

About NYSSBA
School Board News
Governmental Relations (PARC)
Leadership Development
Policy Services
Center For Urban Schools Programs
District Vacancies
Publications
Related Links
Pressroom
Annual Convention

School Board News

Schools Today

Schools, agencies fight violence before it starts (08/04/03)

In Cayuga County, a delinquent's life is turned around

A 17-year-old male who had been convicted several times of burglary and robbery stood before a judge in a Cayuga County Courthouse looking at jail time.

Homeless and a high school dropout, he was a couch surfer, sleeping wherever he could find a sofa. His parents had washed their hands of him, but only after having used him as a pawn in their divorce. He had committed his crimes to feed his drug and alcohol habits.

That was 18 months ago. Today, the former drug -addicted dropout – we'll call him "Quinton" for the purposes of this article – has earned a General Equivalency Diploma. He attends Cayuga Community College, works full time for a local municipality and is visiting Cornell University in hopes of attending veterinary school.

The radical change in the direction of Quinton's life began with the judge's sentence. Rather than sending the 17-year-old to jail, the judge assigned Quinton to an alternative program that draws upon the resources of public education, mental health and local law enforcement agencies.

The Safe Schools Intensive Supervision Conditional Discharge Program (ISCDP) is organized by the nonprofit Cayuga County Safe Schools/Healthy Students Partnership.

The year-long conditional discharge program put Quinton in close contact with a therapist and case manager who met with him, his friends, associates and family in natural settings – the basketball court, a local diner, a park bench – almost daily, according to Heidi Nightengale, a resource manager for Safe Schools/Healthy Students.

The partnership tracked down a family friend – the closest thing to familial support that was available – and the teenager began living with her. While the youth completed a residential substance abuse program, the case worker and therapist counselled the family friend on setting boundaries and guidelines for Quinton. Quinton attended group therapy sessions to develop social skills, and he received help attaining all of the necessary papers for employment.

Reaction to Columbine

The Safe Schools project was created in response to incidents of school violence in places such as Columbine, Colo., Safe Schools Project Director Philip Uninsky told *On Board*. Representatives of the federal Departments of Education, Health and Human Services and Justice joined forces and awarded grants to projects that capitalize on violence prevention and intervention resources already available in communities.

In awarding grants, the federal government focused on:

- ⌘ Preventing violence.
- ⌘ Improving school safety policies and promoting a safer school environment.
- ⌘ Addressing mental health issues among preschool and school-age children.

"To their credit they didn't focus on (Columbine-like) behavior, which was extreme; they focused on what makes healthy students," Uninsky said. "They tried to draw a link between academic achievement and barriers to learning, asking themselves: What are the barriers to learning and social and emotional development?"

The programs don't just target students already in crisis, noted Chuck Mason, a member of the Auburn school board.

"What Safe Schools has done is help to be proactive about preventing a Columbine-type of situation," Mason said. "It's been a very integral part of helping to create a healthier and safer climate in the schools. And it's given students more opportunity to learn in summer and after school programs in particular."

Evidence-based programs

Led by a community advisory board and six full-time employees, Safe Schools assembled a variety of "evidence-based" programs whose effectiveness was supported by research. These included after-school programs for all grade levels. To deal with crisis situations, Safe Schools organized a mobile outreach team comprised of clinicians trained to assess mental health and substance abuse problems and to provide school-based preventive and intervention treatment.

Some of the programs and curricula include:

- ✦ Building Relationships in Great Harmony Together (BRIGHT), a high school health curriculum that helps teens develop a model of health strategies for handling anger and conflict in dating relationships.
- ✦ Educational Karate Program, which promotes non-violent problem solving by exploring the idea of peace with oneself and others and by emphasizing the importance of both physical and mental well-being.
- ✦ Every Person Influences Children, a community- and school-based workshop designed to enhance parental involvement in the education lives of their children.
- ✦ Primary Mental Health Project, a school-based early detection and prevention program for young elementary school students that addresses social, emotional, behavioral and adjustment problems that interfere with effective learning.

Student referrals come from multiple sources, but the partnership provides one single point of assessment and service intervention, Uninsky said. The agencies and school districts share a database, where information is gathered and updated on each student in the system.

Early signs show progress is being made. An evaluation by the independent MAGI Educational Services, Inc., found that incidents of prohibited conduct (physical violence and related behaviors) dropped 81 percent between 1999 and 2001 at Auburn Middle School.

"One of the reasons why it's worked is because it's specifically tried to work with the people in this district to solve their own problems, to come up with solutions to its own needs," Mason said.

Why Cayuga?

Cayuga County is located smack in the middle of New York State. A maximum security prison in the center of Auburn employs a majority of the residents. Uninsky chose to launch Safe Schools/Healthy Students in Cayuga County because the community understands the idea of working with difficult populations. Also, school officials there saw the need and viewed the project as an opportunity rather than a burden, he said. The Auburn and Port Byron school districts and Cayuga-Onondaga BOCES participate.

Between them, Auburn and Port Byron have plenty of issues to deal with: high rates of child abuse, domestic violence, teen pregnancy, high school dropouts, suicide and drug and alcohol abuse, as well as an epidemic of bomb threats at one school – 28 in one year.

Uninsky initially received a \$5.5 million grant from the federal agencies and has since raised another \$4.5 million to continue the project. He is working with private foundations to enable the project to continue in Cayuga County and be implemented in other communities across the state.

Formerly human services counsel for the New York State Assembly speaker, Uninsky has written and lobbied for bills calling for a temporary state commission to promote similar projects in other New York State communities.

While there will be a cost for communities to replicate the project, databases that collect shared information on at-risk children and tools of assessment have already been developed and paid for by the initial federal grant, Uninsky said.

While districts and municipalities face enormous budgetary pressures, Uninsky argues the cost is higher when social ills are left to fester.

"If it's done right, it costs far less than sending a 16-year-old to jail," he said.

[Home](#) | [About NYSSBA](#) | [School Board News](#) | [Governmental Relations](#)
[Leadership Development](#) | [Policy Services](#)
[Publications](#) | [Download Library](#) | [Message Board](#) | [Search Engine](#) | [Contact Us](#)

New York State School Boards Association
24 Century Hill Drive - Suite 200 • Latham, New York 12110 - 2125
Voice - (518) 783-0200 • Fax - (518) 783-0211 • Email - info@nyssba.org

© 2003 New York State School Boards Association. All rights reserved.