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PRESERVATION**

Terrence
schools

Scared at school

Fear encourages an anti-violence fervor that may be short on facts

By Tamara Henry
USA TODAY

The nation's alarm over school violence has hatched an anti-violence industry that is flourishing more on fear than solid proof that its methods work.

Never mind that statistics show schools are still among the safest places your child can be.

Haunted by sporadic horrors such as the killings last April 20 at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colo., communities and schools across the USA are immersing themselves in an ever-widening range of programs aimed at warding off those demons: safe-school programs, gang resistance, drug- and alcohol-abuse prevention, anti-bullying, stay-in-school projects, peer mediation, conflict resolution.

The programs at elementary, middle and high schools are well intentioned, officials say. But most are too new for tough evaluation, although their creators and supporters

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— Bill Modzeleski, U.S. Department of Education

than \$10,000," Modzeleski says.

Modzeleski is concerned about the proliferation of violence prevention programs. The scarcity of available federal funding may leave educators to accept whatever is offered, he says.

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Schools typically don't pay for many of the private safe-school and violence prevention programs. Instead, businesses and corporations are asked to pick up the tab.

Some schools use federal funds for a hardball approach, installing metal detectors and surveillance cameras, adopting zero-tolerance policies or hiring police officers.

Others look for flashier solutions that are privately financed. There's a glitzy, \$3 million school assembly program complete with a rock band, as well as 24-hour tip lines and interactive movie software aimed at improving decision-making.

Whether all of that actually helps deter violence is unclear, experts say. No hard data are available to prove the programs do — or do not — prevent violence.

They may only be satisfying a need to feel we are doing something to allay our fears, some say.

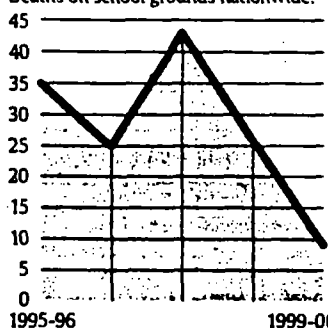
"I think there are many well-meaning individuals who want to make a difference, and there are those who try to capitalize on our fears," says Cheryl Blalock Aspy of the American Counseling Association, who in June is publishing *Violence in American Schools: A Practical Guide for Counselors*. "We will often invest in very expensive hardware, when a therapeutic relationship with an adult would be a much better investment. ... We often

need to see the action to believe that we have done something, and relationships do take time."

Justice Department statistics show a rise over the past several years in the percentage of students who fear be-

Violence declines

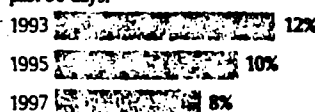
Deaths on school grounds nationwide:



Source: National School Safety Center

Fewer weapons in school

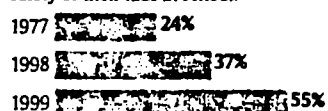
Percentage of students in grades 9-12 who reported carrying a weapon onto school property at least one day in the past 30 days:



Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Health Statistics, National Health Interview Survey — Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 1993, 1995, 1997

Fear on the rise

Percentage of parents who fear for the safety of their kids in school:



Source: USA TODAY/CNN/Callup Poll

By Julie Stacey, USA TODAY

Cover story

ters give anecdotal evidence of success. Others show mixed results. All are of concern to a federal government that helps fund many yet watches them with a skeptical eye.

The Clinton administration has directed the Department of Education "to really take a look at safe schools in a much broader context," says Bill Modzeleski, director of the department's Safe and Drug Free Schools program. He sees the anti-violence fervor as part of a "culture of fad-ism" out of sync with an actual decline in school violence.

"It's not only a culture of fad-ism, it's a culture of the quick fixes. We've got to change this culture of quick fixes because changing behavior that leads to crime, violence and drug use is not simple."

Gavin de Becker, a security specialist whose Mosaic 2000 in-school violence-prevention pilot program is criticized by Modzeleski, also decries simplistic solutions. "All over America, schools are overreacting to threats," de Becker says. "A threat is to a school shooting what a cough is to lung disease. It's just one symptom."

About 97% of the nation's 15,000 school districts get some of the \$500 million the Education Department budgets for anti-violence programs. "What we end up with is about 59% of school districts in this country receiving less

ing attacked in school. At Ligon Middle School in Raleigh, N.C., 13-year-olds Alisha Ross and Kelli Cheatham say they welcome a new program that has a tip line students can call to report suspected impending violence.

"It almost makes me feel more comfortable at our school," says Ashley Byrd, an eighth-grader.

Cover story

Alisha says the program, called WAVE (Working Against Violence Everywhere), helps students to be more aware of potential dangers around them.

"My mom is real happy about it, too," says Kelli, a seventh-grader. "My folks know you'll be a lot safer if you have problems."

Lost amid the fear-provoking mass shootings and the anti-violence earnestness is the fact that most of the USA's schools are relative havens from violence.

"One of the important things is that our schools remain — despite recent tragedies in Michigan, Colorado, Oregon, Mississippi, Arkansas and Kentucky — the safest places for kids to be," Modzeleski says.

He points to Education Department statistics that show school crime has decreased in the past five years and that there's a million-to-1 chance of a student being a homicide victim. Ninety percent of schools don't have any serious violent crime, he says.

School violence accounts for a small share of deaths among the student-age population. For example, National Center for Health Statistics numbers show 4,139 firearm deaths among young people in the USA, compared with 35 shooting deaths in schools during 1997-98.

Though fewer, school shootings are laden with emotion: In five years, 106 shooting deaths have occurred on school grounds around the USA, says the National School Safety Center. Those are the numbers that electrify consumers of dozens of programs. Among them:

► **Central High**, interactive movie software created by counselor Gregg Conway, made its debut last month in Oklahoma. Gov. Frank Keating says the computer game will become part of the curriculum for all public schools in the state because it teaches the importance of making good decisions. The 1,675 elementary, middle and high schools each get six copies.

► **Rage Against Destruction** is an anti-violence high school assembly program that began a nationwide tour of high schools in St. Louis last month. Director Tom Woodcock uses a concert-style assembly, complete with \$3.5 million in video, lighting and sound and expensive giveaway items. The assembly includes a live band, a positive anti-violence message and a chance for the students to voice concerns.

► **The Drug Abuse Resistance Education** program (DARE) is one of the oldest of its type, founded in

1983 in Los Angeles. The police-led classroom lessons teach children from kindergarten through 12th grade how to resist peer pressure to use drugs or violence. The program — 17 lessons in elementary and 10 lessons in middle and high school — is being implemented in nearly 75% of the nation's school districts and in more than 52 countries.

Noting criticism of DARE by the research community, University of Minnesota researcher Cheryl Perry launched a study in Minnesota's junior high schools that runs through next year. Earlier evaluations by

other researchers found short-term — not long-term — changes in knowledge, attitudes, beliefs and cigarette smoking, she says.

► **Gang Resistance Education and Training (GREAT)** is a federally sponsored program that operates through police departments to help students set goals, learn ways to resist pressure or resolve conflicts without violence. Local police officers conduct nine classroom sessions in 45-minute blocks. With as many as 1,400 police departments involved in training 2 million students, GREAT gets \$13 million from Congress.

To monitor the impact of efforts getting federal money, Modzeleski says the government now requires schools to document success within two years of getting funding. "So they won't continue something ad infinitum, year after year, if it's not working," he says.

Success in other programs may be more difficult to document. Transcendental Meditation is the method of the 20-plus members of End School Violence Now, an organization formed at the Maharishi School of the Age of Enlightenment in Fairfield, Iowa. The students at the Maharishi School created a

videotape and special presentations for students at schools where they are invited to speak. They've visited students in a Denver suburb, in Detroit and at a Boys and Girls Club in Omaha. Students plan to visit Boston on April 26.

"Most students are pretty stressed out. The kids I talk to seem to be looking for something more, some way to release the stress and feel more relaxed," says Laura Moses, 17, a senior at Maharishi.

Perhaps most controversial of the programs on the market is a threat-evaluation program created by de Becker, who for years has provided security for celebrities. Mosaic 2000 is being piloted in nearly two dozens schools nationwide to help administrators spot troubled students who might become violent. The field test is free, but an advisory board is to be created to determine the future price for schools.

William Ybarra of the Los Angeles County Office of Education says the testing of Mosaic 2000 "is a touchy situation in our county," which has 81 school districts and 1.6 million students.

"You have the district attorney that supports it. Yet, I haven't seen it work in a school setting yet. The field test is not conclusive, but it's already gone out as a possible solution. I'm concerned about that."

"Probably the biggest misunderstanding is that it's profiling," de Becker says. "A profile would be something that says, 'When you find him, he's likely to be a white male between 30 and 40 who likes sports cars and is angry with his father.' It's about a person who's not identified. Mosaic is the opposite."

De Becker says Mosaic examines behavior of students already suspected of having serious problems.

"When you look at the cases where multiple shootings occurred, you see that the No. 1 problem prior to the shooting was that the school did not ask the right question. They denied what was right in front of them," de Becker says.

In Chicago, where three schools recently completed Mosaic 2000 field tests, officials are ambivalent. Patricia McPhearson-Davis, manager of Chicago's Safe and Drug Free Schools programs, says that despite her initial hesitation, she realized Mosaic 2000 "merely confirms what you already believe" about a student. "It is not something that is taking students at random and choosing them."

Analyzing and trying to understand individual cases of violence form a small part of a bigger picture. There are broader forces at play beyond students' personalities and decision-making, many educators and other student advocates say. Addressing them requires vision, not slogans.

"When we talk about school safety, we also must talk about smaller class size, better-prepared teachers, better-prepared schools, more challenging curriculum," Modzeleski says. Reducing violence is "a complex undertaking which cannot be done only by schools. It's got to be done by communities and families."

"The bottom line is to improve and stimulate the environment overall."

Contributing: Dan Vergano

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