

Forum

Crime and Violence Has Chilling Affect in Schools

Columnist George Will relates the story of a Chicago mother who purchased a handgun and some ammunition after she overheard men in the small family restaurant she owns saying, "This is an easy place to stick up." Her son took the gun from her purse and put it in his school gym bag because a classmate who had stolen his candy threatened to shoot him if he didn't give him more candy. Her son is 6 years old.



GUEST COLUMNIST

By RON BARKER

A New York Times story about a teacher shot on the way to class came under this heading: "Stuck in the Shoulder in the Year's First Shooting Inside a School." The implication is that there is more to come.

Both of these incidents provide a glimpse into a sad but realistic commentary on what is happening in many of our nation's schools. First, they aptly demonstrate how the fight against crime is ultimately a fight for freedom. The fear of crime and of being victimized has greatly compromised the freedom of our young people and teachers to go to school without major concerns for their personal safety.

Second, these stories, and so many others like them, show a clear trend toward normalizing deviant behaviors that at one time would have been considered intolerable by any standards. New York Sen. Pat Moynihan notes that in 1929, Chicago's St. Valentine's Day Massacre shocked the nation. Four gangsters machine-gunned seven gangsters. Yet today, such carnage would be part of a "normal" weekend in many cities. As crime levels rise while being increasingly tolerated, the message conveyed is that there is little expectation of improvement. As just one example, crime prevention gets redefined as crime resistance. And the innocent resort to things like displaying signs on their car windows that read, "No Stereo," in hopes that a thief will bypass their vehicle for one with more promise.

The fear and anxiety generated by the prevalence of crime and violence have a telling effect on every facet of life but especially within schools. This is because fear and anxiety are absolutely counterproductive to the true mission of education. School should be one place, in addition to the family, where a child's self-esteem can be developed from within, from a

genuine sense of achievement and worth gained from learning and being cared for. Likewise, it should be a place where teachers are free to teach and contribute to a child's optimal development.

However, this purpose is undermined when a child's fear leads to self-alienation instead of participation in the learning process. It is undermined when a child concludes that self-worth depends on triumphing over others. And learning is thwarted when a teacher's fear diminishes his ability to teach as more time gets consumed with disciplinary concerns. As within any social institution, paranoia also precludes trust and damages morale within the entire school environment. The result is that all participants in the system can stay locked in a survival mode, while draining away much needed energy and attention that are required for learning and teaching.

Young people need stroking and affirming, but they also need confronting and challenging. A genuine and lasting sense of self-worth must be connected with sound values and strong character. This truth must be modeled by both parents and teachers inside and outside our schools. Otherwise, we are implying that all one needs to do at school or anywhere else is just come and be present with no accountability, no discipline, and with no challenge to go out and apply oneself to living responsibly every day in the real world.

(The writer is the Forsyth County Sheriff and former teacher in Forsyth County schools.)

Violence in Our Schools Stems From Changes in Community

One of the major contributing factors in the increase in school violence is the population shift and the damage it has caused in our communities. Many of the evils imposed during the Jim Crow era actually backfired by having positive effects on the African American community. In our communities before integration, all African-Americans lived together. We were gerry-manded to a certain section of town. This meant that our neighborhoods included persons from varied socio-economic backgrounds. The poor lived down the street from the affluent and college graduates lived next to the self-taught.

If you look closely at this condition, you can see how that which was intended to demean us was used by us to our advantage. In the community there were positive role models there were human resources and there was a sense of community. If there was not a positive role model in our home, one could surely be found next door, down the street or around the corner.

Our communities were a source of strength. Today's neighborhoods are populated by persons with similar socio-economic backgrounds and educational levels. The strength of the community and sense of community are absent now. Neighborhoods populated with only low-income residents are not fertile breeding grounds for hope and upward mobility.

School staffing can also directly influence the level of violence in our schools. Many African-American youngsters can complete elementary school without ever having been taught by a person from their race. This person could have filled the void of mentor, and their absence is certainly detrimental. In my generation, professional options were limited, and many multi-talented African-Americans chose education from this short list. These persons put their many skills and abilities into their chosen profession and, their students flourished even in under-funded and inadequate facilities. A person who today might be a lawyer or judge would have been a history or social studies teacher in my generation.



GUEST COLUMN

By PEYTON HAIRSTON SR.

could cause a black child to attend the public schools for 13 years (K-12) and not have a black teacher. There is even a greater chance that he/she will not find one who will make an impact on their lives. The availability of guns, the drug trade, the lack of jobs and meaningful work, the low expectation of children at school and racism all play a great part in this problem. Let us not be fooled into thinking that the problem of violence is not an outgrowth of the problems listed in this article. Although black students are not responsible for all the problems of violence in schools, a large portion which they are responsible for has its roots in the problem listed.

We can be sure that we will not solve the problem in school until it is addressed in our communities.

(The writer is principal at Union Cross Elementary School.)

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