

Date: January 11, 2003

Subject: Safe School Summit: A Policy Report

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## **INTRODUCTION**

A Safe School Summit was held at Western Carolina University (WCU) on November 14, 2002. Over 600 participants attended the Summit organized by the WCU Public Policy Institute and funded by the North Carolina Governor's Crime Commission and the Horowitz Foundation. The Asheville Police Department (APD) played an integral role in the creation and implementation of the Safe School Summit. In addition, the 3-C Institute for Social Development and the North Carolina Center for the Prevention of School Violence in the Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention were also important in the planning and implementation of the Safe School Summit. Joint sponsors of the Safe School Summit included the Asheville Citizen-Times, the Asheville Police Department, 3-C Institute for Social Development, Carolina Institute for Community Policing, Horowitz Foundation, North Carolina's Governor's Crime Commission, Pi Gamma Mu Honor Society, and the WCU College of Education and Allied Professions.

Since over 600 people attended the Safe School Summit, including many experts on school safety, attendees were invited to participate in a survey and make recommendations for creating a safer school environment in North Carolina. Overall, 218 participants responded to the open- and close-ended survey questions. Survey respondents included law enforcement officials (chiefs of police, police, sheriffs, and SROs), public school officials (superintendents, principals, school counselors, teachers, and other school staff) and university faculty and students. Just over 60 percent of respondents were male and 40 percent of respondents were female.

An outstanding group of speakers facilitated presentations on key factors related to safe schools. Prior to the Summit, focus groups in education and law enforcement identified important school safety issues. Topics covered at the Safe School Summit included School Resource Officers (SROs), Contingency Planning, Safe School Planning, Bullying, and Threat Assessment. Speakers included Dr. John Bardo, Chancellor of WCU; Dr. Dixie McGinty, WCU Department of Educational Leadership and Foundations; Calvin Hodnett, US Department of Justice; Dr. Anna McFadden, WCU Department of Educational Leadership and Foundations; Joanne

McDaniel, Center for Prevention of School Violence, Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention; Marilyn Salzman, Jefferson County Schools in Colorado; Bob Gabordi, Asheville Citizen-Times; Dr. Melissa DeRosier, 3-C Institute for Social Development; Mark Alexander, National Threat Assessment Center, US Secret Service; and Brandi Justice, National Threat Assessment Center, US Secret Service. The Keynote Speaker was Cabinet Secretary George Sweat, North Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Will Annarino, Chief of Police in Asheville, received the Alexander Hamilton award for public service excellence in public leadership.

Prior to the Safe School Summit, the North Carolina Annual Report on School Crime and Violence showed that incidents of crime and violence were increasing in North Carolina. The revised 2001-2002 report highlighted a 31 percent increase in incidents of crime and violence in schools. A new reporting instrument, process, analytic approach, and additional categories account for some of this increase but not all. However, new reporting categories may explain some of the increase. Given the controversy surrounding the recent statistics, it is more important than ever to have survey data and policy suggestions from a diverse group of citizens working to make schools safer. Fortunately, 218 law enforcement and SROs, teachers, school administrators, faculty and students participated in the Safe School Summit survey. The major findings of the survey, as well as suggestions towards creating safer schools, will be discussed under key topics that follow.

## **SCHOOL SAFETY CHALLENGES AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **1. The Challenge of Bullying**

One of the most important safety problems identified in the survey was the problem of bullying in schools. Over 73 percent of those responding to the survey thought bullying was a problem or serious problem in schools, nearly 24 percent of those surveyed thought it was not a problem in schools, and 2 percent did not respond to the question. Participants were asked whether bullying was a bigger problem in elementary, middle or high school. Nearly 62 percent thought the problem was greatest in middle schools, 17 percent in high schools, and 12 percent in elementary schools (9 percent did not know or did not answer this question). When asked whether bullying prevention is a priority in your school there was a nearly even division with 48 percent of survey participants indicating bullying prevention is a priority in their school and 47 percent indicating it is not a priority. About 4 percent of those participating in the survey were not sure on this issue.

### **Policy Recommendations on Bullying**

Participants indicated bullying prevention as a top priority in schools. More school-wide training needs to be provided, and teachers, SROs, and others need to get involved in the establishment of policies to prevent bullying. Many respondents suggested that parental involvement and school counselors were important components. Conference participants also stated that current training in this area is not meeting the needs of schools and this area needs higher priority. Bullying is an

important indicator of school safety. If bullying is not identified and dealt with in the early stages it has the potential to escalate into serious levels of violence.

## 2. The Challenge of Drugs

Drug problems were a second major concern of conference participants. Of those participating in the survey, over 73 percent thought drugs were a problem or a serious problem in their schools, 23 percent thought they were not, and 3 percent were not sure. These findings are consistent with the North Carolina Annual Report on School Crime and Violence, which indicated that possession of a controlled substance continues to be the most reported type of school crime and violence. In open-ended questions on the most important issues facing North Carolina schools, drugs were the third most important problem mentioned.

### Policy Recommendations on Drugs

Suggestions to confront drug use included more systematic training programs and involvement of SROs, teachers, and administrators. According to some participants, the current training is very segmented and therefore inhibits team building and effective communications. Many participants mentioned the need for more alternative schools to meet the unique needs of students who frequently break the law and threaten school safety. Respondents also mentioned better established threat assessment teams to make decisions easier on alternate school decisions. The use of alternative schools and procedures for making decisions about alternative school placement needs additional study. Parental and community involvement are also important in solving controlled substance abuse problems according to many participating in the survey.

## 3. The Challenge of Gangs

Teenage gangs were another area addressed by the survey. When asked about the problem of gangs, 28 percent of respondents thought gangs were a problem (or a serious problem), and nearly 70 percent indicated gangs were not a problem. Just over 2 percent did not answer the question. In an open-ended question on the challenges facing North Carolina, violence, gangs, and bullying were frequently grouped together as challenges facing North Carolina leaders in school safety.

### Policy Recommendations on Gangs

This is yet another area in which survey participants called for more training.

## 4. The Challenge of Collaboration

The focus groups that helped plan the Safe School Summit stressed communication and collaboration between key school safety personnel. Communication and collaboration between school and law enforcement officials was especially important. Of those interviewed, 70 percent thought collaboration between education and law enforcement officials to be either good or

excellent, 26 percent thought collaboration was poor, and 4 percent did not respond to the question. In the area of communication between adults and students in schools, 58 percent thought communication was excellent or good compared with 39 who thought it was average or poor (3 percent did not respond). The survey results may challenge conventional wisdom that communication between law enforcement and schools is a major problem and may be reflective of the fact that there are many successful working relationships between SROs and educators in North Carolina schools.

### Policy Recommendations on Communication and Collaboration

Most suggestions toward better communication and collaboration involved regularly scheduled and structured meetings. Participants also emphasized improved communication with an emphasis on team building. Responding to an open-ended question about how to increase collaboration on school safety, 41 percent of participants stressed formal meetings, active teamwork on violence prevention, or joint training or planning meetings. One possibility is to invite speakers to school systems. It was also suggested that crisis management plans need to be prepared by school officials and law enforcement agencies. In addition, there should be regular meetings on violence prevention between educational personnel, law enforcement officials, social workers, and social services agencies. Numerous participants at the Safe School Summit suggested that more training on school safety should incorporate all agencies involved in school safety helping build communication, collaboration, and trust. Respondents stressed that there were not enough structured committees on school safety, they did not meet regularly, there was not enough time allocated, and that key officials needed to exercise more appointment powers.

A second area that was stressed by survey participants was the need for applied exercises and drills on school safety. Some participants said that they did not know if there was a school safety plan or crisis management plan in their school. More planning exercises and drills would improve teamwork, enhance communication, and help provide effective training.

A third major suggestion that many participants mentioned was the need for more community and parental involvement in safe school education and planning. Participants recommended periodic community meetings reviewing school safety. Meetings could also highlight ways parents and community leaders might assist in school violence prevention.

### 5. The Challenge of School Resource Officers

School Resource Officer Programs are one of the key elements in school safety in North Carolina. Survey results indicate that communication between law enforcement officers and schools was quite good. Open communication is probably related to the presence of SROs in many schools. Of those surveyed, 75 percent thought the SRO Program was effective or very effective, and only 15 percent thought it was ineffective. About 10 percent did not respond to this question.

### Policy Recommendations on School Resource Officers

In open- and closed-ended questions, comments on the effectiveness of SROs were favorable. Many participants suggested the need for mutual training between school administrators, teachers, and SROs. Respondents also suggested legal changes to be made to make this possible in some training agencies. In response to the questions on resources, many survey participants thought more SROs were needed. According to many Safe School Summit survey participants, priority should be given to increased funding for SROs and joint collaborative training.

## 6. The Challenge of Resources

With continued budget shortfalls, providing adequate resources to meet school safety priorities has been difficult. Of those surveyed, over 7 percent strongly agreed and 57 percent agreed that school officials are provided adequate resources to confront school violence. In contrast, 34 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed that resources were adequate to deal with school violence (1 percent did not respond). On the open-ended questions, funding and resources were the second most important issue facing North Carolina leaders in the area of school safety.

### Policy Recommendations on Resources

Participants at the Safe School Summit were asked about resources needed to make schools safer. Training was the most frequently mentioned need. Priorities included training on violence prevention, bullying prevention, substance abuse, SRO training, and conflict resolution. Because 36 percent of those participating in the survey mentioned training in the area of school safety as a top resource need, training and educational levels may be inadequate. Many respondents liked the model used at the Safe School Summit where educational leaders, law enforcement, SROs, teachers, and principals participated in the educational/training program together. Some thought more programs are needed for parents on school safety and school safety issues. Since resources are constrained, some suggested more videos or interactive CD-ROMs similar to those provided by the US Justice Department for the 2002 Safe School Summit. Overall, there was a clear preference for personal guided training programs.

A second priority was for more SROs in the schools. In an open-ended question asking how schools could be made safer, 31 percent of respondents mentioned the need for more SROs or security related personnel. Some participating in the survey indicated they have lost their SROs due to budget cuts. Others indicated they did not have an SRO. It was very clear from the survey that more funding and training needs to be provided.

A third area that many participants mentioned was the need to use more advanced equipment and technology to support school safety. In an open-ended question on resources needed to make school safer, 23 percent of respondents said equipment and technology. Surveillance, security, video cameras in parking lots and other strategic school locations were all mentioned as needs. Participants from some schools suggested electronic keys, better lighting in parking lots, and the need for improved building design. Metal detectors were also mentioned, but not as often as security cameras.

Finally, many participating in the survey suggested smaller schools and reduced class sizes. Size reductions would help create safer schools because there would be more opportunities for adults

and students to create caring professional relationships and to provide students with more individual attention. Community schools that involved knowledgeable parents who were involved in school policies were also suggested in the open-ended questions. Respondents were not supportive of the combining smaller schools. Moreover, many respondents indicated the importance of parental involvement in school safety.

## 7. The Challenge of Training

Closely related to resource needs in schools is the question of whether schools receive adequate training to deal with violence in their schools. Of those surveyed, nearly 55 percent indicated school officials are provided adequate training opportunities to deal with violence, and almost 42 percent indicated they disagree or strongly disagree that training opportunities are adequate (about 4 percent did not answer this question).

### Policy Recommendations on Training

Respondents to open-ended questions on school safety named training as a priority. Over 32 percent of participants mentioned the need for more programs related to education and training on school safety. It was evident from respondent comments that parents attended school in a different environment with different challenges. The media, drugs, and youth cultures were cited as challenges. This gap not only creates the need to educate parents and communities but the need for special training programs for all school personnel. Areas most prioritized included bullying, drugs, safe school and crisis planning, and dealing with violent and explosive students. More resources are clearly needed in this area.

## 8. The Challenge of Threat Assessment

Threat assessment teams have become a very important area of school safety because they give the school a committee with the authority to investigate and make recommendations on safety problems. When asked whether your school has a threat assessment team in place, 46 percent responded that they agreed or strongly agreed that a threat assessment team was in place, 49 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed that threat assessment teams were in place (5 percent did not respond to this question).

### Policy Recommendations on Threat Assessment Teams

In open-ended questions respondents said that threat assessment teams of law enforcement and educational personnel are needed to evaluate, prevent, and make recommendations. Recommendations included formalized teams prepared to research and make recommendations on needed school actions to prevent violence. Respondents indicated that some students needed to be assigned to an alternative school or removed from the school.