

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

YOUNG MEN AS ALLIES IN PREVENTING VIOLENCE AND ABUSE: BUILDING EFFECTIVE PARTNERSHIPS WITH SCHOOLS

Written by:

Alan Berkowitz, Peter Jaffe, Dean Peacock, Barri Rosenbluth & Carole Sousa

In the hallway of a public high school, a young man, urged on by his friends, gropes a classmate despite her repeated attempts to push him away. A silent majority of male and female students, uncomfortable but uncertain what to do, pretend not to notice.

In another school, a teacher feels overwhelmed and exhausted after failing to contain an especially disruptive student. She knows he's exposed to ongoing violence at home and is not sure what to do.

At basketball practice, a coach listens intently as one of his players describes with obvious pride a presentation he recently led in front of an all male audience on preventing teen dating violence.

In a school board meeting, parents, teachers and students, who not long ago were locked in confrontations about endemic sexual harassment, celebrate the anniversary of a new dating violence initiative focused on building the capacity of male students to challenge violence against women and girls.

The settings and specifics may change, but the stories remain similar, the landscape familiar. In schools all across the country, every day, young men and boys build relationships based on their notion of what it means to be a “real” man. They sometimes make choices that put others and themselves at risk and contribute to a variety of devastating public health problems, such as teen dating violence, unplanned teen parenthood, and sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV infection. As the vignettes suggest, young men also make choices that promote healthy relationships free of violence that both partners can truly enjoy. Mindful of this, schools and communities across the country are implementing programs that reach out to young men and invite them to take up the challenge of ending domestic and sexual violence. This paper argues that young men can play a critical role in constructing a healthier world for women and men, a world free of violence and founded on principles of equity and compassion. The paper argues that schools have a critical role to play in making this happen.

From birth, boys are socialized into patterns of identity and behavior that will cause some men to be violent towards others, and most to be ineffective witnesses to this violence. As a result, violence prevention efforts for men must start early. Schools provide a perfect setting for this preventive and educational effort. Thus, this paper makes a case for the development of violence prevention initiatives in schools that focus on boys. It outlines obstacles to effective school violence prevention programs, suggests strategies that may be effective and, most importantly, argues for the development of ongoing

partnerships and collaborations with educators and school systems for this purpose. At the end seven case studies provide examples of effective implementation of this approach. While the focus is on violence against women, many of the strategies and recommendations would also serve to reduce violence perpetrated by men against other men.

SCHOOLS AND THE IMPACT OF MALE VIOLENCE

Educators may be surprised by the extent and impact of violence against school aged girls and its effect on what happens in schools. One-fifth of teenage girls are assaulted by a dating partner during adolescence, and roughly 16-39 percent of adolescent boys admit to having used violence against a dating partner. Girls who have experienced such violence are more likely to become pregnant as teenagers, to attempt suicide, to use drugs and alcohol, and to have eating disorders. These effects play themselves out in dramatic ways in classrooms across the country, impeding students' ability to learn and adding untold stress to the already difficult jobs of teachers and administrators. Finding a solution to this problem is an urgent priority.

Schools have a critical role to play in addressing domestic and dating violence and in getting young men to take a stand against it. To do so we must look beyond the obstacles posed by limited resources, labyrinthine school districts, and testing requirements to focus on the interests and goals educators and violence prevention advocates share.

ACKNOWLEDGING THE CHALLENGES FROM THE OUTSET

If it were easy to develop school-based domestic and sexual violence programs, it would have happened a long time ago. In fact, there are real challenges that at times appear daunting to both advocates and educators, including the following:

Schools and educators struggle with many competing demands. Prevention advocates understand that the schools face many competing demands that make it difficult for teachers and administrators to take on any additional issues. Advocates understand that schools are currently struggling with budget cuts and personnel lay-offs, and that in this climate educators are likely to be reluctant to take on anything new. Similarly, advocates recognize that educators face reforms focused on standardized tests, forcing them to spend most of their time “teaching to the test” and leaving little room for adding a focus on gender and violence into their already full workload.

Advocates and educators sometimes doubt prevention, especially when it comes to working with young men and boys. Advocates and school personnel alike are sometimes doubtful about the efficacy of prevention strategies, and often appear even more hesitant to engage boys and young men as allies in efforts to prevent violence. Simplistic approaches, too, are often fueled by a punitive “lock-em-up” trend in society. Yet to make progress, educators must believe that prevention of violence against women is possible and be aware of the growing number of successful programs.

Advocates sometimes feel ill equipped to work in schools. Violence prevention advocates may themselves be reluctant to invest scarce resources into developing school-based

domestic and sexual violence prevention programs. By building on the lessons learned from existing models, advocates can begin to develop the skills and resources they need to offer school-based programs in their communities.

COMPELLING REASONS FOR WORKING IN SCHOOLS TO END VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Given these challenges, how do we promote our vision? How do we convince key stakeholders that schools have a vital role to play in promoting young men's involvement in ending violence against women and girls? Answers to these questions include the following:

Schools are uniquely positioned to address domestic and dating violence and to promote positive alternatives. Schools offer an opportunity unlike any other for prevention efforts that make teens more aware of violence in relationships and help prepare children of all ages for healthy relationships.

Schools influence the social norms regarding gender-based behavior. The social norms that encourage or condone violence exist in our schools as well. At the same time, healthy norms that are hidden can be brought out into the open to inhibit violence. For example, boys are often uncomfortable with the social norms of masculinity and with the behaviors of other men. School prevention programs can validate this discomfort and help boys express their opposition to abusive behavior when they do witness it, transforming young men into empowered bystanders. See, for example, the case studies on Mentors in Violence Prevention and on the Social Norms Approach included in the long version of this paper.

Prevention is effective and strengthens schools. A growing number of successful programs and case studies, coupled with recent tragedies, have empowered advocates for school-based violence prevention programs. As these programs have developed, consistent insights about what works have emerged. In particular, most violence happens in the context of personal relationships. Thus, violence prevention programs that focus on helping students develop attitudes and skills important for healthy relationships have promise. The case studies included in this paper highlight some of these programs. For example, the case study of the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network (GLSEN) illustrates well the significant impact that school-based prevention programs can have on the culture of an entire school.

Punitive, post-crisis responses will not end violence. Because punitive approaches have limited effectiveness and unintended negative consequences, prevention must be a priority. By engaging young men and boys with their peers and adult mentors, they can be partners in these initiatives and active participants in increasing school safety as well as ending violence against women and girls.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH SCHOOLS

The development of effective partnerships with schools is an ongoing process that begins with small steps, is sensitive to the challenges and realities that schools face, and is informed by a vision of what a comprehensive school-based program looks like.

Develop a comprehensive program. One-time approaches are unlikely to have much of a long-term impact. At best, they raise awareness and provide students a vocabulary with which to talk about their experiences. At worst, they reinforce the view that violence against women and girls is a peripheral issue. Thus school-based programs should foster the development of long-term, comprehensive programs through community collaborations that include advocates, educators, and law enforcement officials. It is important to start with individuals from groups who have an interest in violence prevention and who understand the inner workings of a school or school district.

Remind educators that domestic and sexual violence prevention programs are consistent with school mandates. The immediate mandate of all school districts is to provide students with a safe environment in which to learn. Youth suffering from trauma—whether through being bullied or experiencing dating violence—often do poorly in school. Reminding school officials of their responsibility to ensure a safe learning environment can produce impressive results in a way that the standard pitch about adolescence being "a unique opportunity to prevent adult domestic violence" may not be. After all, as much as school staff and officials within departments of education might be concerned about the lives their students go on to live as adults, their immediate concern is with the schools they teach in or oversee.

Use Data Effectively. Data can be an effective tool to bring together advocates and school personnel, showing the pervasiveness and impact of violence against women and girls, and revealing the connections between gender roles, young men's violence, and other harmful behaviors. Research can highlight program effectiveness. Finally, data can reveal the discomfort students feel with violence and their desire to intervene, thus providing important information about actual norms that can be integrated into prevention programs

Build long-term relationships. Each contact with a school can be seen as part of a bigger picture. For example, every request from a teacher for assistance is also an opportunity to learn more about how to advance a comprehensive approach in the school. Campaigns can start with a small, informal partnership of an advocate and a concerned teacher, who then identifies who else should join the partnership. Eventually, this group can develop into an advisory board for school-based violence prevention efforts.

Build relationships with other programs. One of the most efficient ways to introduce a comprehensive program that addresses violence against women and girls is to build relationships with already existing school-based programs that address related issues. This is true both at an individual school level and at the district level. Given the overlap between violence and other issues, it makes sense to partner with programs that address these other issues.

Establish an advisory board or leadership team. Advisory boards consisting of faculty, administrators, and parents are needed to plan and implement program activities and to build support for them among stakeholder groups. Work may proceed slowly at first as members identify school needs, discuss competing priorities, and ultimately agree on an action plan. It may take time to develop a strong advisory board that will advocate for a plan to sustain a comprehensive program that avoids implementing programming in a haphazard way.

Work with state departments of education. In some states, activists, advocates, educators, concerned parents, and students have organized to gain the support of their state department of education. These efforts can lead to changes in school policy and practice across the entire state and can also leverage important state resources that can be used to promote and monitor collaboration. The success of any initiative is often connected to the availability of sustained funding. One way to advocate for these funds is to lobby a state representative to author legislation.

COMPONENTS OF AN EFFECTIVE SCHOOL-BASED PROGRAM

What are the critical elements of a comprehensive school-based program to end violence? They include the following:

Develop comprehensive school policies to prohibit gender-based violence. School codes of conduct that prohibit violence and threats at school may fail to address common forms of hurtful language and behavior that can be described as bullying or sexual harassment. Clear policies and guidelines are needed to help school personnel respond effectively and in a consistent manner to these behaviors. Such policies must be victim-sensitive, ensuring that targets of bullying, sexual harassment, and dating violence be protected from retaliation and from further abuse during and after the investigation process.

Integrate violence prevention themes into existing school curricula. An effective strategy is to integrate violence prevention activities, discussions and writing assignments into existing curricula in core subject areas. Otherwise busy teachers may be willing to include lessons from selected violence prevention curricula designed to enhance their course work. With sufficient training and technical assistance from advocates, teachers can help students explore the connections between violence, sexism, racism, and other forms of injustice and oppression.

Train staff. Teachers need support from their administrators, adequate training and materials, and time to attend training workshops, plan lessons, supplement class work, and coordinate with other teachers and advocates. Training for teachers should include understanding the effects of violence and abuse on children, warning signs, how to respond to incidents and disclosures at school, and how to access community resources.

Involve parents. Comprehensive programs involve parents at multiple levels. This may include communications with parents in meetings and newsletters, parent conferences, and referrals for families experiencing violence. Parent groups can sponsor events, and

information can be disseminated through written materials, cable access television shows, and performance pieces.

Provide school-based counseling. Children who have been hurt by sexual or domestic violence need specialized counseling to increase their safety and social support. A partnership with a local sexual/domestic violence agency can meet this need. School-based groups offer a unique setting for young men and young women to discuss issues of violence and abuse in their homes and dating relationships. Young men's groups can provide a safe place for boys to explore their experience as perpetrators, victims and/or bystanders, and serve as an intervention for boys who have begun to use violent or coercive behavior.

Invite guest speakers. Guest speakers from local agencies can provide expert information and, when representing diverse groups, demonstrate that violence affects men and women of different races, cultures, physical abilities, educational levels, and socioeconomic status. They show that many people are actively working to end violence against women and girls. Agency personnel can also provide follow-up activities and materials.

COMPONENTS OF EFFECTIVE PROGRAMS FOR BOYS

Prevention programs aimed at young men and boys are effective when they involve all relevant parties, are active rather than passive, are sustained over time, focus on boys concerns and experiences, and employ positive messages. These dimensions can be incorporated into programs of any size or scope.

Because violence is a gendered experience, programs are more effective for boys and girls when gender differences and concerns are considered and integrated into an intervention. In some cases this may mean offering separate gender programs. Thus, school violence prevention programs for boys must address their concerns and realities, which center on feelings of blame for the problem, uncertainty about how to act in intimate relationships, misperceptions and myths about peer sexual activity, fears about what other boys will think, and previous experiences as witnesses or victims of violence. Healthy norms in these areas can be encouraged and supported. Prevention programs that work with young men may utilize strategies such as the development of empathy for victims, understanding consent, reducing bystander behavior, and re-imagining what it means to be male. These strategies must be adapted in school settings to fit the developmental stage of the students, whether in coeducational or separate gender audiences.

CONCLUSION

Exposure to gender-based violence can affect educational and other child well being outcomes. Schools have a vested interest in reducing gender-based violence and are an ideal place to address it, serving as a training ground for social relationships and providing opportunities for adults to model healthy relationships and interrupt abusive behavior. Comprehensive strategies include policies, staff training, curriculum, and discussions in separate gender group. They promote safe and respectful relationships among students at school and prepare young people for healthy, non-violent relationships

in the future. Partnerships among advocates and educators are critical to this work. Work with young men and boys is particularly critical for changing social norms regarding relationships and violence against women. We hope that this paper shows clearly the role schools can play in ending violence against women and girls, and that our comments will spark a lively discussion to move this important work forward.

This project was supported by Grant No. 2001-WT-BX-K019 awarded by the Office on Violence against Women, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. Points of view in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice. Similarly, the ideas presented in this document do not necessarily represent the viewpoints of the Family Violence Prevention Fund and its partners.