a safety event.
  - Develop fundraising activities to collect additional funding for school needs.
  - Involve youth and solicit their ideas to address gang problems. Plan a youth-led service activity. It makes youth feel part of the solution and more vested in the safety and security of their school.

Best Practices in the Field

Zero-tolerance Policy

How They Help: One way that schools can solidify their stance against gang activity is to implement a policy against it. The National Gang Center (www.nationalgang-center.gov) reported that since the 1990s, several schools and districts have implemented zero-tolerance rules and laws for school conduct (2010, p. 7). For schools that have not had active gang activity, established policies around it may not be in place. This gap in a school policy may create barriers for disciplinary action that may need to be taken at a later time.

How You Can Do It: The students' safety and security is a fundamental responsibility of the school. Before developing a zero-tolerance policy, seek input from all partners with the school: students, teachers, parents, administrators, and SROs. Consider reaching out to other schools and districts that have had success with it. Remember that it takes time to create a policy with buy-in from all of the stakeholders involved. Once the policy has been developed and approved, it will only be effective if it is known to exist, consistently followed, and reviewed regularly to ensure that it covers all of the needs of the school and any emerging gang issues.

Uniforms and Dress Codes

How They Help: Many gangs represent themselves through colors, gestures, symbols, and dress. A student's attire can announce the presence of the gang in a specific location or territory within the school. One strategy to decrease the visibility of gang members in the school is to implement a strict dress code or uniform policy. The Long Beach Unified School District implemented school uniforms in 1994. A 1999 article in *Psychology Today* reported that five years after imple-

mentation, the Long Beach Unified School District saw a 91 percent drop in crime (p. 14). After the Long Beach Unified School District announced its initial success with the uniform program a year later, many other cities began to adopt the policy. "In 2007–2008, about 18 percent of public school principals reported that their school required students to wear uniforms" (National Center for Education Statistics, p. 153). Dress codes are not as strict as a school uniform, but can be as effective if monitored properly. In 2007–2009, approximately 55 percent of public schools reported an enforced, strict dress code (National Center for Education Statistics, p. 153). Clothing items and trends known to be associated with gang activity can be banned from campus, as part of the dress code.

How You Can Do It: Consult parents, community members, teachers, and the board of education to receive guidance on how to proceed. Before establishing a dress code policy, make sure the list of banned items is comprehensive for all of the gangs in the community surrounding the school. Look for specific colors, symbols, and brands of clothing and accessories. With the assistance of the board of education, use the completed list to implement the policy within the school system, making sure it is known, understood, and strictly followed.

Resources

- G.R.E.A.T Program: www.great-online.org
- National Crime Prevention Council: www.ncpc.org
- National Gang Center: www.nationalgangcenter.gov
- Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention: www.ojjdp.gov
- STRYVE (Striving to Reduce Youth Violence Everywhere): www.safeyouth.gov

Also, contact your local police department for information on local gang issues and prevention suggestions.

References

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National Center for Education Statistics. (2010). *Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2010* (NCES 2011-002). Retrieved from: http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2011/2011002.pdf

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