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Our Schools Shouldn't be Scary

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In 2003, 13 juveniles in the District were murdered. In 2004, that number almost doubled -- to 24.

In response to the surge in juvenile violence, the D.C. Council, with the mayor's backing, has proposed to ban the sale of violent video games to children [Metro, Feb. 3 and 4]. While this action may be a commendable component of a broader plan, by itself it would be a tiny bandage on a gaping social wound.

D.C. youth face the threat of violence from their earliest years. In the Healthy Kids Survey of D.C., more than 60 percent of children in charter elementary schools reported being bullied -- four times the national average.

By the time these children reach high school, they can face severe intimidation and gang-related violence. Fifteen percent of D.C. public school students reported being absent from school in the preceding 30 days because they felt unsafe on the way to school or at school. Accordingly, D.C. children have high rates of failure, truancy and substance abuse.

The District is not alone in this problem, nor does it need to invent its own solutions. The Auburn, N.Y., government, for example, can provide some guidance. That violence-plagued city formed an intergovernmental agency to institute 21 practices that have been proven to reduce violence. The results were remarkable.

In two years the number of serious, school-based incidents of physical aggression in Auburn were reduced by 54 percent in the elementary schools, 83 percent in the middle schools and 31 percent in the high school. In three years arrests of teens ages 13 to 15 declined 48 percent, petitions to the family court for juvenile delinquency declined 20 percent and the number of juveniles charged for violence declined 32 percent. Academic performance also improved even in distressed schools.

To deal with its problems with youth violence, the District should take a page from Auburn and:

- Form a group of city agency leaders, led by the deputy mayor for children, youth and families, the police chief and the superintendent of schools. The goal would be to plan, fund and evaluate prevention, intervention and treatment programs.
- Build an infrastructure to support these programs. Most of the city's efforts to implement violence-prevention programs have failed because of a lack of common training, monitoring, data collection and information exchange.

- Require all public schools to implement proven violence and substance-abuse prevention programs as required under the No Child Left Behind Act. The public schools and the Public Charter School Center for Student Support Services already have pilot programs, such as Botvin's Life Skills, Second Step and Project Toward No Drug Abuse, which can significantly lower violence and substance abuse.
- Build an effective school resource officers program. Auburn's school resource officers are credited with decreasing school and youth violence. The D.C. public school system has 90 such school-based officers, but they have little training or support. Public charter schools have no school resource officers.
- Expand school-based mental health services to all schools. These prevention programs, staffed by the D.C. Department of Mental Health and the Public Charter School Center for Student Support Services, could serve many more schools if city, school system and federal Medicaid dollars were combined to support them.
- Keep youth off the streets by supporting organizations that provide mentoring, employment training, tutoring and youth development services.
- Make it safe for children to travel to school. Expand the Gang Prevention Partnership of Columbia Heights-Shaw Collaborative to Wards 7 and 8 and draw upon such organizations as the East of the River Clergy-Police-Community Partnership and the Alliance of Concerned Men.
- Develop treatment services for young people involved in the justice system to rehabilitate them and keep them safely in the community. The District recently launched three such programs. It needs more.

We can reduce youth violence and give hope to students lost in the District's failing schools. All it will take is a long-term commitment -- starting now.

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