

Boston Globe

Spike in violence in middle schools raises concerns

By Tracy Jan, Globe Staff | October 2, 2007

A Marlborough student was suspended for bringing a knife to school. A week later, a Concord student was arrested for putting 10 classmates on a hit list. Then there was the bomb threat at a Tewksbury school and a lockdown in Waltham where two knives were found in students' lockers, just a day after a pellet gun was discovered at another Waltham school.

The episodes all occurred within five weeks last spring, not in high schools, but in middle schools in suburban districts, where educators and law enforcement agencies are increasingly worried about violence penetrating places once considered havens.

Massachusetts suburban and rural middle schools in 2005-06 had 4,750 reports of violence - such as fights, sexual assault, and robbery - and threats of violence; 484 drug, alcohol, and tobacco offenses; 290 cases of sexual harassment, and 383 weapons found, according to a Globe analysis of school safety statistics provided by the Massachusetts Department of Education.

Educators, police, and national school violence specialists struggle to explain rising violence among younger students, which is also reflected in national statistics. They cite an array of causes, including violent video games, movies, and television shows and news coverage of violence at school and in the community, which results in copy-cat incidents.

Specialists also say that today's students rebel earlier than previous generations did; have easier access to violent images, writing, and attitudes on the Internet and in online chat rooms; and have even less parental supervision than in preceding generations.

Between 2003-04 and 2005-06, violence or the threat of violence in suburban and rural middle schools grew 3.4 percent, despite a 3.9 percent decline in the overall middle school population. Confiscation of weapons, including knives and guns, increased 13 percent. And reports of sexual harassment were up 28 percent. Drug offenses, though, dropped 16 percent.

In 2005-06, 53 percent of episodes involving violence or threats of violence occurred in Massachusetts middle schools, as opposed to 47 percent in high schools. Nationally, violence in middle schools has been on the rise, as well, with 94 percent of middle schools reporting violent incidents in 2006 compared with 87 percent in 2000, according to the US Department of Education.

In response, district attorneys, police, and others have been pushing for more collaboration with educators and for more police officers to be assigned to suburban middle schools. District attorneys are also training teachers and students about bullying, Internet safety, and sexual harassment.

Middlesex District Attorney Gerard T. Leone Jr. is urging middle school principals and counselors to participate in regular meetings with local police, social service providers, and assistant district attorneys to discuss students with criminal records or who have had brushes with the law. The goal, he said, is to intervene with such students as early as possible.

"It's troubling and surprising that violence is impacting younger and younger people," said Leone, who recently met with about 100 educators and police chiefs to discuss violence in middle schools. "It doesn't matter if you're in an urban, suburban, or rural school. Kids are exposed to anything other kids are, and violence is not necessarily determined by where you live anymore."

In the past, the community-based juvenile justice meetings, mandated in every Massachusetts school system by a 2000 state law, have focused mostly on high school students.

In Norfolk County, where educators in most middle schools are already meeting with law enforcement officials, District Attorney William R. Keating said suburban middle schools have seen an increase in violence committed by girls, students who carry knives for self-defense, and crimes committed by groups of students, rather than individuals.

The frequency with which weapons were found in Massachusetts middle schools was on par with the incidents in high schools in 2005-06; nearly half of all weapons discovered in secondary schools were discovered in middle schools. Middle schoolers were also more likely to sexually harass their classmates than high schoolers, by a rate of 61 percent to 39 percent.

"We're concerned about the more aggressive behavior of kids," said Patricia Clem, executive director of the Westfield-based Commonwealth of Massachusetts Middle Level Educators organization.

This fall, more than two-dozen middle schools in Middlesex County - including Dover-Sherborn, Reading, Lincoln, and Framingham - have agreed to participate in meetings of educators, police, and court officials, double the number of middle schools that participated last school year. Leone wants middle schools in all 54 towns and cities in Middlesex to join in. Many middle schools in Norfolk, Suffolk, and Essex counties are already involved in similar efforts.

"Prevention is the key, so you have to get people to share intelligence," said Weymouth police Captain Brian Callahan, who oversees the town's juvenile detectives and the high school's police officer. "You want to get people to come forward and tell you what kind of problems they're seeing."

In addition to the meetings, Callahan said he would like to see police officers patrol the town's middle schools, as they do at the high school, because of the increased violence.

Lincoln agreed to send middle school educators to juvenile justice meetings in April, after a student fatally stabbed a freshman at Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School outside a boys' bathroom, said Lincoln Superintendent Michael F. Brandmeyer.

"These things can present themselves at any time in communities like Lincoln," Brandmeyer said. "If we can intervene with kids who do illegal or crazy or dangerous things earlier on, we have a greater chance of changing their behavior."

Other superintendents and principals said that the meetings help keep them updated on gang activity and the latest drugs that have infiltrated the community. The close relationship with police and courts also helps schools head off potential violence caused by individual troublemakers.

Juan Rodriguez, principal of the Fuller Middle School in Framingham, said a police alert helped him avoid spillover violence in his school last year, after a weekend incident that culminated in two students assaulting two others with a baseball bat. Rodriguez and his staff were able to meet with students and their families and friends to defuse the tensions among students early in the school day.

Tewksbury Superintendent Christine McGrath was driving to a recent School Committee meeting when she spotted three boys on bikes weaving recklessly between cars. She recognized one boy as an eighth-grader who had twice landed in her office for bringing marijuana to school.

A team of education and law enforcement officials had decided the boy should try out for the football team to stay out of trouble, but McGrath had heard that morning that he had quit the team after a

couple of days. McGrath made a U-turn, and followed the boys to a condominium complex.

"I was right in their faces," McGrath said. "I told them, 'I'm going to be watching you guys.' "

All three boys' names had surfaced in past meetings.

"It's youngsters knowing that we pay attention to them," she said. "It's me having a sense of who I need to be worried about and who I need to help."

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